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Introduction: Making liberal internationalism great again?

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Abstract

At a time when liberal internationalism and institutions of multilateral cooperation are being dealt almost daily blows, this special issue revisits the notion and practice of middle power liberal internationalism. The introduction suggests that while liberal internationalism is far from dead, its challenges are serious and multiple. Reflecting on the seven essays contained in the volume, it argues that the biggest challenge for a future liberal internationalism is not to double-down on its normative virtues, but to critically reflect on how it can be retooled to respond to new challenges.

Keywords

World order, liberal internationalism, middle powers, middle power liberal internationalism, multilateralism

At a time when liberal internationalism and institutions of multilateral cooperation are being dealt almost daily blows, foreign policy establishments on both sides of the Atlantic are expressing ever-louder concerns for the vanishing world order.¹

1. Anthony Dawkin and Mark Leonard, “Can Europe save the world order?” European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/can_europe_save_the_world_order.pdf (accessed 25 September 2018); G. John Ikenberry, “The plot against American foreign policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-04-17/plot-against-american-foreign-policy> (accessed 24 September 2018); Robert Kagan, “The twilight of the liberal world order,” Brookings, 24 January 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the->

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There are multiple reasons to worry: President Donald Trump's transactional approach to international relations undermines and hinders international cooperation in key areas, as illustrated by the unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the retreat from the Paris Climate Agreement, and the president's branding of the EU as a "foe." This disdain for conventional forms of diplomacy has called the solidity of transatlantic relations into question, as witnessed during the tense 2018 NATO summit. Trade wars are escalating, and the US abdication of global leadership is matched by the growing strength and global assertiveness of illiberal powers such as China and Russia. In Europe, the rise of nationalism and populism—and of course, Brexit—are shaking the foundations and cohesion of the EU. Hungary and Poland's "illiberal democracies" are pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in European politics, and once-fringe ideas have moved from the extreme right to become part of mainstream politics, as seen most clearly in the rise of anti-immigration sentiments across the continent. On a global scale, the prospects for liberal politics seem equally dire. Worldwide, democracy is in decline, its basic tenets of freedom of the press, guarantees of free and fair elections, minority rights, and the rule of law under siege.²

Yet, while there is ample evidence that the institutions, values, and practices that have governed global politics since the Second World War may no longer be taken for granted, the liberal international order is far from dead. In Canada, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has confidently restated its commitment to liberal internationalism. President Emmanuel Macron of France has issued a strong defence of multilateralism, as has Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the foreign policies of the Nordic countries still emphasize support for rules-based international cooperation.

Against this background, this special issue discusses how Canada, the Nordic countries, and a handful of other European states have advanced what is often called "middle power liberal internationalism," and asks to what extent their investment in a rules-bound world order may constitute a pivotal factor in its continuation and reconstitution. In doing so, we do not seek to define, nor necessarily defend, all components of liberal internationalism.³ Instead, we opt for a minimalist understanding of middle power liberal internationalism as a strategy that revolves around the building of multilateral institutions and global rule of law as a tool to advance key political, economic, and security interests, while at the

twilight-of-the-liberal-world-order/ (accessed 24 September 2018); Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Will the liberal order survive?" *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive> (accessed 24 September 2018); Graham Allison, "The myth of the liberal order," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/myth-liberal-order> (accessed 24 September 2018).

2. "Democracy in crisis: Freedom House releases Freedom in the World 2018," Freedom House, 16 January 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/democracy-crisis-freedom-house-releases-freedom-world-2018> (accessed 24 September 2018).
3. Definitions of middle power liberal internationalism abound. For a discussion, see Kim Richard Nossal, *The Liberal Past in the Conservative Present: Internationalism in the Harper Era*, in Heather A. Smith and Claire Turenne Sjolander, eds., *Canada in the World: Internationalism in Canadian Foreign Policy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21–35.

same time strengthening a set of normative ideals. We recognize that the label “liberal internationalism” itself performs important, often self-serving, political functions. Our focus here, however, is primarily on how contemporary changes in world politics—especially the rise of illiberal political trends and key changes in the role and functioning of multilateral institutions—affect the viability and future direction of liberal internationalism. Small and middle powers are often seen as the main defenders and beneficiaries of a rule-governed, multilateral world order, and as standard bearers of liberal internationalism. As such they provide a useful prism for exploring the durability and adaptability of liberal internationalism in the face of hegemonic withdrawal. Recognizing the importance of hegemonic actors, our purpose is both to explore the resilience and structuring effect of the rules of the existing order,⁴ and the specific role of non-hegemonic actors in upholding and advancing these rules as a foreign policy objective.

