

## The International Politics of Illiberalism

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**Abstract:** Illiberalism has become an increasingly important force in global politics in recent decades. Though it draws its legitimation from the foundation of liberalism—the sovereignty of the people—it nonetheless represents a backlash against liberal values and the global liberal order. Illiberals in power in different countries share a similar discourse of rejection of liberal values, cosmopolitan globalism, and neoliberal economics. They employ similar methods of rule, including an authoritarian concentration of power, the elimination of checks and balances, and clientelist practices. However, the inherently transactional nature of illiberalism and its preoccupation with national sovereignty limit cooperation among illiberals. This puts them at a disadvantage with liberal states in many aspects of international competition. The chapter lays out a theory of the international behavior of illiberal regimes, demonstrating the points of similarity and connection between illiberals in power and their ultimate lack of a strong basis for mutual cooperation.

**Keywords:** international order; national sovereignty; competition; cooperation; globalism

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “liberal international order” briefly seemed to be the only consequential game in town. Competing ideologies of international order were either minor nuisances at the disorderly periphery of the system or were heading into the dustbin of history. Ideas and actors that refused to get with the program seemed to be a chaotic gang of also-rans: terrorist zealots, theocracies, niche petro-monarchies, obsolete ethnic haters, and legacy Communist regimes.

More than three decades later, however, many of the opponents of the liberal international order seem to have coalesced around a somewhat coherent set of illiberal talking points and practices: strongman rule based on direct action rather than legal and procedural niceties, sovereignty of the “true people” only, economic nationalism, nativism, cultural or civilizational traditionalism, gender-role conformity, and resistance to the hegemonic projects of foreign and domestic liberals (Brubaker 2017; Laruelle 2021).

We argue that this trend toward illiberalism draws its legitimation from traditional forms of social organization that resonate across many societies (Inglehart and Welzel 2015).<sup>1</sup> However, this does not serve as a strong basis for organizing solidarity among illiberal actors in world politics, because those principles are predominantly transactional and obsessed with national sovereignty in ways that severely limit cooperation among the foes of liberalism (Frye 2022; Russett and Oneal 2001; Shirk 2022; Wintrobe 2000). This and other features of illiberalism leave illiberal states and actors at a significant disadvantage in many aspects of international competition with liberal states (Copeland 2015).<sup>2</sup> First we discuss why illiberalism has recently been so assertive, comparing it to the overlapping phenomenon of populism, and then we explore the implications of illiberalism for foreign policies and international relations in several issue areas.

### **Why Illiberalism?**

The recent iteration of illiberalism has gained traction for a number of intertwined reasons. Illiberalism is a partially modernized version of a widespread historical formula for illiberal social order based on coercion, in-group favoritism, patronage economics, and domination by culturally legitimated elites (Fukuyama 2011; Mousseau 2019; Svobik 2012). As such, it draws upon familiar themes and organizing principles of traditional society, conservative modernizing regimes, and far-right populist movements (Gat 2012, Chapter 2; Trimberger 1978). These ideas and practices resonate to some degree almost everywhere because they have been historically ubiquitous. So-called Asian values or non-Western values, such as deference to hierarchy, patriarchy, social conformity, and priority of the group over the individual, have been characteristic of all societies, including even European society, until quite recently (L. S. Bell, Nathan, and Peleg 2001; Donnelly 2013).<sup>3</sup>

These illiberal values cohere as a plan for a pre-modern society that functions at a low-level equilibrium: for most societies at an early stage of modernization, this type of social order improves upon anarchy and is more easily within reach institutionally than is full liberalism (Dahl 1973, 33–47; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009). One adaptation of this approach that has long attracted illiberal modernizers is the notion that technological and bureaucratic rationality

can function effectively even if detached from the rest of liberal modernity (Baehr 2001; Bell 2016).

These illiberal formulas offer a plausible rationale for resistance against the disruptive intrusion of a revolutionary liberalism that threatens established elites and entrenched mass attitudes across all cultural, economic, and political dimensions of society. Triumphant liberalism has overplayed its hand in many societies that lacked a favorable institutional or social basis for liberalism, producing backlash and backsliding in many of the fledgling democracies of the post-Cold War “Third Wave” (Gunitsky 2017; Huntington 1993; Levitsky and Way 2010). Inside societies, endangered elites can invoke illiberal themes such as anti-elitism, nativism and gender-role conformity to mobilize mass support against liberal hegemony (Vinjamuri 2017).

In the international arena, illiberal states can deploy themes of national and cultural sovereignty to justify expedient tactical alliances against liberal threats (Cooley and Nexon 2020; C. Roberts, Armijo, and Katada 2017). That said, nationalist sovereignty hawks often experience friction not only with liberals but also with each other (Reiter and Stam 2002).

The acceleration of globalization and cultural change has intensified and spread the conflict between hegemonic liberalism and illiberal backlash worldwide. Economic globalization has fueled the rising power of illiberal China and, until the 2008 world financial crisis, briefer surges in then semi-liberal India, Brazil, and Turkey. Their rising contemporary illiberalisms reflect both the social disruption associated with economic change and the political responses to its risks and disappointments (Huntington 1968).

