Rethinking the 'Illiberal International': Power, Fragmentation, and Institutions

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Recent arguments for global order increasingly imply that authoritarian countries around the world may be coalescing into what has come to be called an illiberal international. While doing so provides the necessary perspective of the transnational nature of contemporary authoritarianism, it may also conflate coherent and durable cooperation with patterns that are intensely fragmented, incomplete, still in flux, and characterised by power politics rather than an emergent alternative order. Upon additional inspection, what is usually depicted as a centralised international organisation more often appears to be a partial operation within the existing global governance.

For a large part of the post–Second World War period, liberal institutionalism has been the leading paradigm in the study of international politics. The lure of these frameworks rested on an important insight: that international organisations, economic co-operation and rule-based coordination might serve to blunt conflict, encourage long-term cooperation and in turn encourage the diffusion of liberal values. States were set within a dense-knit set of institutional arrangements in which they were expected to optimise their absolute interests, take up internal rules, and then slowly unite towards broadly liberal norms of governance.

This would seem to be a reasonable expectation for many decades. The spread of multilateral organisations, greater global economic integration, and the diffusion of democratic forms of governance have all contributed credence to the idea that institutions could be mechanisms to influence power politics. Within that framework, authoritarian governments were often painted as constrained or transitional actors, limited by systemic norms or socialised through repeated participation in global governance regimes. But today's global politics is progressively putting that confidence to the question. Democratic erosion and reversals in several regions, the continuing power of authoritarian rule, as well as rising assertiveness in illiberal states, have cast doubt about the presumed liberalisation effects of institutional involvement. Recent scholarship has proposed a concept of an emerging illiberal international, or the transnational cooperation between authoritarian regimes that purportedly reconfigures the global order from within.

Nic Cheeseman, Matías Bianchi and Jennifer Cyr have made this argument with the clearest statement of their time by noting that the growing variety of transnational authoritarian cooperation means that the main threat to the liberal international order today is not the conduct of one power, but the combined action of aggregated illiberal practices (Cheeseman, Bianchi & Cyr, 2025). This intervention should help transition analytical attention away from narrowly state-centric interpretations and toward a transnational understanding of contemporary authoritarianism. But while this diagnosis is, analytically, suggestive, it threatens to exaggerate the novelty and coherence of what we call an "illiberal international." To treat these regimes of authoritarian cooperation as an emerging international order will cloud perceptions even of the unevenness, interest-driven, and often unstable nature of the cooperation that is there. The more frequent result of these interactions is not to offer a definitive alternative to the liberal order, but rather pragmatic and short-term alignments, influenced by regime security concerns and asymmetric power relations.

At the heart of liberal institutionalism is a commitment to the idea that institutions lower uncertainty, reduce transaction costs, and encourage cooperation through information and predictability (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Martin, 1995). On top of these functional consequences, institutions are also expected to impose socialising

demands. States are assumed to incorporate shared norms and align their practices with institutional expectations through consistent interaction and rule-based engagement. Economic interdependence, in particular, has long been considered conducive to political moderation. The criticism that reads the contemporary authoritarian coordination as proof of the collapse of liberal institutionalism tends to be an oversimplification of the theory. Liberal institutionalism never presumed that institutions would engender normative convergence automatically, nor did it deny that power politics thrived. It argued instead that institutions could shape behaviour in situations of mutual interest and repeated interaction. The challenge, hence, is much less in the theoretical limits of institutionalism than in the political conditions within which institutions emerge.

Of course, there is transnational cooperation among authoritarian regimes today. They share surveillance technologies, mirror strategies each is pursuing for controlling dissent, offer mutual diplomatic support in multilateral forums, and make economic partnerships which are intentionally unprotected from political conditionality. These methods bolster regime resilience and make it less susceptible to external pressure. However, characterising these interactions as 'international' can overlook the degree of institutionalisation and normative solidarity, which is not a frequent occurrence in practice. Most illiberal cooperation is still largely ad hoc and transactional. Coordination often is bilateral rather than multilateral, episodic rather than institutionalised, and pragmatic rather than ideologically consolidated. Regimes cooperate when it suits current aims, but they also compete, they distrust one another, and they dramatically differ in strategic interests.

