The British Academy

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Global (Dis)Order
international policy programme

Expanded temporalities of global (dis)order and their policy implications

Contents

The Global (Dis)Order international policy programme

Today's international system is in flux with the need to navigate competing power aspirations and nodes of order. To generate fresh insights and creative thinking for policymakers and practitioners in this contested environment the British Academy and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have begun a new joint international policy programme on Global (Dis) Order. The programme is centred around four main themes: illuminating dynamics of and within international order, diagnosing and rethinking a changing world economy, governing transnational and planetary challenges, and managing violence and (in)security.

The programme is focused on shedding light on the history, current nature, and potential future trajectories of global orders, while acknowledging that these understandings are diverse and often contested. It also provides an opportunity to think in broader, longer-range ways, drawing in a breadth of disciplines and expertise from policy, practice and research that is both historical and future-oriented. This requires us to marshal diverse perspectives and visions from around the world, as well as expertise that bridges the worlds of research, policy, and practice. It also requires us to take a long view, to better understand the historical antecedents and precedents for contemporary geopolitical, economic, political, societal, technological, ecological, and other trends.

To achieve this goal we will analyse potential pathways and trajectories for global (dis)order and propose strategies and approaches to collectively manage shared geopolitical, economic, transnational, planetary and security challenges and dilemmas. To this end, the British Academy and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have commissioned a series of policy discussion papers to prompt engagement and debate among policy audiences, by posing challenging questions and highlighting gaps and opportunities for policy.

Preface

How did we get here and where are we going? These are deceptively simple questions that keep international analysts and policymakers pre-occupied. The landscape in which we operate appears to be shifting beneath our feet with a force and at a pace that outmanoeuvres our established architecture of governance and diplomacy - and challenges our conceptual categories of order and sensemaking.

Our current moment of flux and fluidity is interpreted and understood differently depending on our vantage points and experiences. What is seen as a crisis from one perspective might be seen as an opening or opportunity from another. While we will likely never get to a universal narrative, a goal of policymaking must surely be to try and better understand how order and disorder have been (and are being) experienced from these different vantage points.

It is to this end, that the British Academy and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have commissioned and collated a series of discussion papers that explore these temporalities and dynamics in further depth. Whilst the collection makes no effort to generate a comprehensive, alternative paradigm, these seven papers seek to provoke and challenge policymakers and scholars alike to expand their perspectives on the nature of order and order-making.

Our first three papers lay out creative new approaches to think about ordering in our current moment. Flockhart advocates shifting our lens from a 'multi-polar' to a 'multi-order' world politics. In recognising the parallel existence of multiple global orders, she argues, we can better appreciate how cultural diversity and power dynamics combine to constitute specific orders - and shape the relations within and among them. In the second paper, Foot and Haug Foot consider the implications of expanding Chinese engagement for the UN system and multilateralism more generally. They argue that Chinese activism, in concert with a transformed US orientation, is likely to make the UN much less 'liberal', with serious consequences for the world body's commitment to peacebuilding, human rights, and the "responsibility to protect" norm. In the third paper, O'Connor shifts the conceptual lens from the state to non-state actors, exploring the critical role of philanthropy in today's global order. Reviewing contemporary critiques of philanthropic power and influence, particularly its lack of accountability and transparency, he identifies steps the sector has already taken to legitimate its role and how it can work collaboratively with policymakers to become a more responsible partner.

The next three papers deploy case studies that place dynamics and narratives of order and disorder into historical perspective. Helleiner analyses how historical analogies have been deployed to make sense of Donald Trump's approaches to economic protectionism and global order more generally. Highlighting the inaccuracies of many of these claims, he stresses the need for healthy scepticism, noting that historical narratives are often invoked for self-serving political purposes. Laqua and Scott-Brown consider how grassroots historical movements emerged during three historical moments of the 20th century, exploiting situations

of flux to effect lasting transformations of existing orders. They identify a common thread in these efforts: an exploratory dialogue between institutions and non-state actors that situates activism as a form of social enquiry, which they argue contributes to consensual and sustainable change. In their own contribution, Morley and Steinacher examine historical and contemporary invocations of the Roman empire, as an analogy that provides sensemaking to narratives of decline and collapse. They outline how this emotionally appealing trope can and is being mobilised as a form of globalised disruption and suggest a variety of measures and strategies to address misinformation and radicalisation associated with its use.