The seven essays in this special issue illustrate that the current pressures on the liberal world order cannot be separated from domestic changes within the traditional supporters of liberal internationalism. A case in point is the increased resistance among key voter groups—including in Canada and the Nordic countries—to ever-closer global integration. The clearest effects of this are the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016. At the same time, we stress that the fading liberal world order was not entirely “made in the West” but also emerged as the result of prolonged pressures from countries in the Global South. Speaking to this puzzle, this special issue provides for nuanced discussion of the future of middle power liberal internationalism in a manner that invites open-ended reflections on how, by whom, and in what ways the liberal tenets of the current order can be defended and improved.

Morality and self-interest in middle power liberal internationalism

Middle power liberal internationalism is seen to have developed on the margins of Cold War politics and scholarship, and has predominantly been used to describe the foreign policies of the Nordic states of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, as well as the Netherlands and Canada.⁵ Internationalism is commonly regarded as a key characteristic of Canadian foreign policy, albeit to varying degrees and with different expressions.⁶ Similarly, the Nordic countries are known for a strong

4. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 1984).

5. Peter Lawler, “The ‘good state’ debate in international relations,” *International Politics* 50, no. 1 (2013): 18–37.

6. The premiership of Stephen Harper was, for example, seen to preside over a withdrawal from liberal internationalism, most notably from multilateral institutions and commitments to global environmental protection. Roland Paris, “Are Canadians still liberal internationalists? Foreign policy and public opinion in the Harper era,” *International Journal* 69, no. 3 (2014): 274–307; Don Munton and Tom Keating, “Internationalism and the Canadian public,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 3 (September 2001): 517–549; Kim Richard Nossal, Stéphane Roussel, and Stéphane

commitment to free trade, international solidarity, and development assistance in their foreign policies.⁷

Such middle power liberal internationalism can be seen both as a strategy born out of necessity and relative lack of power in the international system, and as a moral commitment to a more just and rule-governed world order. As lesser powers, these states stand to benefit from multilateralism and a rules-bound global system, as this may augment their influence beyond what material resources allow. In this vein, Holmes, arguably the intellectual father of Canada's internationalism, maintains that internationalism is a "hard-boiled calculation of the Canadian national interest."⁸ This notion of "enlightened self-interest" in promoting a world in which "might does not equal right" sits at the core of middle power liberal internationalism.

Small and middle powers frequently self-identify and are also described by others as "good international citizens" or "responsible members of international society."⁹ Evidence for such good citizenship is said to be their long-standing support for the United Nations, international human rights, peacekeeping, mediation, foreign aid, and other progressive dimensions of the liberal international order. Some even suggest that being a "good international citizen" has become part of the national identity in these countries, giving Canadians a sense of being "different" and making Nordic publics strong supporters of development assistance and globalization.¹⁰ Inherent in this notion of a morally superior foreign policy is the suggestion that middle power liberal internationalism involves some form of subjugation of narrowly defined national interests in favour of shared, collective, or common interests of the international community. Such claims to lofty normative principles are, however, tempered by the recognition that liberal internationalism is simultaneously a real-political strategy to secure a rules-based order that benefits these states' strategic interests. It is, in other words, a strategy that aims to increase these states' status and importance in the eyes of hegemonic actors such as the US by investing in system maintenance in exchange for support on other issues of vital concern.¹¹

Contributors to this special issue discuss these tensions, but do so by embedding them in an understanding of two key aspects of the formulation and conduct of

Paquin, *The Policies of Canadian Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991); Smith and Sjolander, *Canada in the World: Internationalism in Canadian Foreign Policy*.

7. Olav Stokke, *Western Middle Powers and Global Poverty: The Determinants of the Aid Policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden* (Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute, 1989); Anthony J. Dolman, "The like-minded countries and the new international order: Past, present, and future prospects," *Cooperation and Conflict* 14, no. 2-3 (1979): 57-85.
8. John W. Holmes, *Canada: A Middle-Aged Power* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1976), 6.
9. Ronald M. Behringer, *The Human Security Agenda: How Middle Power Leadership Defied US Hegemony* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012); Alison Brysk, *Global Good Samaritans: Human Rights as Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
10. Paris, "Are Canadians still liberal internationalists?"; Terje Tvedt, *Bilder av "De Andre": Om Utviklingslandene i Bistandsepoken* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget AS, 1990); Peter Nedergaard and Anders Wivel, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Scandinavian Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017).
11. Iver B. Neumann, "Peace and reconciliation efforts as systems-maintaining diplomacy: The case of Norway," *International Journal* 66, no. 3 (2011): 563-579.