At the same time, grievances were piling up among the self-perceived losers from globalization in the developed liberal democracies as well. Deindustrialization and increased immigration have coincided with disruption to working-class culture, norms of gender relations, sexuality, and religious belief in ways that have torn the social fabric of many communities. In the United States, these same communities have been ravaged by the opioid epidemic (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021).

These ills were widely blamed on aloof, tone-deaf liberal elites. The post–World War II liberal order had established social-welfare states in the developed democracies, set up international institutions to buffer their national economies from market shocks, and lightly regulated news media in the public interest. Over time, however, this liberal regulatory order gave way to freer trade and capital mobility, increased immigration, heightened economic inequality, deregulated broadcast and social media, and the individual right to engage in previously taboo social behaviors.

These trends in liberal policies and their structural consequences have provided grist for the mill of illiberal ideology. Political tacticians repackaged the whole litany of divisive issues into polarizing partisan narratives, featuring hot-button wedge issues such as abortion and immigration, which in the United States also provided cover for unmentionable lingering attitudes about race. Illiberal grievance politics became a self-fulfilling prophecy by stalemating potentially effective liberal remedies to real problems and destroying trust in institutions (Colantone and Stanig 2019; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Kuziemko, Marx, and Naidu 2022). In almost all the developed democracies, the countertrend to the illiberal offensive was to mobilize successful election-winning centrist coalitions. Though this has kept militant illiberals out of the corridors of power in most democracies, it also continues to feed the illiberal narrative of an insulated establishment that does not reflect the true will of the people.

The recent rise of illiberalism addressed in this volume represents a backlash against transformations that have occurred within liberalism—in particular, its increasing cosmopolitanism, globalism, and advocacy of women’s and minority rights. Illiberals’ populist pushback against liberal ambitions represents a shift from the practices of past conservative movements: the focus on eliminating constitutional checks on populist power and the use of social media for direct contact with their mass base of support. At the same time, illiberalism is not revolutionary; it does not offer a novel form of governing the people, but rather relies on old authoritarian practices of coercion and clientelism. And, unlike totalitarian ideologies, it does not attempt to radically transform the connection between state, society, and the individual.

### **Modern Illiberalism’s Overlap with Liberalism and Right Populism**

Contemporary illiberalism has some important features in common with liberalism and populism, but it is distinct from both.<sup>4</sup> Modern illiberalism competes with liberalism in part by offering a model of modernity that overlaps with liberalism's. A key area of overlap is their common nationalism. Liberalism and most contemporary illiberalisms share the notion that political sovereignty resides in a distinctive people that deserves to rule itself in its own state in a way that protects and serves the interest of its distinctive values and traditions. Liberal nationalism takes popular sovereignty literally and operationally: it means rule by the people through accountable representative government based on inclusive political equality of citizens. Illiberal nationalism cuts corners on process and inclusion: it means rule for the true people through the agency of leadership that heeds their voice and acts on their behalf (Snyder 2000; Tamir 1995).

We have defined illiberalism as an ideology with a specific content of beliefs and policy preferences that is oppositional to liberalism. Populism, in contrast, is defined by most scholars as a thin concept or political style that can align with a variety of ideologies that infuse it with a substantive set of social and economic principles. Thus, "left populists" can favor class politics, mass social-welfare programs, soft money, and easy credit, whereas "right populists" can favor low taxation, no welfare for the undeserving, and "fair" market policies that limit competition from immigrants and foreigners. What makes them all populists is their penchant for direct action by a strong leader who embodies the will of the ignored people, distrust of most educated and conventional elites, impatience with legalistic institutions, wariness toward foreigners and groups other than "the true people," and a blunt, confrontational style of political talk and behavior which conveys the urgency of their plight and demolishes the evasions of polite elite discourse (Moffitt 2020; Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008).

Illiberal nationalists may share many of these stylistic features with populists, and their policy preferences may overlap considerably with those of right populists. However, in other ways they may diverge. Populists mobilize, whereas illiberals tend to demobilize—or mobilize selectively, using more traditional or more controllable instruments of authority. Putin revives the Russian Orthodox Church and funds radical parties abroad but outlaws Russian NGOs and jails or murders dissidents (Guriev and Treisman 2022). China governmentalizes religion and blocks

unofficial collective action, but allows managed expressions of opinion in a social-media landscape that the regime decisively shapes (Roberts 2020; Weiss 2014). US Republican plutocrats buy local broadcast media and fund evangelical networks, but risk losing control when they send dog whistles to armed militias (Nelson 2019; Walter 2022). Viktor Orbán organizes campaigns against foes from George Soros to the Brussels bureaucrats, while at the same time dismantling civil-society organizations and independent media.

Populists moralize politics: “You shall not crucify mankind on a Cross of Gold,” said the original soft-money populist, William Jennings Bryan. Illiberals, too, may sometimes moralize, for example, deploying opposition to abortion to invoke traditional moral standards of the community. Illiberalism, however, often parades formulaic traditional values whose benefit is largely the opportunity to decry liberals as decadent and degenerate because, for example, they advocate LGBTQ rights.