Our final two papers adopt a more explicit focus on the future, specifically reflecting on our predictive capabilities. Bacevic considers how 'epistemic attachments' can obscure our ability to foresee large-scale disruptive events, due to assumptions of conceptual durability. Using case studies, she suggests those with a stake in predicting the future may find more success by embedding a set of apophatic questions within their analytical processes. Ebner and Whitehouse, finally, explore the relationship between leadership psychology and mass atrocities, outlining how a psycholinguistics approach using large scale computational analysis can provide policymakers mandated to prevent large scale violence and atrocities with a powerful risk assessment tool and early warning indicators. They argue that policymakers should adopt this approach, in concert with civilians and media entities, to improve early prevention mechanisms.

This collection of papers highlights the ways in which widening or loosening our temporal orientation enables us to think more creatively and deeply about our current moment and possible trajectories. In moments of uncertainty, it is sorely tempting to latch onto familiar narratives and analogies, and to ascribe sense making and predictive power to them. But this collection shows the value of questioning some established narratives and assumptions - and the implications of doing so for practical policy choices.

The arrival of the multi-order world and its geopolitical implications

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Abstract

This article argues we are now in a multi-order world rather than a multipolar world. Portraying the world as multipolar belies the complexity, significance, and extent of recent changes and could have disastrous policy consequence. As signified by the current turbulence within the liberal international order, in a multi-order world, relationships within orders are as important as relations between orders. In this more complex, fragmented, and diversifying world, there is danger of the liberal international order splitting in two. At the same time, cultural diversity may be a positive aspect of the new ordering architecture. The concept of a multi-order world adds theoretical space to see new actors of global and international significance and to focus on the global structure of relations in addition to shifting patterns of power.

Introduction

Is global order a thing of the past? Is the liberal international order fraying and what is happening to previously stable alliances and cooperative relationships such as the transatlantic relationship or the relationship between the United States and Canada? Not such a long time ago, these questions would have been regarded as alarmist, but today the prospect of large-scale order transformation is part and parcel of daily debates. This rupture is probably as important as the transformation that followed the end of the Second World War, and together with the simultaneous transformations in technology and science, the impact on people and societies may well be on par with the Industrial Revolution. As Gramsci wrote from his prison cell, we live 'in times of monsters' where 'the old world is dying and the new one struggles to be born'(Gramsci & Buttigieg 1992). In these circumstances, we see the political consequences in populist parties as voters seek certainty in an uncertain and turbulent world, whilst policymakers struggle to find their feet in the emerging world and seek to manage the fallout from the ending of the old world.

To ensure that the policy decisions of today are relevant for the geopolitical reality of tomorrow, policymakers must have a clear sense about the likely outcome of the ongoing transformation – in other words what kind of global order will be in place and what kind of relationships can be expected within it? These are big and complex questions that have no easy answers, yet many scholars and policy practitioners seem to already have their answer - the world will be multipolar (Ashford 2023; Bekkevold 2023; Borrell 2021). At least anecdotally, it seems there is widespread agreement that the international system is transforming from a unipolar system anchored in American hegemony, to a multipolar system reflecting the shift of power to a larger number of states. However, although the idea that the international system will be multipolar is persuasive, and although the use of analytical concepts such as polarity can be useful for gaining an overview of complex matters, we must be aware that polarity as a concept rests on a specific form of analysis that tends to emphasize states, sameness, power and interest, and which is only partially sighted when it comes to values, identities, lesser powers and complexity. I worry that the focus on multipolarity, means that policymakers are trying to understand the current order transformation through conceptual lenses that are blurred and not very relevant.