What seems, at a distance, to be a consistent pattern often unfolds as a loose aggregation of strategies instead of a durable transnational order. This difference is analytically meaningful. Reinforcing too much coherence runs the risk of losing sight of the ongoing relevance of power asymmetries and regime-specific calculations. In contrast with Western historical international orders, whether liberal or not, the illiberal international is characterised by the absence of a common institutional architecture, an explicitly articulated normative agenda, and avenues for enforcing collective commitments. Its demarcations are porous, its alignments tentative, and its unity is contingent.

Authoritarian collaboration is hardly without precedent. During the Cold War, non-liberal regimes pursued elaborate diplomatic, military and ideological cooperation. For decades, there have been ways of authoritarian learning and mutual support, particularly in sectors of regime survival or internal security. What distinguishes the current era is not the presence of cooperation, but rather its increased prominence, mediated by technology and operating within a more tightly globalised, institutionalised world. In fact, international institutions have, indeed, emerged as increasingly contested sites of normative contestation, where rival conceptions of sovereignty, democratic processes or human rights coexist and collide (Risse, 2000). The illiberal actors want rules to be reimagined in terms of non-interference and procedural sovereignty. But such contestation does not imply institutional capture or the emergence of a rival order. Instead, it is but a manifestation of the intrinsically political character of institutions—a point already made by long-term institutionalist scholars.

Institutions are not neutral places free of power. They are influenced by bargaining dynamics, evolving coalitions, and uneven normative commitment. The fact that illiberal actors contest liberal norms within institutions is not evidence in itself of institutional failure but rather of institutional politics working. The more serious problem is that liberal actors behave inconsistently—selectively enforcing norms or prioritising their short-term strategic considerations over long-term objectives. In such conditions, institutional contestation is less a marker of illiberal capacity and more an indication of liberal ambivalence.

Presentation of current trends predominantly as a movement towards an illiberal international order is at risk of displacing responsibility itself. By turning analytical focus to authoritarian coordination, it also deflects attention from the part played by liberal democracies in eroding the normative underpinning of the international order. The selective human rights-based and instrumentalist approach to the institutions has undermined the credibility of liberal leadership, leading to a ready environment in which new readings of sovereignty can proliferate. Theoretically, the increased visibility of authoritarian cooperation should lead to revision, not refutation, of liberal institutionalism. Institutions remain important, cooperation remains potent, and rules shape behaviour. What needs to be reassessed is the belief that institutional participation alone will maintain liberal norms in the absence of sustained political will. Normative convergence isn't a product of institutional design but rather of power, persuasion, and commitment that

vary from context to context.

Reintegrating power into institutional analysis is therefore necessary – namely, material power, but also discursive and normative power. Authoritarian regimes don't just ride roughshod over institutions; they exploit ambiguities, mobilise procedural rules, and create issue-specific coalitions. But their ability to do so critically depends on the actions of others. Institutional results still largely depend on one thing: they are political. The larger conclusion is that the modern international order here is not being supplanted by a coherent illiberal substitute. Instead, it is undergoing a period of heightened contestation, marked by fragmentation, selective cooperation, and normative ambiguity. Over-theorising authoritarian coordination runs the risk of interpreting episodic alignment as systemic transformation.

International orders seldom rupture through instant destruction. Rather, they undermine themselves very slowly, via compromises that get normalised and through the process of hollowing out joint commitments. Such a process will be determined not merely by the actions of illiberal elements, but by the dynamic between contestation and accommodation in present institutions. To put this dynamic primarily in the context of the rise of an illiberal international order is therefore to confuse a symptom with a structure. In such a sense, the constraints laid bare are not those of liberal institutionalism in theory but of liberal political practice. Institutions can enable cooperation and open the site to contestation, but they cannot replace normative commitment. This difference in perspective allows for a more nuanced – and ultimately a more accurate – assessment of the challenges we face in global governance at a time of visible, yet hardly unifying, authoritarian cooperation.

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