### **Illiberalism and Conservatism**

If illiberalism does not equal populism, it has even less overlap with classic conservatism.<sup>5</sup> Illiberals do not come from old, privileged, land-owning upper classes; if anything, they are the upstarts who aim to unseat these elites and take their place. They do, however, use some version of a conservative past to legitimize their rule. Often, they put forward an amalgam of “blood and soil” traditionalism with a technologically dynamic form of modernity, as in National Socialism, the neo-samurai military modernizers of the Meiji Restoration, Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman imperial revival movement, and the neo-Confucian nationalist technocracy narrative of post-Tiananmen China.

In Russia, Putin has often turned to the czarist trinity of orthodoxy, autocracy, and Russian identity—plus hypersonic missiles—to frame his regime.<sup>6</sup> Putin equates himself to powerful reformers like the modernizing czar Peter the Great. In Hungary, Fidesz has been rewriting the history of the interwar years, glorifying the authoritarian Horthy regime as a model of Hungarian democracy, much as it portrays its own regime as a model of illiberal democracy.

A glorious conservative past is not a part of the ethos of the United States, which was “born modern.” Except for “originalist” legal theorists, contemporary American illiberals have thus sought inspiration less from the founding fathers than from the losing side of the Civil War (Hartz 1955; Mead 1999). Elevating historical losers might seem counterintuitive, but it is quite a common practice for nationalists. Myths of victimization generate a strong emotional attachment, especially for those who feel victimized in the present by real and invented foes (Benford and Snow 2000). Putin’s origin story is the tragedy that was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the West’s abuse of Russia in that moment of weakness. PiS in Poland is obsessed with the loss of Polish sovereignty in the past and the role that Germany (or Prussia) and Russia played in it. In Hungary, the loss of territory and population in the Treaty of Trianon remains a galvanizing historical event for nationalists—perhaps not surprising for a society whose independence days honor the 1848 and 1956 revolutions, two occasions on which the nation failed to achieve independence.

### **Transactional Illiberalism**

Much contemporary illiberalism, based on coercive power and patronage economics, is heavily transactional and otherwise lacks a clear and consistent set of moral principles. Confucianism was promoted under Hu Jintao until too many people started to take it seriously as an ethical standard for social relations. Now instead they have Xi Jinping Thought (Snyder 2008; Xuetong 2013). Contemporary illiberalism in the manner of Putin has no moral theory of politics other than a Schmittian us-versus-them attitude, with the “us” referring ambiguously to Russians or perhaps just to the regime (Schmitt 2008 [1932]). This cynicism elides illiberalism’s corruption element with its identity-solidarity theme. The opportunistic bargain between Donald Trump and his evangelical base is a variation on this theme.

Many illiberals are deeply cynical. At its core, illiberalism views politics as a power-driven zero-sum game, and thus regards liberalism as either weak or merely window dressing intended to disguise the cynical intentions of powerful actors. Illiberal nationalists take it as a mission to uncover the hypocrisy of liberals through never-ending whataboutism: the United States is no more a democracy than is Russia because of the impact of money on politics and gerrymandering; Hillary Clinton is the corrupt one because of her emails; and so on. This

perception of politics as detached from morality makes illiberals distinctly transactional in their international behavior and less prone to the cooperation that is inherent to liberalism.

Admittedly, market liberalism also has its inherently transactional side. Sometimes this has been tempered by the notion that the long-run health of capitalist enterprise depends on the provision of public goods and stable relationships with productive employees. Increasingly, however, libertarian ideas, short-run profit targets, “rational markets theory,” and financialization of the economy have hollowed out the public ethos and regulatory stabilizers of the liberal economy. Indeed, liberalism’s rising transactionalism has been a major source of illiberal populist backlash in both the advanced democracies and developing countries (Lemann 2019; S. C. Nelson and Katzenstein 2014; Pistor 2019).

Other illiberal populists may not be cynical but may nevertheless have ethical systems that place a low value on universally applicable principles and on rule-following in general, while placing a high value on the status of the in-group and its honor. Israel’s Jewish and democratic pillars have always been in tension, for example, but under Netanyahu Israel has increasingly drifted toward the exclusionary Jewish pillar. Another example is Walter Russell Mead’s (1999) analysis of “The Jacksonian tradition and American foreign policy,” which traces the historical and cultural roots of Trump’s Southern evangelical base. Another common tendency is for illiberals to fail to recognize the contradictions between their in-group prejudices and their ostensibly inclusive civic principles, a feature of Turkish religious nationalism as analyzed by Jenny White (2013). Neither of these variants bode well for smooth relations with either liberal or illiberal outgroups.

Illiberalism is more likely to arise where liberalism was never strong or where an unresolved struggle between liberalism and illiberalism defines the political arena. In states with limited experience with liberalism, illiberal actors can more easily subvert political institutions, and society itself will be less resistant to illiberal principles of government. This has been the case to varying degrees in Putin’s Russia, Modi’s India, and Erdoğan’s Turkey. In the post-communist region, liberalism similarly has not fully taken hold. The transition from communism has often divided a political system between liberals and nationalists, incentivizing nationalists to use



illiberalism against their domestic political opponents. This has been a central feature in the de-democratization in Hungary and Poland.