This article presents a different position. It starts from the counterintuitive position that it is logically implausible for the global ordering architecture to return to an international system that was in place a century ago. Those suggesting that we are currently witnessing a return to multipolarity emphasise shifts in the global distribution of power and the rising number of powerful states, most notably China. These are certainly important changes, but

Continuing to portray the world as multipolar belies the complexity, significance, and extent of many other important changes.

other important changes are overlooked, which suggest a fundamentally different global ordering architecture is in the making. Continuing to portray the world as multipolar belies the complexity, significance, and extent of many other important changes. This paper presents an alternative interpretation of the ongoing global order transformation, demonstrating why it will be neither bipolar nor multipolar but rather multi-order.

A multi-order world is a global ordering architecture consisting of several international orders. Gramsci was right that order transformations take time, so the multi-order architecture is still in development, but can be glimpsed through the existence of three independent international orders already clearly visible within the global ordering architecture - the American-led liberal international order (albeit that American leadership under Trump is currently in question), the Russian-led Eurasian order, and the Chinese-led Belt and Road order.[1] Other orders and other forms of relationships of importance are also in the making suggesting a more complex architecture than a multipolar one. The paper does not claim to present a full picture of the emerging ordering architecture but seeks merely to demonstrate the importance of embracing new thinking to contemplate the possibility of an entirely new form of international system in which multiple international orders with very different dynamics and different behavioural patterns make up the global ordering architecture. The perspective brings into light important relationships and dynamics that are not readily apparent in the multipolar perspective – especially that relationships within orders are just as important as relations between different international orders, and it leaves room for considering other aspects than powershifts and for acknowledging the importance of other actors than just a handful of "pole states". I argue that awareness of the subtle differences between the multi-order architecture and more traditional polarity-based understandings is an essential first step towards timely strategic policymaking fit for the multi-order world.

The paper proceeds in four moves. First, I outline three significant events over the past four years which only partially fit the polarity-based narrative. Second, I outline the multi-order perspective by focusing on order as a condition, a social domain, and as practices of ordering. Thirdly, I show how changes in three characteristics of the global system indicate a multi-order world rather than a multipolar one. Finally, I briefly consider some of the broader geopolitical implications of a multi-order world and demonstrate the importance of ordering dynamics within and between international orders. The picture that emerges challenges some of the most foundational assumptions about international relations and global order including the prospect of achieving convergence around common rules in multilateral governance to meet shared challenges.

Three challenges to the existing order and the limits of polarity thinking

The discipline of international relations and the thinking of policy practitioners has long been permeated by traditional realist thinking, seeing the international system as anchored in just three features: the condition of anarchy; the necessity of self-help; and the distribution of capabilities among its major structure-producing states (Græger et al. 2022). According to

1 I first presented the argument for a multi-order world in the prize-winning article 'The coming multi-order world' (Flockhart, 2016) and have since elaborated on it in several articles (Flockhart, 2020, 2021, 2024b, 2024a). The development and future prospect of governance in the multi-order world is the subject of an on-going research project: Anticipating Governance in the Multi-Order World.

this view, the first two features are static; therefore, structural change is only possible through change in the distribution of capability (power) between the system's main states (Waltz 2010). This line of thinking produces elegant and persuasive arguments, but rather than seeing the transformation of the global order as a harbinger of new and often unexpected forms of behaviour, it works on the premise of business-as-usual and assumes predictability and sameness of the units in the system. Most importantly, it cannot explain, and did not anticipate, many unexpected recent shocks in global politics, including why Russia would risk its international standing and (seeming) domestic stability by invading Ukraine, why China and indeed a large segment of the Global South would side with Russia (or at least not protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine), or indeed why the USA under the Trump Administration is willing to risk its standing and domestic stability by taking a wrecking ball to the global ordering architecture and the liberal international order – which were built by, and for, the USA.

