TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

COMMON GROUND AMID DIFFERENCE: MULTILATERAL COOPERATION FOR PEOPLE AND PLANET

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Abstract: There is growing consensus that the liberal international order as we have known it is dwindling. Since it never really lived up to its expectations, proponents and critics alike do not think it should be reinvigorated. The new world order that is taking shape is a "multiplex" one, characterized by a plurality of actors and a great political, ideological, and cultural diversity. In contrast to competing models of world order, multiplexity does not see traditional forms of power as the main driver, but rather the interaction capacity of actors that can, for example, be derived from the capacity to reach agreements. However, the contestation of the liberal values still enshrined in the multilateral system of cooperation seems to weaken this capacity. This introductory chapter argues that multilateralism is not only a means to an end but has the social purpose of enabling interaction based on core values – like a spirit of collectivity, inclusivity over exclusivity and negotiated governance – whose observance determines its quality. In the face of growing illiberalism, however, these values are challenged. Nevertheless, global problems that transcend national borders still require multilateral cooperation. As the introduction and the following chapters show, this will be possible but will probably take different forms and should allow political contestation in a pragmatic and pluralistic way.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her State of the Union Address of 10 September 2025 the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, emphatically stressed that "Europe is in a fight." She argued that "[b]attlelines for a new world order based on power are being drawn right now." Therefore, this "must be Europe's Independence Moment" (European Commission 2025: 1). The mood which is reflected in this speech is based on impressions caused by a series of crises starting in the 2010s with surging numbers of refugees worldwide due to a rising number of intra-state

conflicts,[1] the failure of liberal peacebuilding missions, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, and ultimately, the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, imposing tariffs erratically on almost every country, questioning old alliances and, above all, the international commitment not only of the United States, but the multilateral system on the whole. In contrast, other, longer-term problems, like fighting poverty and inequality, or environment-related challenges with massive economic and social impacts like climate change, biodiversity loss, the looming water crisis or the prevalent plastic waste seem to have been pushed into the background.

At first glance, the prospects for multilateral cooperation seem quite dismal. The more so, since we can see an increase in autocratic regimes and the democratic backsliding[2] of established democracies like the United States. It is no coincidence that the decline of the liberal international order has been discussed for about a decade now, after the first Trump administration came into office in 2017. The rise of populist movements, also in democratic countries, is accompanied not only by questioning the legitimacy of domestic institutions but also by re-claiming national sovereignty, which is usually equated with weakening international institutions or even the withdrawal from them. There is much talk of "independence" and making your own country "great again".

On what kind of "power", as indicated by Ursula von der Leyen, will "order" be based in a globalized interdependent world of the 21st century? What kind of "order" will emerge or has already been emerging while the liberal international order has been dwindling? And will the new order impair or even foreclose multilateral cooperation? Or will it contribute to reinvigorating multilateral cooperation? This introduction and the following chapters argue that we are still in need of global and multilateral cooperation – and it is and will still be possible. Very likely, it will have to take different forms, though, and allow political contestation in a pragmatic and pluralistic way.

1 Between 2014 and 2024 the number of forcibly displaces persons doubled from about 60 million in 2014 to more than 123 million in 2024 with 73% hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR 2025: 1).

2 "By backsliding we mean the incremental erosion of democratic institutions, rules and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments, typically driven by an autocratic leader" (Haggard/Kaufman 2021: 1).

2. AFTER LIBERAL HEGEMONY: WHAT'S NEXT?

When the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union (EU) and Donald Trump was elected to his first presidency in 2016, a lively debate about the state of the liberal international order started. Some observers called it "rigged" and demanded to "fix it now or watch it wither" (Colgan/Keohane 2017). Outspoken critics of the liberal international order even proclaimed that the era "after liberal hegemony" (Acharya 2017) had dawned. Meanwhile, many experts believe that what was once called "liberal international order" does not exist anymore. To understand why this is the case and what kind of international order will be and already has been emerging, we have to take a closer look at the reasons for its decay.

