



Has the Multilateral Fightback Begun?

MATTHEW LOUIS BISHOP
The University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

The recent resurgence of authoritarian nationalist populism has led some to question the continuing viability of the post-1945 order. This new conventional wisdom suggests that we are entering a brave new era in which globalisation and multilateralism have outlived their usefulness as states retreat behind national borders. However, this claim rests on a conflation of liberal ideas with the neoliberal ideology that has reigned since the 1980s. It also conflates actually-existing global integration and its governance with multilateralism as a concept, practice, and aspiration. It is crucial to disentangle these phenomena, and to remain cautious about attributing permanence to an apparently decisive shift that may simply be a temporary state within what is, by definition, a contingent and contested process.

Is the 'Liberal Idea' Dying?

Shortly before the G20 began in Osaka in June 2019, Vladimir Putin gave [an interview](#) to the *Financial Times* where he argued that liberalism has 'become obsolete'. As far as he is concerned, the rise of nationalism and its concomitant backlash against open borders and multiculturalism in much of the West means that 'the liberal idea' has now effectively 'outlived its usefulness'. In a broad sense, Putin's analysis has some merit: there [has undeniably been](#) a substantial degree of neoliberal overreach in the way the past few decades of globalization have played out, favouring capital mobility and financialization over the interests of everyday people who have frequently lost out due to the skewed distribution of benefits and costs from deeper global integration.

The decade since the global crisis has certainly revealed many pathologies in the functioning of the global economy and its governing practices. It has become abundantly clear that societies are unable to deal fully with the crises that beset them, from capitalist stagnation, intensifying inequality and poverty, to large-scale migration and the climate emergency. Moreover, the [neoliberal governing orthodoxy](#) is in an advanced state of decay, despite, paradoxically, remaining remarkably resilient. This, as academics are [fond of reminding us](#), is entirely to be expected: Gramsci's 'interregnum' between the old and new orders is one replete with 'morbid symptoms' until the crisis is decisively resolved.

As the neoliberal order, and the specific set of governing ideas, norms and values underpinning it have come under attack, it could be argued that the various challenges to liberal ways of governing societies – encapsulated by the reactionary agendas of populist leaders like Orban, Salvini, Bolsonaro, Trump and the Brexiteers in Britain –

represent a victory for the kind of nationalist, anti-global (and even anti-democratic) values that typify and underpin Putinism. Reflecting on this, one British columnist [neatly captured](#) the new conventional wisdom thus: 'there is no question that a great reverse is taking place' with a chauvinistic and bigoted backlash against minority rights and democratic norms, such that it appears the 'lights are going out'. It is hardly surprising, then, that Putin is so keen to argue that the emergence of hard-right leaders espousing politics similar to his own represents a global watershed.

Problems with Received Wisdom

Too many, however, seem to have accepted the Putinesque account at face value in my view. Without wishing to be excessively panglossian about what is undeniably a deeply troubling state of affairs (about which Putin may of course prove to be right) both his confidence and the anguish of others regarding the looming end of the liberal world order may ultimately

appear excessive and, therefore, misplaced.

It is clear that we are going to have to live with right-wing proponents of [‘regressive nationalism’](#) in many major countries for the time being. Those actors can, probably will – and already have – done substantial damage to the actually-existing liberal order. Trump’s trade war, for example, is [historically unparalleled](#): it has already come at great cost to [consumers and business](#), and intensified tensions in what should be Washington’s most delicately managed relationship. It is also self-defeating: at just the moment when China is beginning [the tricky process](#) of domestic rebalancing (which implies a greater future demand for exports) and opening up to [greater foreign investment](#), Trump has made accessing those markets on the part of US firms more difficult. But, despite this, it is problematic to argue that any of this points to a fully-fledged breakdown in globalization or the post-1945 order. Four interlinked reasons for this come to mind.

First, an intellectual problem is whether any of this represents a decisive break from either ‘liberalism’ writ large, or the neoliberalism of the recent past, and these need to be disentangled from each other in any case. One irony is that Trump and the other proto-Putins, despite railing against ‘liberalism’, are not in favour of actually ending *neoliberalism*. In fact, as I have [put it elsewhere](#) with my colleague Tony Payne, they are very much neoliberals at home, and neonationalists abroad.

