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MULTIPOLAR DISORDER: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, CLIMATE SECURITY AND THE COLLAPSE OF LIBERAL MULTILATERALISM.

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Abstract

The international liberal Order (ILO) of the mid-2020s, the system of democratic governance, multilateral institutions, and rules-based international relations, is at a moment of systemic crisis. In this paper, we argue that the crisis is driven by three converging forces: (1) the strategic norm-setting agenda of an emerging authoritarian bloc led by China, Russia and their allies; (2) the weaponization of artificial intelligence as a force multiplier for disinformation, electoral interference and the erosion of democratic epistemics; and (3) the catastrophic failure of multilateral climate governance amid intensifying great-power competition. This study critically analyses how these forces are interacting with the domestic fragmentation of Western democracies through economic populism, cultural nationalism and institutional distrust, using Critical Theory as an analytical lens. The study critically analyses how these forces interact with the domestic fragmentation of western democracies through economic populism, cultural nationalism and distrust of institutions. Case studies from the United States, France, Germany, and Italy show how the liberal order is being challenged from without and hollowed from within at the same time. The paper concludes that even a reformed liberal order needs to confront not only authoritarian challengers but also the structural failings of liberal governance itself in order to be sustained.

INTRODUCTION

The modern world is hardly a reflection of the liberal optimism that followed the end of the Cold War. Fukuyama's 1992 proclamation of the "end of history"—the presumed inevitable global victory of liberal democracy and market economics—has yielded to a messier world: a multipolar disorder where authoritarian forms of governance are vying with liberal democracy for global ideational primacy; where new technologies are being deployed as weapons against democratic institutions; and where the existential danger of climate change is being sacrificed to the dictates of great-power rivalry. This paper examines this multipolar disorder through the lens of three intersecting crises that characterise the political landscape of the mid-2020s. First, the consolidation of an authoritarian normative project: an intentional effort by China, Russia and their partners to build alternative international institutions, norms and discourses that legitimise authoritarian governance and delegitimise liberal democratic universalism. The project reached a symbolic

milestone in 2025 when the leaders of China, Russia and North Korea met together for the first time since the 1950s, a sign of a new depth of authoritarian alignment. Second, the AI disinformation revolution: the use of generative AI at scale to create synthetic media, run targeted psychological operations against democratic electorates and poison the information environments on which deliberative democracy depends.

Third, the climate-security nexus: the compounding interaction between accelerating climate change and intensifying geopolitical competition, where both crises amplify each other in ways that neither liberal institutions nor authoritarian alternative frameworks can manage. These three crises intersect and amplify the domestic fissures that are already apparent in Western democracies — the economic insecurities of deindustrialised communities, the cultural upheavals of rapid demographic change, and the deep institutional distrust created by years of misgovernance, corruption scandals, and the apparent hijacking of liberal institutions by cosmopolitan elites. The ensuing politics of resentment, populist in character and seen in countries from the United States to France to Hungary, is both a symptom of the liberal order's internal contradictions and a resource exploited by its external challengers. This paper adopts a Critical Theory analytical framework which allows us to simultaneously analyse how power structures, dominant ideologies and institutional arrangements shape and constrain political possibilities. The emphasis of Critical Theory on questioning who benefits from prevailing norms is especially pertinent to the analysis of the ILO whose universalist claims have been consistently challenged by states and peoples who viewed it as an instrument of Western hegemony. Any meaningful critical analysis must acknowledge the ILO's real successes in promoting prosperity, reducing conflict and expanding human rights, but also face up to the double standards, exclusions and imbalances of power that have undermined its legitimacy – and which its authoritarian challengers are ruthlessly exploiting.

External and Internal Problems in the Liberal Order

The liberal order is facing critical problems. This problem is both external and internal. Externally authoritarian countries like China and Russia are challenging the order. They are creating their institutions and norms that are different from the liberal order. Internally the liberal order is being challenged by the rise of populist movements and the decline of trust in institutions. Many people in democracies are feeling anxious and uncertain about the future. They are worried about their security, their cultural identity and the ability of their governments to address big problems like climate change. The third dimension of the problem is technological. New technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) are being used to spread false information and undermine democratic institutions. This is making it harder for people to know what is true. What is not? It is also making it harder for governments to address big problems like climate change.

Literature Review

The foundational literature on the liberal international order provides the analytical starting point for this study. Ikenberry's (2018) concept of the liberal order as an "open and loosely rules-based system" that facilitated post-war prosperity and security cooperation has been progressively refined as scholars have documented the order's mounting stresses. Mearsheimer (2019) provided the most prominent realist critique, arguing that the liberal order was structurally incompatible with the inevitable return of great-power competition. From a more radical perspective, scholars including Acharya (2018) and Zielonka (2018) have documented how non-Western states and even European partners increasingly experience the liberal order as an instrument of American hegemony rather than genuine multilateralism.