foreign policy. First, foreign policy is always implemented in complex contexts over which individual governments have limited control. By implication, it is important to be sensitive to how foreign policy decisions that have been justified with reference to liberal internationalism may end up serving a range of different purposes. A review of Norway's contribution to the war in Afghanistan, for example, concluded that of the three goals used to justify it—rebuilding Afghanistan, fighting terrorism, and supporting the US—only the last was really achieved, and yet the other two, and especially the first, were the most prominent justifications.¹² Focusing on mediation in “messy” places, Peter Jones' article in this special issue sheds light on some of the dilemmas that confront Canadian practitioners and policymakers as they weigh the costs of serving as impartial mediators and “helpful fixers” to both the warring parties and the great powers. Similarly, Nina Græger's discussion of Norwegian security and defence policy can be read as an ongoing process of adaptation to changing geopolitical parameters, but with a broadly speaking liberal justification.

Second, while we may debate the fine lines of what constitutes liberal internationalism in an analytical sense, its practical use demonstrates just how flexible it is and how it can be used to create public support for a broad range of different, even contradictory, foreign policies. The meaning and practice of middle power liberal internationalism, in other words, is not fixed and static, but historically specific and flexible. The conventional stories of middle powers and their impact on world politics typically inscribe them as “good citizens” and as progressive bearers of enlightenment values. A more careful reading of history, however, shows that this has not always or consistently been the case. As David Petrasek shows in this special issue, Western states, including middle powers, have been far from reliable and consistent in their support for human rights. Similarly, interventions justified in the name of liberal humanitarianism and the protection of civilians have frequently promoted geopolitical interests, and in the case of the NATO-led intervention in Libya, have helped produce—indirectly at least—the highly contradictory outcome of a “failed” state.

The story of middle power support for liberal internationalism also has to take account of the fact that historical progress towards a more just and equal world order has frequently resulted from prolonged pressure from the Global South and despite Western resistance. The UN Charter that was agreed upon in San Francisco in 1945, for example, contained no commitment to self-determination or decolonization. Instead, mandates were turned into trusteeships and colonies became dependent territories, thus breathing new life into a deeply unequal world order and cementing the dominance of the great powers for years to come.¹³ It took concerted and prolonged pressure from southern actors to arrive at the principle of self-determination and eventual independence for the colonies, and in this sense,

12. Norges Offentlige Utredninger (NOU), “En God Alliert: Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014” (Oslo: Forsvarsdepartementet, 2016).

13. Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

the current international order is far from the product of exclusively Western authorship.¹⁴ While this may be an uncomfortable truth to many middle power liberal internationalists, it bears repeating at a time when multilateral cooperation and a rules-bound world order need defenders. As Petrusek argues, it may also provide for a more optimistic outlook: if the human rights regime is in fact less dependent on the West and middle powers, it is possibly more resilient than current worries might suggest.

The shifting grounds of liberal internationalism

The historical specificity and flexibility of liberal internationalism is also evident in its changing practice by Western states and middle powers in a post-9/11 era characterized by widespread fear of transnational terrorism and violent extremism. In this new security climate, liberal international ideals are routinely invoked to legitimize interventions that are difficult to reconcile with claims to selfless good international citizenship. We have already mentioned Libya, and another notable illustration is the extent to which the ideals of liberal peace have been used to justify war fighting and regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan, without producing much by way of tangible benefits for local populations. These operations have significantly damaged the “brand” of liberal internationalism both at home and abroad, and have made it increasingly difficult to sustain arguments of moral superiority. Similarly, as development and security policies have come to be understood as two sides of the same coin, development assistance has more than perhaps ever before come to be justified not primarily with reference to the welfare of distant others, but with an eye to national security.

Such transformations have made it increasingly hard to identify a distinctive middle power liberal approach to international relations. Instead, these countries have often fallen into line with militarized international policies and initiatives, as most strikingly exemplified by Denmark’s participation in the US-led “Coalition of the Willing” in Iraq in 2003.¹⁵ It seems the very meaning of liberal internationalism has changed so that being a good international citizen today is entirely compatible with hard-nosed national defence and self-interest. Continuing this line of enquiry, John Karlsrud’s contribution to this special issue looks at the troubled UN “stabilization” mission in Mali and argues that the return of small and middle powers to UN peace operations is in large part driven by a desire to augment their own status and security, and that their participation may ultimately serve to undermine the liberal character of UN peace efforts.