This may appear a contradiction in terms, but Erdogan, Trump, Bolsonaro and others have frequently advocated or pursued highly destabilizing forms of domestic [‘authoritarian neoliberalism’](#), with social protection and international regulation that seeks to sustain it dramatically stripped back. Trump’s trade war, after all, is about incoherently aggressively demanding the utopian: i.e. perfect forms of *even freer* trade that, of course, [do not exist](#). So, while they may well be anti-liberal, in the sense of wishing to undermine

the post-1945 order of rules-based multilateralism, they seek to extend even harsher forms of neoliberalism, not replace or soften it.

A second problem is conceptual. Put simply: [globalization itself](#) is, at root, an ongoing, open-ended process of change, not a pre-determined end state. Fundamentally, it also connotes nothing more (but also nothing less) than a recognition that the geographical and spatial organisation of social and political-economic life, or at least substantial aspects of it, find expression and play out at the global level. Its character, in a given era, is defined by the preferences of its elites, the outcomes of political struggles, and this is inherently underpinned by a distinct, and historically specific, set of [‘ruling ideas’](#) as implied above. The key point here is that, beyond this, its character is distinctive to a given era.

So, while we may well now see the global economic system evolve in new ways, it is far from clear that it will be any less ‘global’ such is the extent of

integration and cross-border economic activity. Again, Trumpism actually implies extending, not winding back, neoliberalism via a chaotic undermining of multilateral institutions and nationalistic strongman tactics. At the same time, a different kind of pro-multilateral set of ideas advocating more intensive collective management of international economic affairs that preserves and improves upon the global governance architecture could emerge too. It is not as if there is not a substantial constituency for them in many countries, particularly amongst younger people who will increasingly comprise the electorate.

There are, moreover, powerful structural pressures for this. The problems facing even the most avowed nationalists are intrinsically trans-national in character: climate change, mass migration, financial flows and so on all require shared management. The very fact that Trump and others come to G20 summits, despite their often-intense scepticism, illustrates how crucial (and unavoidable) collaboration

and co-operation are. This, ironically, is the hallmark of liberal international affairs.

A third issue is historical. It is, as I have suggested already, vital to disentangle intellectually the post-1945 liberal order from actually-existing neoliberal ideas and practices that were institutionalised after 1979 and dominated until the crisis of 2008. The former has, of course, long been in dire need of rejuvenation, regardless of the wanton damage caused by the Trumpists. But, the answer to the crisis of the latter is not to further undermine the global economic governance architecture itself. The task ahead is to retain the baby of globalisation and permit it to flourish while draining the increasingly putrid neoliberal water. Trump *et al* want to keep the smelly water while throwing the baby out of the window and smashing the bath up too!

It is difficult, when trying to make sense of the era in which we live, to see beyond that which seems obvious (i.e.

that a new era of neonationalism is here to stay). It was not, in fact, that long ago that we had a group of relatively committed multilateralists advocating a 'Bretton Woods II' and doing everything they could to drag the world out of the global crisis. Indeed, was that not actually [why the G20 was established](#) in its present form? It is not inconceivable that we could see such leadership again, and perhaps even sooner than we might expect.

Trump lost the 2016 election by three million votes and his 'path to victory' in the electoral college was both narrow and fortuitous. A Democrat could be in the White House by the next G20 summit, taking [a harder line](#) with Russia, [Saudi Arabia and Brazil](#), a more emollient one with the rest of the world, and a more intelligent approach to diplomacy with China. In Britain, Brexit has already '[failed as a political project](#)' and the Conservatives could be decimated in the coming months. Few radical nationalists elsewhere in Europe, on [both right and left](#), now advocate leaving the EU. Lula would

probably [have defeated](#) Bolsonaro had he been given the chance to do so, and the latter does not hold universal appeal. Erdogan's AKP [has started losing](#) elections in Turkey. Even Putin himself [will not be around](#) forever.

Electorates become disenchanted with even the most popular politicians, and the great joy of democracy, however imperfect, is that they can express that through the ballot box. When they do so, politics can be recalibrated rapidly. It may not seem likely at present, but it is at least possible that we may look back on the nationalist moment of the late 2010s as a remarkable – but nonetheless short-lived – aberration. As electorates get [younger and more globalized](#), caring about trans-border issues like the dominance of tech-monopolies and the climate emergency, multilateralism could rapidly come back into fashion.