Recent scholarship has focused increasingly on the authoritarian normative counter-project. Cooley and Dukalskis (2025) provide the most comprehensive analysis of how China and Russia are not merely defying liberal norms but building

alternative institutional architectures through bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS grouping, and China's network of Digital Silk Road partnerships. Their concept of "authoritarian norm-setting" — the active construction of counter-norms around sovereignty, non-interference, and developmental statism — represents a significant advance over earlier scholarship that treated authoritarian powers primarily as resistors rather than creators of international norms.

On the AI disinformation dimension, a rapidly growing interdisciplinary literature bridges political science, computer science, and communication studies. Research from the Oxford Internet Institute, MIT Media Lab, and European institutions has documented the exponential growth of synthetic media and AI-generated disinformation in electoral contexts. Studies of the 2024 elections across the United States, European Parliament, and numerous national contexts found AI-generated content playing measurable roles in shaping voter attitudes, amplifying social divisions, and undermining trust in electoral institutions. This literature connects to older work on media and democracy by scholars including Habermas (whose concept of the "public sphere" provides the normative standard against which AI-mediated disinformation represents a radical threat) and Norris and Inglehart (2019) on cultural backlash.

The climate-security nexus literature has been developed by scholars including Floyd (2010), Busby (2018), and more recently by practitioners and analysts at institutions including the RAND Corporation and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. This literature documents how climate-induced resource scarcity, mass migration, and state fragility interact with geopolitical competition to create what has been termed "threat multiplier" dynamics — where climate stress amplifies existing political and social vulnerabilities to produce conflict cascades. The 2026 IPCC assessment's stark warnings about temperature trajectories have added urgency to this literature at a moment when multilateral climate governance is at its most fragmented.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employs Critical Theory as its primary analytical framework. Originating with the Frankfurt School and developed through the contributions of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas, Critical Theory examines how power structures, dominant ideologies, and institutional arrangements simultaneously shape and constrain political possibilities while presenting themselves as natural or universal. Applied to the international liberal order, Critical Theory enables examination of how the ILO simultaneously reflects genuine advances in human rights, prosperity, and conflict reduction, and conceals the power asymmetries, double standards, and exclusions that undermine its universalist claims.

Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" — the arena of rational-critical discourse through which democratic legitimacy is formed — is particularly relevant to this study's analysis of AI disinformation as a structural democratic threat. The deliberate corruption of the information environment by AI-generated synthetic media represents an assault on the public sphere in Habermasian terms: an attack not on any particular political position but on the epistemic conditions that make democratic self-governance possible. This connects the AI disinformation crisis directly to the foundational normative claims of liberal democracy, making it a structural rather than merely technical challenge.

Critical Theory's Gramscian dimension — the concept of hegemony as ideational dominance achieved through the apparent naturalization of a particular order's values — is equally relevant to analyzing the authoritarian normative counter-project. China's and Russia's challenge to the liberal order is not primarily military but hegemonic: an effort to denaturalize liberal democratic universalism and replace it with a counter-hegemonic vision of a world of sovereign civilizational blocs each pursuing its own developmental model free from liberal conditionality.

The Authoritarian Normative Counter-Project

China and Russia are working together to create an international order. This order is based on their values and norms which are different from the liberal order. They are creating their institutions and norms that are designed to promote their own interests and values. This is a challenge to the order, which is based on the idea of universal human rights and the rule of law. The liberal order is facing a problem. It is being challenged by countries like China and Russia. It is also being challenged by the rise of movements and the decline of trust in institutions. It is being challenged by new technologies like artificial intelligence, which are being used to spread false information and undermine democratic institutions. The liberal order needs to be reformed if it is going to survive. It needs to be more inclusive and more responsive to the needs and concerns of countries and peoples. It also needs to be more effective in addressing problems like climate change. If the liberal order is not reformed it will continue to decline. That will have big consequences for global governance and international relations. The liberal order is important because it promotes peace, stability and cooperation among countries. It also promotes rights, democracy and the rule of law. It is facing some big challenges. It needs to be reformed if it is going to survive. The authoritarian normative counter-project is a challenge to the order. It is based on the idea that countries should be free to pursue their interests and values without interference from other countries. This is an approach from the liberal order, which is based on the idea of universal human rights and the rule of law. The authoritarian normative counter-project is being promoted by countries like China and Russia. They are creating their institutions and norms that are designed to promote their own interests and values. This is a challenge to the order, which is based on the idea of universal human rights and the rule of law. The liberal order needs to be reformed if it is going to survive. It needs to be more inclusive and more responsive to the needs and concerns of countries and peoples. It also needs to be more effective in addressing problems like climate change. If the liberal order is not reformed it will continue to decline. That will have big consequences, for global governance and international relations. The biggest change in the way authoritarian countries are challenging the order in the 2020s is that they are no longer just resisting liberal norms. China and Russia are now building their systems to make authoritarian governance look legitimate. They want to give countries alternatives to the institutions controlled by the West.