In states with deep liberal traditions, institutions and society are more difficult to transform and populist mobilization will not necessarily take an illiberal form. A notable example is the Brexit vote and its aftermath in Britain. Though it represented a strong protest against globalization and cosmopolitanism, leading to a profound change in foreign and economic policies, Brexit did not produce an illiberal form of government. The Brexit movement, though populist, was not illiberal.

### **Consequences for Foreign Relations of Liberal and Illiberal States and Groups**

The character of liberal and illiberal regimes makes them distinctive actors in international relations in ways that tend to put them at loggerheads on many basic issues. On balance, liberal regimes probably bring considerable advantages to this contest. However, the liberal and illiberal regimes and movements that survive in a highly competitive environment will tend to be ones that adjust pragmatically to the pressures and opportunities of their environment rather than simply following their ideological predilections.

Considerable research has been devoted to the distinctive foreign policies of liberal democracies (De Mesquita et al. 1999; Russett and Oneal 2001). Despite (or because of) being accountable to voters in their quite distinct nations, liberal democracies never fight wars against each other; instead, they favor each other as allies, have been especially active in creating international organizations to manage international cooperation in many spheres, tend to engage in and promote free trade, promote human rights, and have been on the winning side of the grand strategic contests that have shaped the international system over the past century. Explanations for these outcomes include their voters' ability to punish leaders who engage in costly adventures, the shared liberal identities that all but eliminate threat perceptions between liberal democracies, the rule of law that makes democratic commitments more credible, the checks and balances that keep democracies' policies on an even keel, and the free marketplace of ideas that produces better foreign-policy analysis and discourse relative to authoritarian regimes. While

illiberal voices and factions often exist in the pluralistic liberal environment, political competition is structured in a way that normally tends to limit their impact.

There is less explicitly generalizing research on the distinctive foreign policies of illiberal regimes and states. Illiberal regimes, whether semi-democracies or outright autocracies, fight wars with each other and with liberal democracies at about the same rate (Reiter and Stam 2002; Russett and Oneal 2001). Different subtypes of authoritarian regimes have a different propensity for war and aggression, with personalistic regimes being most belligerent, institutionalized single-party regimes being most cautious, and military regimes having a mixed track record. The war profile of semi-democratic illiberal regimes is more similar to that of authoritarian regimes than of liberal democracies (Reiter and Stam 2002).

Unlike autocracies, semi-democratic illiberal regimes lie on the borders of the exclusive club of liberal democracies. Even while courting new illiberal allies, they are likely to continue seeking privileged membership benefits in the liberal global system such as favorable trade and security arrangements. In the domestic arena, illiberals in semi-democratic settings seek to transform or subvert political institutions so as to continue comfortably winning elections. When other democracies attempt to interfere in these domestic transformations, or when illiberals wish to divert attention away from their domestic actions, an ensuing internal upheaval can have transnational spillover effects. Attacks by the illiberal governments of Hungary and Poland on their countries' constitutional courts have led to an ongoing showdown vis-à-vis the European Union (EU) and increased attempts from both countries to stymie EU fiscal policy and a joint refugee-settlement policy.

Illiberal regimes are typically sovereignty hawks and tend toward mercantilism in foreign economic policy (Krasner 1985). Though they may opportunistically join international organizations founded mainly by liberal states, they have been less likely to establish their own illiberal organizations except by imposition, though this has been changing recently. Since the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, Beijing has been actively creating a network of "post-Western" institutions (Cooley and Nexon 2020). While the SCO is a Eurasian regional alliance rather than a fully international institution, it does comprise a significant share

of the world's population. Moreover, Beijing's multilateral economic and infrastructure partnerships are global. Evaluations of these organizations have so far been mixed, with Western observers tending to downplay their importance and potential for lasting impact (Cooley and Nexon 2020). Illiberal states have tended to be on the losing side of major system-founding strategic contests (Ikenberry 2019; Kennedy 1987). Explanatory conjectures for these patterns include the greater role of repression and rent-seeking in illiberal regimes, the extractive interests of their ruling elites, the narrowly nationalistic ideologies used to mobilize public support, the weakness of their regulatory institutions, their relatively low level of per-capita income and citizen capacity, the lack of checks on capricious autocrats, and the restrictions on information and open debate that degrade the quality of their policy discourse (Lake 1992; Owen 1994; Russett and Oneal 2001). All that said, some argue that the recent era of democratic backsliding and successful state-led capitalism has led to innovations in illiberal foreign policy and thematic convergence among some weakly liberal and illiberal states, which call into question the relevance of assumptions based on earlier eras (Cooley and Nexon 2020). This may depend on context. A highly repressive, resource-dependent regime like Putin's Russia today seems as vulnerable to catastrophic errors as past illiberal states.

We now turn to the foreign-policy tendencies of illiberal regimes and the foreign-policy positions of illiberal parties and movements in several issue areas.