In addition, the types of support and investment that middle powers offer to the very bedrock of liberal internationalism—multilateral institutions—have changed considerably. In the 1980s and 1990s, organizations such as the UNDP, UNICEF,

14. Andrew Phillips, “Beyond Bandung: The 1955 Asian-African Conference and its legacies for international order,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 4 (2016): 330.

15. Nedergaard and Wivel, *The Routledge Handbook of Scandinavian Politics*.

and the WHO were supported through core, untied funding, but over time there has been a gradual shift to a much stronger reliance on voluntary, earmarked funding. This has reduced the autonomy of these institutions to act as international public actors, and has in turn contributed to their image in the Global South as tools of rich countries, employed to buy political influence.¹⁶ In short, middle powers—and great powers—have tried to get multilateralism on the cheap, systematically underfunding multilateral organizations and increasingly controlling their operations through earmarked funding.¹⁷

This in turn raises the question of whether liberal internationalism is intrinsically a “good thing” that should be defended. There is little doubt that the liberal order has historically represented a form of universalism, seeking to export an often moralistic, paternalistic, and Eurocentric model to the rest of the world. Such critiques have been strengthened by recent interventions in the name of security and anti-terrorism. From the perspective of middle powers, liberal internationalism is primarily a rules-based order that serves to provide protection from more powerful states and to tame politics through a framework of procedural liberalism that contains political decisions within agreed-upon rules. From the perspective of many countries in the Global South, however, these rules are not so much liberal as profoundly hierarchical and unequal. While the current global order has sustained institutions like the UN General Assembly, where states have one vote regardless of economic or military power, it has also facilitated great power domination through the Security Council and such organizations as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, to mention but a few. Hierarchy and inequality, in short, are constitutive features of the post-war world order. This is further illustrated by Louise Riis Andersen’s article in this special issue, which details the paradoxical nature of the UN as a halfway house between the national and the global, dominated by the great powers of 1945. The inherent tensions and limitations of the UN system currently manifest in more explicit ways than before, in large part due to the efforts of emerging powers, most notably China, to wield their influence and reshape global norms through multilateral organizations.¹⁸

The contemporary challenges to the liberal world order do not emerge only or primarily from the rise of China and the Global South, or from the aggressive and subversive policies of Russia, but also from within the Western core in the form of populist-nationalist ideologies. The rise of nationalist populism and far-right movements is fuelled by a profound sense of exclusion and marginalization among large sections of the population in the industrialized West, and the main culprit of their misfortunes is perceived to be “globalism,” or what we here refer to as liberal internationalism. Understanding (and responding to) the current crisis of the

16. Ranjit Lall, “Beyond institutional design: Explaining the performance of international organizations,” *International Organization* 71, no. 2 (2017): 245–280; Ole Jacob Sending, “The international civil servant,” *International Political Sociology* 8, no. 3 (2014): 338–340.

17. Erin R. Graham, “Follow the money: How trends in financing are changing governance at international organizations,” *Global Policy* 8, no. S5 (2017): 15–25.

18. Alexander Cooley, “Countering democratic norms,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 49–63.

liberal order therefore entails an active engagement with the foundation of such movements and ideas. This is the task of the articles by Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams, and by Alexandra Gheciu. In their contribution, Drolet and Williams explore one of the lesser-known, yet highly influential ideological underpinnings of the Tea Party movement, the alt-right, and Trumpism, namely American paleoconservatism, arguing that it cannot be dismissed simply as a populist cry of rage, pain, or resentment. Instead, as expressed by one of its key thinkers, paleoconservatism has not only a distinctive and systematic account of the sociological and political dynamics of the liberal order, but also a practical political strategy for attacking and undermining it. If middle powers are to act effectively in defence of liberal internationalism, they need to engage and understand these powerful critiques. In her essay on NATO, Gheciu takes this debate to Europe and explores how the rise of anti-liberal sentiments in member states is undermining and challenging the notion of a pre-existing Western security community united around liberal-democratic norms and values. In short, looking to the future, it seems that neither the West writ large, nor the traditional middle powers, can be assumed to be permanent defenders of liberal internationalism, at least not as we have come to know it. At the same time, recent research on the ideational underpinnings of Western hegemony suggests that support for some types of liberal principles is fairly solid in emerging powers, raising the prospect of new global alliances and dynamics.¹⁹

Conclusions

The liberal world order has not come to an end. But in a period of rising populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, as well as growing protectionism, much of what is worth admiring and valuing about world politics since 1945 is at greater risk than it has been for many years. Amidst anger over inequality, immigration, and cultural change, multilateral cooperation is assailed from right and left. It needs defenders, and it needs debate. This seems particularly important in the face of an increasingly transactional strategy aimed at cutting costs and relaxing commitments on the part of the US, at the same time as Russia and China are developing a playbook intent on transforming key aspects of international structures so as to effectively loosen the grip of liberal values.