China is working on levels to achieve this. In organizations China is taking on more leadership roles in groups like the United Nations and the World Health Organization. By putting people in key positions China is changing the way these organizations think about norms making them more about sovereignty and less about liberal democratic values. At the time China is creating its own institutions, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative, which offer financing and cooperation without the conditions set by the West.

Russia is using methods to set authoritarian norms. It uses its veto power in the United Nations Security Council to block accountability for its actions and to prevent interventions that might set liberal humanitarian precedents. Russia also uses its media and influence operations to make the liberal order look like a project promoting the idea of "civilizational diversity" as an alternative.

Artificial Intelligence and the Crisis of Democracy

The use of intelligence to spread false information is a big change in the threats to democratic governance. Before spreading information required a lot of human effort and was relatively easy to detect. In addition, with language models and generative AI false information can be produced quickly and easily and it is very sophisticated.

This has implications for democratic governance. In election campaigns across Europe and North America in 2024 and 2025 AI-generated content, like deepfake videos and fake social media posts was used a lot. This overwhelmed the ability of

fact-checkers and platform moderators to keep up. Research shows that AI-generated false information spreads faster and reaches people than true information and it can change people attitudes more effectively.

Authoritarian countries have been quick to use AI disinformation capabilities. Russias Internet Research Agency and Chinas "50 Cent Army" have used language models to increase their influence operations targeting Western electorates. These operations do not aim to promote candidates or policies but to deepen polarization, undermine trust in institutions and amplify social divisions.

Climate Change and Great-Power Competition

The combination of climate change and great-power competition is a challenge to governance in the mid-21st century. Climate change is not an environmental or economic problem but a security issue that interacts with existing vulnerabilities to produce big governance failures. Rising sea levels, droughts, extreme weather events and climate-driven agricultural disruptions are causing crises, mass migrations and resource conflicts that feed back into geopolitical tensions.

The great-power competition aspect of the climate crisis works on two levels. At the material level countries are competing for resources like critical minerals, rare earth elements, water and arable land. Chinas dominant position in the processing of earth minerals and the manufacture of solar panels and electric vehicle batteries gives it a lot of leverage in the clean energy economy. At the level great-power competition has compromised the multilateral consensus needed for effective climate governance.

The climate-security nexus is particularly severe in the Global South, where countries are most affected by climate change but have the resources to adapt. Pakistan is an example: it is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change but it has contributed very little to global greenhouse gas emissions. The failure of nations to deliver promised climate finance and the disruption of climate aid from the United States under the Trump administration shows how great-power politics can compromise multilateral climate governance.

Global Governance Failures and Human Rights

The crisis of governance in the mid-2020s reflects not just the weaknesses of existing institutions but the fundamental tension between the universal aspirations of the liberal international order and the selective application of its norms by its main champions. This tension has been illustrated by the United States in years.

The Biden administrations support for Israel during operations in Gaza, which has been examined by international legal scholars and the International Court of Justice shows the liberal orders primary champion in tension with the human rights norms it promotes globally. This situation exemplifies a pattern where the orders universalist human rights claims are undermined by the selective application of those claims to allies and adversaries alike.

The Trump administrations actions have deepened this credibility deficit. By cancelling foreign aid programs that supported democracy, civil society and human rights in states and by advancing governance practices at home that had been characterized as authoritarian the administration has weakened the material architecture of the liberal order and empowered its ideological critics.

Populism, Nationalism and Democratic Fragmentation

The populist wave that started with Brexit and the first Trump election in 2016 has become a feature of Western democratic politics by the mid-2020s. Populisms electoral performance across Europe and North America in 2024-2026 shows that it cannot be understood as a protest movement or a response to specific leaders but reflects deep structural changes in the political economies and cultural dynamics of advanced industrial societies.

Economic structural factors are also essential. Four decades of globalization have created a lot of wealth but also deindustrialized working-class communities, stagnated wages and concentrated returns among the highly educated and

internationally mobile. The political geography of populism in the United States, United Kingdom and France maps onto the geography of deindustrialization.