Finally, there is a cultural problem. Put simply: is the world really clamouring for Putinism? In railing against liberal values in his FT article, he suggested

that 'migrants can kill, plunder and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants have to be protected'. This is xenophobic nonsense: migrants have powerful incentives to *not* commit crimes, and, relative to the wider population, are no more 'criminal'. So, while supporters of Trump, Bolsonaro *et al.* are attracted to lies designed to stoke their nationalism, they remain lies and have the opposite effect on those of a more liberal bent, encouraging even greater resistance and opposition.

This reality is often hidden due to the inane tendency of much journalistic commentary to paint the world in binaries: West (good) vs East (bad); democratic vs authoritarian; free trade vs protectionism; and so on. Yet in all societies, there are mixtures of these tendencies, and they are subject to continual political contestation. As such, it is implausible to suggest that neo-nationalist ideas and practices are immutable: they provoke reactions, which can intensify as new political coalitions emerge to contest them.

In a [thoughtful piece](#) during the G20 summit, Francesco Grillo suggested that, contrary to the new received wisdom, ‘the political game that we are witnessing is [not] about the (rather resistible and contradictory) rise of the hard, nationalist right. But more about the ... irresistible fall of the establishment’. What I take from this is that the neoliberal order – both in terms of the technologies that drove political and economic organization, and the ideas that legitimized it – has been decisively undermined by new patterns of technological change. The new order that is emerging –with power concentrated in the techno-monopolies, disaggregated sources of information, and widespread economic insecurity and inequality – has so far proven devastating for labour.

The answer, though, is neither to restore a decaying neoliberalism nor mistake accentuated neonationalism for a cause when it is a symptom. ‘What is really urgent’, Grillo argues, ‘is to start studying a century that began already 19 years ago and which we are

failing to understand’. On that basis, ‘new categories’ might be developed which can lead to new approaches to governing a very different global order to the one that preceded it. All of these will, by definition, require greater international cooperation.

Conclusion: Green Shoots in Osaka?

The key paradox at the heart of proto-Putinism is that its advocates in Ankara, Brasilia, Washington and elsewhere fully recognize the pathologies that have brought them to power, but wilfully misdiagnose the solution as requiring more of the things that caused those pathologies to intensify and less of that which could have attenuated them. It was not rules-based multilateralism that caused the global crisis, but rather an insufficiency of global governance and an inability (even unwillingness) on the part of the western governments to deal properly with the negative distributional consequences of an increasingly problematic neoliberal globalization when they had the opportunity.

Nonetheless, it is quite possible that this situation could change quickly. There is a deep-seated [commitment to multilateralism](#) on the part of many governments and the bodies that comprise the wider institutional regime of global economic governance. The symbolism in the opening of the summit was emblematic in this regard: Prime Minister Abe of Japan ensured that Trump was flanked by Juncker of the EU, Xi Jinping of China, and Roberto Azevêdo of the WTO. The [message seemed clear](#): we remain committed to multilateralism and will do everything to bind you to it going forward. Indeed, it is remarkable in many ways – and evinces my broader argument – that China, despite being notably illiberal in its domestic politics, is [now the key leader and champion](#) of the liberal, multilateral order.

Strongman-type nationalism has its limits. US intransigence on trade (including WTO reform) and climate change had [apparently stymied](#) behind-the-scenes discussions, leading

some to question whether an Osaka communiqué would even emerge. Yet it did, and included relatively strong language on both issues which, although '[papering over the cracks](#)', illustrates the limits, rather than extent of American power in today's world.

Perhaps, then, Putin himself may be guilty of [wishful thinking](#). Few are genuinely charmed by his authoritarian nationalist view of the world and many are minded to actively resist it, even though it seems to be in the ascendant for now. Am not predicting that a glorious renewal of multilateralism is on the horizon, and the G20 itself [has its own problems](#) in desperate need of resolution before that can happen. But, we may look back in a few years and see that some of the green shoots were more obvious at this summit than we might have realized at the time.

Matt Bishop is Senior Lecturer in International Politics at the University of Sheffield, and he can be found tweeting at: @MatthewLBishop

