



There's Nothing Wrong With the Liberal Order That Can't Be Fixed by What's Right With It

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Is the liberal international order under attack by the Trump administration worth defending? That's the question raised by a series of recent articles by prominent realist commentators—including [Patrick Porter](#), [Paul Staniland](#), [Graham Allison](#), and [Stephen M. Walt](#). Their answer, in short, is no. They make some good points, but there are fundamental problems with their critique.

The realists offer two arguments: that the liberal international order is a myth that never was, so the idea of defending it is an illusion anyway, or that this order overreached in the post-Cold War era as the United States tried to make the world in its own image, causing failures that should not be repeated, whether endless wars or mass outsourcing of blue-collar jobs abroad.

Taken together, these two views are contradictory: You can't criticize the failures of liberal international order if it never existed; President Donald Trump is either attacking it, or he is not. There is a further incoherence in the fact that the realists complain about U.S. imperial overreach but display the same zeal as the neoconservatives in dismissing as irrelevant the rules of liberal international order that might restrain the very excesses of U.S. foreign policy they criticize.

I do agree with the realist critique of liberal international order on a fundamental point: that globalization has overshot since the end of the Cold War (as I [argued](#) before Trump was elected). To my mind, the most serious problem is that, while free markets have expanded rapidly to cover most of the globe, democratic governance has not advanced in tandem. As I have also [written](#) about in the context of China, the paradigm case, it is now virtually undeniable that there is no necessary connection between capitalism and democracy.

During the Cold War, authoritarian capitalist regimes existed, too, and did so within the “free world,” but the West could argue that supporting them was the lesser evil: Indonesia under

Suharto was hardly North Korea. Now that argument can no longer be made, because virtually all states plug in to the same free-market system, even if they play it differently—take China’s state-owned enterprise model, for example. Thus, a key reason for China’s rise is that much of its overseas activity has been perfectly legal, at least on the surface: buying ports, mines, agriculture, and other states’ sovereign debt; building massive infrastructure projects; and so on.

In short, global markets and the legal rules that support them are the most entrenched aspect of the liberal international order. But it’s entirely legitimate—and I’d argue, accurate—to criticize the labeling of market liberalization as “liberal” whenever free markets are not accompanied by free people. There is nothing hypocritical in distinguishing between the international order as a whole and those parts of it that are, to varying degrees, liberal.

The integration of global markets illustrates only one area regulated by the global legal system, a prominent aspect of the international order. (The international order is also regulated by its political and social conventions, although their content is more subjective.) If you want proof of the legal dimension of international order, look at what happens when a state wants to move from one set of rules to another, as with Brexit, where the majority of the debate concerns legal rules.

Of course, all legal rules express deeper power structures, be they military, economic, or cultural. So, to refer to international order as being rules-based does not entail commitment to a utopia of rules unmoored from the realities of power: Strong states clearly influence the rules more. And certain bodies of rules within this order are plainly violated more frequently than others—for example, those concerning the use of force. But those are still exceptions: Most states don’t invade one another most of the time, and when the United States has respected international legal rules in this area, such as in the Persian Gulf War, the results have been better than in cases where it did not, such as in the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Rather than explain these points away as anomalies, I would recognize them as evidence of the fragility and limitations of the liberal dimensions of the international order. But that recognition does not imply that the liberal order has no value: All states, after all, have interests that they cannot achieve on their own and so need to develop rules for working together.

This is a point that even the realist skeptics of liberal international order are prepared to concede when it comes to issues like climate change. Both Allison and Walt, for example, express regret that the United States pulled out of the Paris climate change agreement—a classic instrument of international law. Yet their view that the United States should not have pulled out of the Paris agreement contradicts the claim that international rules are pointless. The same can be said for their regret that that Washington pulled out the Iran nuclear agreement.

Rather than emphasize the contradiction, I would emphasize the realists’ common ground with liberal internationalism, which could be extended to other global problems: money laundering, offshore tax evasion, human trafficking, and so on. In short, if the realists didn’t express such hostility to the theory of consensual international cooperation, they would likely support many of its specific expressions.

Finally, while I accept the realist view that the West should not try to make the world in its own image by involuntarily pressing its values on others through the barrel of a gun, that doesn't mean that liberal powers shouldn't push for global rules that instantiate liberal values.

Accommodating others does not mean giving up your own values; it just means recognizing their proper limits, on a case by case basis.

Indeed, this is what the realists get the most wrong in their tendency to fetishize power over all else. Politics and political order are downstream from culture, and the power of the United States ultimately rests on its values. The Cold War was not merely about bare power, but two ideas of what constitutes a just society. The problem since the end of the Cold War has been that the United States has no clear standard to define its values against, not least because it has not pushed back against the disjuncture of capitalism and democracy now evident whenever autocrats get the benefits of access to the West and Western investment without signing up to its values.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that, since the early 1990s, the West has traded material gain for damage to its own values. Now we are seeing the backlash. Don't believe me? Just look at all the corrupt offshore money in London property, making prices unaffordable for ordinary, hardworking young people, and wonder why many of them have lost faith in capitalism. Values matter in international order, and we can only see that if we reject the realists' amoral blinkers.

Ultimately, peace requires a combination of stability and justice. With the Roman Empire collapsing around him in the fifth century A.D., and contemplating a new order, Augustine writes in *The City of God*: "Anyone, then, who is rational enough to prefer right to wrong and order to disorder can see that the kind of peace that is based on injustice, as compared with that which is based on justice, does not deserve the name of peace." In other words, there's nothing wrong with the international order, and its liberal dimensions, that can't be fixed by what's right with it.