Cultural and identity anxieties are another driver. The rapid demographic changes associated with immigration combined with the expanding visibility and influence of minority, womens and LGBTQ+ communities in life have generated a "cultural backlash" among populations who feel displaced from the cultural hierarchies they previously occupied. Populist leaders offer these populations an explanation and a remedy restoring identity through immigration restriction, cultural traditionalism and the rejection of "woke" progressive values.

AI-enabled disinformation provides a driver one with no precedent in earlier waves of populism. By creating information environments in which conspiratorial narratives and anti-institutional messaging circulate without corrective friction AI-amplified disinformation has made it easier for populist movements to recruit radicalize and mobilize supporters.

Case Study: The United States, 2025-2026

The United States under the Trump administration represents a significant case study of populist democratic erosion in the mid-2020s. The administration has pursued a program of executive aggrandizement declaring national emergencies to circumvent legislative constraints dismantling independent oversight institutions and advancing a philosophy of presidential supremacy that legal scholars have characterized as constitutionally unprecedented.

The economic nationalist policies of the administration appeal to the deindustrialized communities that form the electoral base but also undermine the liberal trade order that has been a central element of the liberal international order. The administrations withdrawal from climate commitments its disengagement from organizations and its transactional approach, to alliance relationships have collectively weakened the institutional architecture of the liberal order in ways that will outlast any particular administration.

Case Study: Europe and the Far-Right Surge

The European Parliament elections in 2024 had some surprising results for far-right and populist parties all over Europe. In France the National Rally got its ever vote share, which made it go to the second round of the presidential race. This also made the main parties change their views on immigration and security to be stricter. In Germany the Alternative for Germany became the biggest party in the country which is very significant because of what happened in Germany in the past. In Italy the Fratelli d'Italia government, led by Giorgia Meloni is now a part of the government even though it has roots in fascism.. It still says it supports the European Union and NATO.

The forces that are driving populism are similar to what is happening in America but with some critical differences. There has not been economic growth in many parts of Europe and the refugee crisis in 2015 had a big impact on the culture. There have also been terrorist attacks, which have made people more worried about security. There have been many corruption scandals involving the main political parties, which has created a good environment for populist politics that are based on resentment. The use of intelligence to spread false information has been a big problem in Europe, where Russian influence operations have targeted many national elections. They have used media and coordinated fake behavior on a large scale, which has alarmed the security services.

Toward a Critical Reconstruction of Liberal Order

The world is very disorderly in the mid-2020s. This poses a big challenge to liberal democracies. This challenge is both outside and inside these democracies. It is about both material and ideal. There are countries that are creating their own rules and institutions. New technologies are being used to attack the foundation of democracy which's the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Climate change is creating security threats that neither liberal nor authoritarian systems can handle.. Inside liberal democracies the economic, cultural and institutional failures that led to

populism are still eroding the social foundations of democratic governance. The far-right surge in Europe is a part of this problem.

A Critical Theory analysis shows that we need to do more than just defend the liberal order against its challengers. We need to look at the contradictions within the order itself such as the double standards, the failures in distribution and the arrogance of thinking we know everything. A reformed liberal multilateralism would need to address the legitimate grievances of the communities that have been left behind by industry apply human rights standards consistently build international institutions that really represent the interests of the non-Western world and develop democratic responses to artificial intelligence disinformation that protect the pursuit of knowledge and truth without reproducing authoritarian control. The far-right surge in Europe is an alarming sign that we need to take these steps.

The connection between climate and security demands attention. Climate change is not one crisis among many; it is a threat that makes all the other crises worse creating conflicts over resources, mass migrations and fragile states that feed authoritarian consolidation, populist backlash and geopolitical competition. Managing climate change effectively requires the kind of cooperation that is very difficult to achieve right now. The main policy challenge of the decade is to find ways to cooperate on climate change that can survive or even transcend the geopolitical competition that makes comprehensive climate governance so hard to achieve.

The emergence of a resilience coalition, which brings together not only the traditional Western liberal democracies but also democratic states from the Global South, Asia and Latin America offers perhaps the most promising structural response to the disorderly world of the 2020s. This coalition would need to combine defense of liberal norms such as sovereignty, human rights and free expression with a genuine openness to institutional reform, distributive justice and recognition of the diverse cultural and political traditions within the global democratic community. It would need to develop approaches to artificial intelligence governance, climate finance and democratic resilience-building that go beyond the current fragmentation. As Einstein said, politics may be more complicated than physics. It is also more subject to human action. The choices we make in the decade will determine whether the mid-2020s are remembered as a turning point towards democratic renewal or towards a more permanent disorder.

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