2.1 THE DEMISE OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The liberal international order that was created after World War II, under the auspices of the "benign hegemon" of the United States, resulted in a system of rules-based multilateralism that originally focussed on promoting free trade as its main objective. However, the kind of economic order that was envisaged was made for the Western world and accompanied by a weak human rights regime of the United Nations (UN) and a Security Council paralyzed by decision-making procedures that allowed the permanent five members China, France, the (then) Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States to block any decision with their veto. Only with the end of the Cold War were multilateral institutions, especially of the UN system, entrusted with strengthening human rights and promoting democracy and the rule of law on a global level (Börzel/Zürn 2021: 282–283).

Hence, the liberal international order that was established after the Cold War is characterized by distinct ideational and institutional properties (cf. Goddard et al. 2024: 3): On an ideational level, core liberal values suggest promoting the rights of the individual and enhancing its welfare. Therefore, the purpose of liberal institutions is to curb the state's power vis-à-vis its citizens. On an institutional level, liberal values lead to decision rules that foster inclusive, equal and fair participation as well as equality before the law.

Equipped with such a social purpose and aspiring to realize the decision rules according to liberal values, the system of global governance that was created

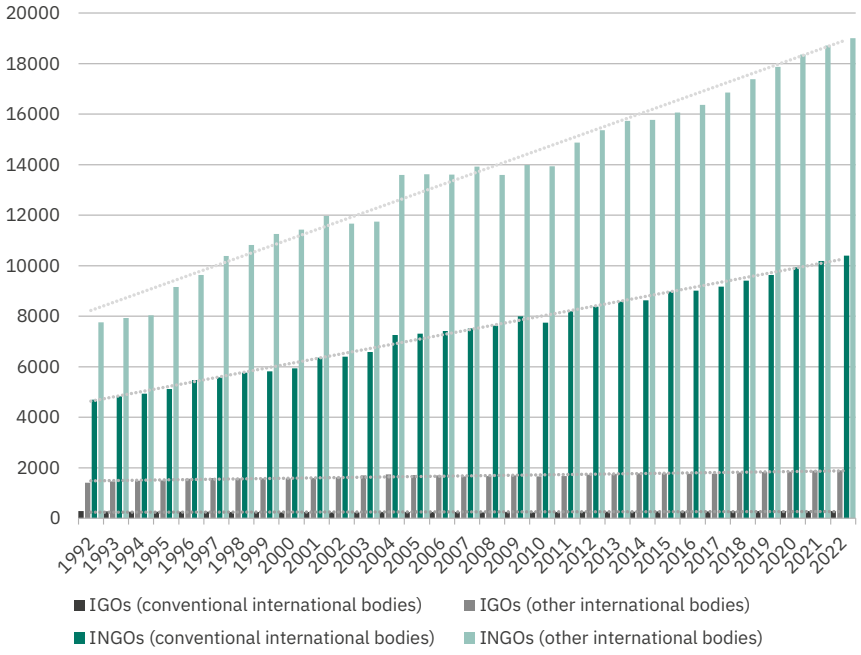
during the 1990s has contributed to increasing not only the authority of multilateral institutions epitomized by a series of landmark conferences,[3] in which new conventions and norms with varying degrees of commitment were adopted.[4] It also led to an increase in regional intergovernmental organizations and broadened the landscape of actors engaged in global policy processes, including a multitude of stakeholders like Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), business and philanthropic foundations. This has also been accompanied by a growing number of international non-state and multistakeholder organizations [see Figure 1] and has gone hand in hand with further institutionalizing norms and rules that help to organize cooperation and provide public goods. Moreover, using the knowledge of scientific experts for policy advice has become increasingly institutionalized, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as one of the more prominent examples. At the same time, the 1990s saw the advent of "liberal peacebuilding" associated with not only ending violent (especially intra-state) conflicts but also democratizing post-conflict states and liberalizing their economies as part of a liberal development process.

3 For instance, the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in China in 1995 or the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000.

4 For instance, as a result of the Rio conference the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) or the Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). Other examples are the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action for the empowerment of women or the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals at the Millennium Summit.

FIGURE 1: Institutional forms of international cooperation have increased due to non-state engagement

Number of international governmental (IGO) and international non-governmental organizations (INGO) (1992–2022)



Legend:
Conventional international bodies comprise federations of international organizations, universal membership organizations, intercontinental membership organizations, regionally defined membership organizations.
Other international bodies comprise organizations emanating from places, persons or other bodies, organizations having a special form, including foundations, funds, internationally oriented national organizations.