Any anxiety about the passing of liberal world order must, however, be balanced by recognizing its shortcomings and injustices. This is not the time for an unconditional celebration of liberal internationalism, nor a love-fest for “Canadian values” or the “Nordic model.” But neither is it a time for complacency. This position is underscored by Louise Riis Andersen’s contribution to this special issue. Focusing on the troubled position of the UN in the liberal order,

19. Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, “The distribution of identity and the future of international order: China’s hegemonic prospects,” *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 839–869.

Andersen suggests that it is timely to revisit and restore the pragmatic roots of liberal internationalism. The same concern is found in Drolet and Williams' discussion of the rise of a new form of conservatism in both Europe and the US, which demonstrates that the rise of nationalist and populist politics is much more than a critique or contestation and more akin to a political project with well-developed arguments and proposed solutions for an alternative world order. Add to this Gheciu's demonstration of the tensions within NATO that touch on the same ideological currents, and there is urgent need for an open-minded and critical discussion of what liberal internationalism should look like in the future, and what middle powers can do to make it "great again."

Recognizing the limitations and criticisms of liberal internationalism, in other words, should not lead us to give up on the idea of responsible state behaviour and efforts to make the world a better place. As Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami observe, the debate around the "good international citizen" in the 1990s sought to promote foreign policy principles among like-minded states that could "promote the moral ideas of the unity of humankind without jeopardizing international order."²⁰ Current debates should not therefore adopt an unconditional defence of the status quo, but instead lead us to ask what elements of the liberal world order should be preserved, what should be ditched, and what should be reformed. To this end, we conclude with a few broad reflections.

First, there is an unmistakable self-serving quality to the idea of liberal internationalism. We know that middle powers, just as other states, engage in different forms of hypocrisy when they, for example, advance human rights and at the same time sell military equipment to regimes that have an abysmal human rights record.²¹ To the extent that the prospects for institutionalizing some new version of liberal internationalism rest with emerging powers and the Global South, reflection on this aspect of middle powers' foreign policies should move centre stage, as it concerns their operations within and outside multilateral organizations.

Second, middle powers have for a considerable time reaped the benefits of a particular institutional configuration where the US has borne most of the economic and military costs of upholding a particular (hegemonic) order, and middle powers have been content to serve as loyal supporters and helpful fixers. If the US and other Western powers are indeed rethinking their support of multilateral institutions, middle powers need to engage in a serious discussion about how many political, economic, and military resources they are prepared to invest in multilateral organizations and forms of cooperation. In other words, criticizing the current US administration for its approach to multilateralism does not, in the end, help much in preparing multilateral institutions for future challenges. A serious discussion needs to be had about priorities and the willingness to invest heavily in support of these priorities.

20. Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English School of International Relations: A Contemporary Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 232.

21. Srdjan Vucetic, "A nation of feminist arms dealers? Canada and military exports," *International Journal* 72, no. 4 (2017): 503–519.

Finally, there is a paradox at the heart of debates about the rise of nationalist and illiberal policies and the role of multilateral institutions: multilateral institutions are presented as the very culprit of the globalization that these political groups challenge. The World Trade Organization is seen as helping foreign companies steal jobs; EU elites are presented as making decisions that adversely affect the ability of the UK to make its own policies; and the IMF and World Bank—so goes the argument—shrink the policy space of governments. The problem for proponents of liberal internationalism is to counter these arguments with solid arguments and evidence that, in fact, these institutions can augment rather than shrink policy space. Doing so entails more than simply challenging the factual and normative grounds on which critics of liberal internationalism make their case. It also requires a critical look at how the institutions can be reformed so as to better embody and practise liberal internationalism, thus charting a feasible strategy for addressing global challenges that resonates with national publics and not only internationally orientated elites. In this sense, the biggest challenge for liberal internationalism is not to double-down on its normative virtues, but to critically reflect on how it can be retooled to respond to new challenges. This special issue is intended as the beginning of such a reflection: an invitation to further, broad-based dialogue, rather than the final word on the way forward.

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