### **Grand Strategies of Authoritarianism and Illiberalism**

Over the past two and a half centuries, the typical grand strategy of major authoritarian or illiberal states has sought to use military expansion to achieve exclusive political control over an autarkic empire within a self-sufficient defense perimeter. To achieve this, the authoritarian or illiberal power has typically engaged in preventive attacks and employed opportunistic Machiavellian tactics rather than rule-based approaches to expanding influence (Hui 2005; Levy 2008). Justifications for expansion have varied, including self-defense, ethnonational irredentism, class and racial ideologies, the inexorable trend of history, and a "might makes right" version of Social Darwinism. Examples include Napoleon's Continental System, the Kaiser's *Mitteleuropa*, Hitler's *Lebensraum*, the expansionist doctrine expressed in Japanese

militarist thought as early as 1920, and the eventual expansion of Stalin's "socialism in one country" to encompass central planning throughout the Soviet empire.

Scholarly explanations for this are varied. John Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism argues that any great power, liberal or illiberal, must and will attempt to seize a defensible, self-sufficient continental-sized hegemonic position using whatever ruthless power-politics expedients it can (Mearsheimer 2001). The main difference, if any, between liberal and illiberal great powers is that the liberal powers were either early developers like Britain or geographically separate like the United States, and so could easily grab their extensive spheres of domination against light opposition. Late developers, in contrast, had to try to overturn the global balance of power to seize their "place in the sun." Autarky was imposed on them in the course of security competition by the liberal trading states' blockades, embargoes, and sanctions, and the former CoCom's limits on technology transfer (Copeland 2015).

Critics of this view point out that illiberal states' foreign trade and economic development thrived in the liberal international economic order prior to 1914, with British voters rejecting imperial tariff protection in 1905. By 1926, Weimar Germany's labor-export coalition was flush with Dawes and Young Plan financing, and Japan's economy boomed as a result of trade with the United States until the 1929 financial crisis (Gourevitch 1986; Snyder 1991). The problems facing illiberal members of the open economic order have arisen not from the cutthroat practices of liberal powers but from the unintended consequences of economic mismanagement by the liberal stewards of the global market system.

Alternative explanations link the illiberal tendency toward autarky and empire to the rent-seeking cartels that dominate their state-led growth model. Several mutually constituting factors feed this pattern. Late developers exploit "advantages of backwardness" such as cheap labor, underutilized resources, and authoritarian command economics (Gerschenkron 1962). The interest-group "selectorate" that sustains such regimes can most easily be fed its patronage through monopolies, subsidies, state-market arbitrage, and tariff protection. Since competitive markets and elections undermine such systems (Ang 2016; Hellman 1998; Shirk 2022), state-dominated market economies generally prefer to trade with each other rather than adopt open-market arrangements.

Ideologically, in the modern era, when almost all states need to put out some narrative of national self-determination, illiberal nationalism works better than liberal nationalism to justify this economic system (Gerschenkron 1943). Sometimes illiberal states such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have switched from this pattern to free markets and democratic politics as they maneuvered their way through the middle-income phase of economic development, though this is most likely in the sphere of influence of a democratic great power. Russia and China appear to have botched their opportunity to make this switch (Frye 2022; Shirk 2022).

The size and power of an illiberal country naturally affect its ability to indulge these tendencies. Even for the largest states, autarkic continental hegemony may prove a pipe dream, especially in the context of an increasingly integrated global economy. That said, less-developed regional powers like Iran and Turkey are commonly run by illiberal ruling coalitions supported by rent-seeking cartels and legitimated by illiberal nationalist ideologies (Solingen 1998). Smaller states, meanwhile, are typically takers rather than makers in the international order. In Europe, they have normally had little choice but to adopt open economies and the democratic politics that goes with it, notwithstanding outliers such as Franco's Spain during the Cold War and Orbán's Hungary during the right populist surge, though even in these cases, the economy remained or increasingly became open (Katzenstein 1985). In illiberal neighborhoods, however, even small states can find illiberal protectors and business partners.

In rare cases, such as the "zone of peace" among the Latin American military dictatorships, this can result in international comity as regimes focus on their common interest in domestic repression. Even among larger states, the Concert of Europe was similarly motivated by the common interest of Europe's crowned heads in forestalling a return to the politics of the French Revolution. This period of international peace did not last long, however, since the monarchies of Britain and France chose to co-opt liberal nationalists, whereas Russia and Austria doubled down on repression. The most usual pattern historically among both larger and smaller illiberal states, however, is regional balancing in which the enemy of my enemy is my friend (Walt 1987).

### **Alliances, Clients, and Networks**

Illiberal nationalists' preference for direct action over formal procedural rule is the most notable characteristic of their approach to foreign policy. Where institutions are liberal and deeply entrenched, as in the United States, illiberal leaders will tend to bypass them and make foreign policy increasingly personalist (Larson 2021). In other cases, illiberal leaders will centralize and personalize the existing institutions to reflect their preferences. Studies of both Hungary under Orbán (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021) and India under Modi (Plagemann and Destradi 2019) have found that such institutional reorganization was the most significant change these leaders brought to foreign policy making.