Source: Union of International Associations 2022: 44–45.

Compared to what the liberal international order promised to achieve, even sympathetic observers must admit that it never lived up to its aspirations and exhibited a good deal of hypocrisy on the part of Western countries (Finnemore 2009: 61). There are several reasons that have contributed to this blunt diagnosis:

- The spread of (nominal) democracies (such as in Eastern Europe) in the 1990s and the increase in economic exchange in the wake of globalization have led to gains in prosperity. However, these are unevenly distributed, leading to increased economic and social inequalities within and between societies worldwide, even in established democracies (Flaherty/Rogowski 2021).

- China, as the most prominent example of a developing country that could reap economic benefits from the liberalization of the global economy and its globalization, has become the main economic competitor of the United States. In turn, the domestic consensus within the United States to support open markets and the institutions associated with it has declined considerably (Weiss/Wallace 2021), as reflected in the protectionist policies of the first and even more the second Trump administration.
- In particular, the "war on terror" made it very clear to other countries that liberal democratic states operate according to double standards, for instance by demanding global compliance with human rights and rule-of-law standards but not consistently adhering to them themselves (see e. g. Birdsall 2016).
- The hope that externally initiated "state-building" would lead to sustainable stability in post-conflict societies *and* to their "modernization" has lately proven illusory, especially in many interventions initiated by Western states. This misjudgement became particularly clear with the hasty withdrawal of Western troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, followed, amongst others, by the termination of the UN-led mission in Mali in December 2023 as ultimately demanded by the military government of Mali.
- Finally, the actions and behaviour of Western countries during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by national egoism, have led to a significant decline in their reputation in the countries of the Global South. Consequently, for instance by emphasizing questions of loss and damage due to climate change, the latter are now addressing issues of justice and greater redistribution more forcefully (Lorca 2023).

These developments have led to a loss of legitimacy and growing mistrust of "the West." In contrast, China has been able to gain recognition for its development model in countries of the Global South through increasingly active, primarily bilateral cooperation (see e. g. Hartmann/Noesselt 2020). This also explains why Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not unanimously condemned by an overwhelming majority of countries in the Global South, especially in Africa (Brosig/Verma 2024). The Russian narrative of a West that wanted to annex Ukraine and against whose aggression Russia must now defend itself falls on fertile ground worldwide (Appel 2024). Russia's propagated view of Western liberal democratic societies as "corrupt," "soft," and "decadent" (Riabov/Riabova 2014) resonates also in other countries. In addition, Russia is politically and economically important to many

countries in the Global South as a military and security partner (Jacobsen/Larsen 2023) and as exporter of oil, gas, grain and fertilizer.

The list of setbacks of the liberal international order and the open contestation of it, even by its former proponents, does not indicate that the post-Cold War liberal international order will be reinvigorated. Even those in favour of liberal values do not think it should (Goddard et al. 2025: 2). And critics put it quite bluntly that the end of Western dominance will be "a good thing for the world as a whole", since "the major benefits of the present order have gone disproportionately to the West at the expense of the Rest, thanks to predatory colonization, violence, racism, and injustice" (Acharya 2025: 50). In view of such little support of the current liberal international order how could an emerging or future international order look like?

2.2 COMPETING HIERARCHICAL MODELS OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Traditionally, the idea of a stable international order is related to the notion that the international system is hierarchically structured. In other words, a state or groups of states are in command of a considerably greater share of power that enable them to take over a leading position. All current concepts of international order acknowledge that international relations are characterized by different forms of interdependence, i. e. mutual dependence, especially as far as trade and security is concerned [see Table 1]. The liberal international system created after World War II is a distinct type of a hierarchical system led by the United States as benign hegemon. In terms of ideology, security and military might the international order that developed after World War II and lasted until the end of the Cold War is also described as bipolar with two superpowers (Soviet Union and United States) that represented two different political and economic systems. Since the 1990s, the liberal international system dominated by the United States as "indispensable nation" is called a *liberal hegemony*.