Illiberals do tend to form new or improved ties with like-minded leaders abroad. Donald Trump expressed his admiration for Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un, and was in turn much admired by Poland's PiS and Jair Bolsonaro, among others; a variety of illiberal leaders including Nicolás Maduro, Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, and Dmitry Medvedev attended Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's inauguration in 2018; Benjamin Netanyahu boasted about his close ties with Trump, Putin, and Modi in a 2019 election campaign. But these ties are transactional and often ad hoc, and do not necessarily lead to lasting alliances. In Netanyahu's case, his investment in illiberal allies proved entirely fruitless after Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack on Israel. Vladimir Putin immediately turned against Israel and the US; China chose not to pick sides; and Donald Trump was critical of Netanyahu and complimented Hezbollah. In contrast, Israel's traditional liberal allies, the United States and Europe, provided diplomatic support and weapons despite Netanyahu's blatant neglect of the alliance.

Viktor Orbán has cultivated a close relationship with Vladimir Putin built on relatively favorable energy trade. Hungary has championed the Russian cause in the EU and has had a less than friendly relationship with Ukraine in the past several years. At the same time, Hungary is heavily dependent on EU funds, trade, and investment, and so Orbán continues to comply with EU sanctions on Russia. As a result, after 2014 the volume of trade between Hungary and Russia significantly declined, and it has in any case been much lower in relative terms than the trade between Russia and several other European countries, primarily Germany (Gross 2013). Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Hungary found itself in a delicate position. On the one hand, Putin was central in Orbán's rhetoric, and even more importantly, Hungary had

recently signed a new energy agreement with Russia, which helped shore up support for Orbán prior to his reelection. On the other hand, for the first time Hungary was isolated in its pro-Russian position and could not hide behind Germany, at least on an oil ban; thus, it faced a tradeoff between its illiberal proximity to Russia and its highly beneficial relationship with the EU.

In such cases, illiberal leaders often use their position as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis their liberal allies. Erdoğan has often squeezed the European Union for more funds in return for hosting refugees; he did the same thing to NATO by initially withholding Finland's and Sweden's bids for membership.

China's illiberal leaders bargain similarly with liberal states based on their position in the international system. Though China has not provided an alternative to liberal democracy as a model of government, it does offer investment opportunities without making demands on its partners for domestic political reforms or protection of human rights (Cooley and Nexon 2020). China has made significant investments in Latin American and African countries; however, though it has cultivated ties with European countries, partly through its One Belt One Road initiative, investment there has been far lower and has not served as a significant counter to EU investment in the newer member states within its neighborhood. China, however, is not building the same permanent institutional structure that is the foundation of the liberal order. China too is transactional in its relationships. It has been unwilling to assist Russia in its Ukraine predicament to bring it to its side, and where economic gain is at stake it feels free to interfere in international situations on its own terms.

Unlike China, Russia's anti-LGBTQ and anti-abortion legislation and its promotion of patriarchal "traditional values" have made it a model for radical-right groups around the world. In the past decade, the Kremlin has cultivated personal ties with a variety of radical actors, including American Christian fundamentalists and European nationalist politicians like Marine Le Pen. Russia has sustained this illiberal network through direct funding, spread of online conspiracy theories, and promoting and spreading conservative thought. Beyond its far-right network, Russia supports an array of radical parties of the left and the right, intending to sow

chaos in liberal democracies and to promote its own agenda. Though the intended chaos has often ensued, advancing Russia's agenda has proven more difficult. Few American politicians openly support Russia, with the notable exception of Donald Trump; likewise, pro-Russian European parties benefit from Kremlin funding but support Russia's agenda only selectively (Snegovaya 2021).

On a smaller scale, Viktor Orbán has built his own conservative network. Orbán has pursued relationships with Matteo Salvini and Marin Le Pen and with Poland's PiS, a close ally until the 2022 war in Ukraine, and has been particularly close to right-wing nationalists in the United States such as Ron DeSantis, Mike Pence, Tucker Carlson, and Steve Bannon, who admire and emulate his political style. Hungary hosts conferences with a focus on conservative and family values, including the 2022 CPAC, a conference that brought together American conservatives and Hungarian authoritarians. Orbán has also tried to promote conservative scholarship by centralizing academic funding and redirecting funds toward the nationalist research agenda and pushing out the liberal Central European University.

Though illiberal nationalists may still belong to liberal international institutions, they view them as the building blocks of the post-World War II liberal order, which they disdain, and as an enemy of state sovereignty. This narrative resonates in the Global South, where many view international organizations as a tool of Western domination and trust in such institutions is low (Call, Crow, and Ron 2017). Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, a narrative placing direct responsibility for the war on NATO became immediately prominent in the Global South, due to the prevalent suspicion of Western institutions in those countries (Ordu and Uche 2022).

Stemming from such negative views, the illiberal approach to international organizations ranges from dismissing them as weak and irrelevant to marking them as foes, openly attacking them, and even threatening exit. Donald Trump was notorious in his negative attitude toward international institutions and treaties. During Trump's one term in office, the United States withdrew from the World Health Organization, UNESCO, the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and the Asia Pacific trade pact; in addition, he attacked NATO and threatened to upend the World Trade Organization. Admittedly, these actions reflected weaknesses in the



global liberal order itself. Ever since the Nixon Administration abandoned the peg of the dollar to gold, the United States has been opportunistically willing to undermine international institutions of its own creation. Following Trump, for example, President Biden has continued to block new nominations of tribunals to the WTO's Appellate Body (Menshikova 2022), effectively paralyzing the organization's dispute-settlement system, though the administration does promise a reform that would restore the WTO's efficacy (Baschuk 2023). Still, Trump's illiberal nationalist attack on IOs was unique in the extent of his actions (Carnegie and Carson 2019).

Not all illiberal nationalists are willing or able to take such extreme measures. Smaller, more dependent, and more integrated states cannot easily form alternative institutions or reshape the existing ones. Since illiberals are likewise transactional and do not necessarily collaborate with each other, they too often fail to build coherent alternative institutions—though, as noted above, China has been making some strides in this direction with a set of regional organizations and multilateral economic initiatives. Erik Voeten (2020), who has examined populist backlash against international courts since 1990, has found that populists, who have also been for the most part illiberal, do not always follow through on their exit threats, and moreover, that populist leaders did not collaborate with each other to create a united front against such institutions (Voeten 2020).

Other relevant research on populist behavior in international institutions has produced equally mixed results. Studies on populists in power—many of them also illiberal—show that they tend to share less crucial information with international institutions, preferring to appear uncooperative as part of their sovereignty-centered agenda, even if they do often continue to cooperate with IOs behind the scenes (Carnegie and Clark 2020).

### **Illiberal Political Economy**

Illiberals' economic policy is typically informed by a combination of their nationalist and nativist positions, their transactional approach to politics, and the need to satisfy diverse domestic coalitions. The economic preference that goes hand in hand with the illiberal nationalist stance is generally protectionist and mercantilist. Accordingly, illiberal leaders often stress a preference for increased trade barriers and favorable trade terms for their own state over their partners. Upon taking office in 2014, Modi refused to ratify the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement until

he received an exemption for India's domestic food-security program, a signal of commitment to his constituency (Gupta et al. 2019). Donald Trump declared that "trade wars are good and easy to win" and went on to impose high tariffs on commodities of both traditional allies and competitors of the United States (Boucher and Thies 2019; Fetzer and Schwarz 2021). Trade protectionism is naturally more feasible for large economies. On the other end of the spectrum are states like Hungary, which has nearly no control over its trade terms. A small economy and a member of the European Union, Hungary trades mostly with other member states, making trade protectionism irrelevant.

While illiberals have a preference for protectionism, they remain an integral part of the international economic system. Under Putin, Russia's economy has been run by economists who have ensured macroeconomic stability for decades. Their eventual failure to stabilize the economy came at the hands of Putin himself when he invaded first Crimea and then the whole of Ukraine, destroying his relationship with the West. Such overreach is another trademark of illiberal states.

Illiberals, in general, court investors and seek export markets. Gupta et al. (2019), for example, characterize Modi as "pro-business rather than pro-market." Hungary lowered its corporate tax to 9 percent in 2017 and its labor tax to 15.5 percent in 2020, among the lowest rates in the EU ("2020 Investment Climate Statements: Hungary" n.d.).

The other guiding principle of illiberal nationalists is satisfying the domestic constituency, often through clientelist practices. For Latin American populists, the consequence has often been inflated budgets that eventually lead to the collapse of the economy and a subsequent sovereign-debt crisis (Kaufman and Stallings 1991). Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland have also used social transfers to keep their lower-class voters in tow. Fidesz subsidizes utilities; PiS transfers cash to families. Ironically, their inflated budgets are sponsored by the EU's structural funds. Both countries are currently in conflict with the EU over Covid funds, due to rule-of-law violations, although a new liberal government in Poland may change that. For illiberals in Western Europe, one way to satisfy their white but socioeconomically diverse constituencies has been limiting the access of nonnatives to welfare provisions.

## **Strategic Interactions of Liberal and Illiberal Regimes**

The foreign policies of illiberal states, parties, and movements are shaped not only by their own internal propensities but also by their interaction with liberals. Although toleration is listed as one of the standard liberal virtues, liberals are not especially tolerant of illiberals, and for good reason (Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Mearsheimer 2018). Not only their principles but also their forms of social organization are antithetical. As Stalin told Milovan Djilas, “each side must impose its own social system as far as its armies can reach” (Djilas 1963, 114). Today, Putin needs to have an illiberal Ukraine run by corrupt oligarchs who are entwined with Russian patronage systems. A formally “neutral” but liberal Ukraine that meets the admission requirements for the European Union can never satisfy Putin’s needs, because that Ukraine would function fully as a liberal polity, its economy functionally integrated with the West, with interests identical to the West, including strategic interests. Ukrainian neutrality under those terms would be no more useful and reliable to Putin than the neutrality of Finland and Sweden turned out to be.

The fact that many members of the World Trade Organization are undemocratic and have state-run, semi-market economies suggests that some transactional arm’s-length accommodations are possible between liberals and illiberals. This may be true temporarily for weak, impoverished illiberal states; however, when trade between statist and liberal economies is for higher stakes, frictions can arise over the risk of strategic opportunism. Once Japan became a near-peer economic competitor, the United States began pressing relentlessly for a thorough liberalization of its markets for goods and capital—and Japan was a military ally. Once trade with liberal states had made China a peer competitor in both the economic and military spheres, China’s habitual intellectual property theft and coerced technology transfer began to look to the United States like a formula for the West’s unilateral disarmament. Conversely, US demands for liberal-style, law-governed economic relations struck at the absolute primacy of the Chinese Communist Party, the entire basis for social order in the Chinese system (Shirk 2022).

In short, routine behaviors that are integral to the functioning of liberal and illiberal systems turn out to be fundamentally mismatched, giving rise to misaligned preferences, distrust, fear, and moral outrage in both directions. This situation constitutes the backdrop for coercive bargaining

and jockeying for advantage, which complicates risk management and the search for mutual benefit and the avoidance of mutual harm.

Our nutshell summary above of past strategic contests has suggested that authoritarian and illiberal great powers have almost always performed poorly in geopolitical competitions with their liberal rivals. Illiberal powers are poor realists who routinely provoke too many enemies and wind up on the outgunned side of an imbalance of power. This is partly because their closed, biased information systems lead to poor decision making, but perhaps more fundamentally because their brutal, corrupt social systems are inherently more threatening to key actors in world politics than are liberal systems.

At the level of more specific strategic interactions, liberal powers have always had an advantage in the control of the sea lanes of communication, which has given them unimpeded access to resources and the ability to blockade and embargo their illiberal opponents. The liberal powers have also enjoyed control over the world's main financial and information systems, placing them in control of crucial nodes and leverage. These advantages may be connected to liberalism's inherent nature as the core system of free exchange of goods and ideas. Illiberal powers have sometimes enjoyed the advantages of command mobilization of resources and of surprise attack, but the liberal powers have mainly enjoyed the overall advantages of economic efficiency, taxation, and military performance (Bueno De Mesquita et al. 1999; Kennedy 1987; Reiter and Stam 2002).

Other alleged built-in advantages include liberal states' greater credibility as makers of threats and promises. Liberal states' transparent public promises, codified in law, make them more acceptable as the predictably hegemonic leaders of the international system (Ikenberry 2019). Likewise, the threats of liberal states and leaders are said to be more credible to foes and third-party observers because democratic publics are able to punish leaders that back away from deterrent threats (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007). The latter point is much debated, however, and a burgeoning literature argues that most authoritarian regimes, except personalistic dictatorships, can gain credibility for their threats as a result of their accountability to domestic elite groups that control the leader's fate (Weeks 2008).

Over time, liberalism has expanded its scope in ideological competition against illiberal alternatives. By the mid-1990s, the various waves of democratization had left most of the world's countries as democracies or semi-democracies, with the vast majority of states obligated to hold at least somewhat competitive elections as a minimal requirement of legitimate rule. Indeed, it was the success of liberalism in the ideological competition that spurred authoritarians to adopt populist and competitive authoritarian modalities of rule. During the unipolar moment, liberalism became "dizzy with success," imagining that the world's Afghanistans and Iraqs could easily become liberal in their politics and economies. However, this overreach came from overestimating the feasibility of liberal transformation in states that lacked the necessary preconditions, not from liberal states' lack of military and economic resources. One subject of debate is whether liberalism's further ideological successes are likely to be limited to Anglo-Saxon and European-influenced cultural zones, or whether liberalism is instead likely to spread to any part of the globe that achieves a reasonably high level of economic development and other facilitating social conditions (Katzenstein 2010, Chapter 1).

Overall, there are strong reasons to expect that liberalism and illiberalism will remain locked in international rivalry, but that liberal states will continue to find advantages in liberal solidarity that will surpass those of the shallower, more transactional relationships among illiberal states and movements.

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**1** Inglehart and Welzel say that "traditional values emphasize the importance of religion, parent-child ties, deference to authority and traditional family values. People who embrace these values also reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia and suicide. These societies have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook" (Inglehart and Welzel 2015).

**2** See Chapter 1 on the need to balance relative-gains thinking with effective cooperation to reap absolute gains when developing long-term concepts of grand strategy (Copeland 2015).

**3** Some traditional social structures persisted well into modernity and hindered liberals' attempts to penetrate society and form lasting coalitions. Gregory Luebbert, for example, explores the role that the traditional-minded peasantry played in determining regime outcomes in interwar Europe (Luebbert 1991).

**4** For more on the relationship between liberalism, illiberalism, and populism, see the chapter by Pappas in this volume.

**5** For more on the relationship between illiberalism and conservatism, see the chapter by Fawcett in this volume.

**6** For more on Russia, see the chapters by Bluhm and Marat in this volume.