Shock 1 – The Russian invasion of Ukraine

When Russia in the autumn of 2021, undertook the biggest mobilisation of troops and equipment since the Second World War, all indications pointed towards preparations for war. Yet, the prospect of a war of conquest in Europe was so shocking that many simply could not contemplate that Russia was preparing a full-scale invasion of Ukraine – nor why such a move would be in Russia's interest. When the invasion took place, it was a shock, not just because Europe witnessed a war of conquest directed at a neighbouring sovereign state but because once the shooting started it was quickly understood that the war was not just an attack on Ukraine, but an attack on the European security order and on the liberal international order and a challenge to the legitimacy of the global rules-based order (Risse 2022) It showed beyond doubt that previously held assumptions about how states conduct themselves in the global context were no longer valid and that long established rules and practices were no longer accepted by Russia. But can the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine really be explained as a return to multipolarity? Russia certainly claimed that its actions should be seen in this context, implying that Russia is a great power within a multipolar system – but with an economy roughly the size of Italy's, Russia is strictly speaking not a 'pole' except in terms of its possession of nuclear weapons. A more persuasive explanation of the Russian invasion is that Putin's ambitions were to build a Russian-led Ruski Mir sphere of influence (Gvineria 2025). Had a multi-order perspective been applied, it would have been clear from the start that Russia was building its own international order and simultaneously rejecting the established practices of the global rules-based order (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022).

Shock 2 – Support for Russia from the Global South

That the existing order was rejected not only by Russia, but by a wider circle of states as well, subsequently became clear in several ways. Little attention had been paid to a meeting taking place between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing at the Winter Olympics just three weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The two leaders met to sign a document codifying their 'unlimited friendship' and outlining their vision for 'entering a new era'[2]. Within the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the extensive document took on a meaning as a 'manifesto for order transformation', detailing Moscow's and Beijing's views on strategic threats, their shared (albeit rather distorted) understanding of democracy, and their grievances against

2 "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," issued on February 4, 2022. Available online on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

American leadership (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). To the surprise of many in the West, it subsequently became clear that it was not only Russia and China rejecting the existing order and preferring a multipolar rather than a unipolar world. Many states, primarily in the Global South, shared Russia and China's misgivings. The extent of the rejection/contestation of the existing order became clear when the UN Assembly voted on 2 March 2022 to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Not only did 4 states apart from Russia (Belarus, Eritrea, Syria, and North Korea) vote against the resolution but a full 35 states, including China, abstained. Since then, and despite the clear illegality (and the rather obvious parallels to colonial subjugation) of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many states from the Global South adopted a position of deliberate neutrality to Russia's war in Ukraine (Götz, Gejl & Knudsen, 2023), and several important states such as India, South Africa, and Brazil pursue a deliberate geopolitical fence-sitting strategy. The voting patterns, and the subsequent behaviour of these states, demonstrated that the existing global rules-based order is contested, and that the Global South largely accepts Russia and China's order building projects and position themselves as "swing states" pursuing transactional policy objectives in the emerging space between the new order constellations. This form of behaviour is fully in line with the multi-order perspective, whereas the role of the 'swing states' in the multipolar perspective is secondary.

Shock 3 – The withdrawal of the United States from the liberal international order

Perhaps the most shocking development is the apparent withdrawal of the United States from the liberal international order and its upending of long-established security practices in NATO. Allies of the United States were already concerned about the Trump Administration's commitment to Europe and to the liberal international order when Vice President J.D. Vance delivered his controversial speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025. To the shock of the audience at the prestigious conference that traditionally celebrates the transatlantic relationship, Vance suggested that Europe's greatest threat isn't Russia or China, but an 'enemy within' which Vance identified as European democratically elected political leaders[3]. The concern in Europe and amongst America's allies has since deepened in reaction to the Trump Administration's handling of peace negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, which showed disregard for Ukraine and European allies but a positive attitude towards Russia. Over the summer of 2025 the extent of the crisis gradually became clear as Trump's tariff policy created upheaval in the global trading system and the Trump Administration doubled down on territorial threats against its close allies, Canada and Denmark, whilst continuing to seemingly be taking Russia's side in the question of the war in Ukraine. With the publication in November of the new US National Security Strategy[4], there was no longer doubt that the events of the previous months constituted a voluntary retreat by the United States from its role as the leading state of the liberal international order and – even more shockingly – that the strategy rests on a peculiar buy-in of Russia's and China's visions of a multipolar world (Wieslander 2025).

...we are witnessing substantial changes in relationships within the liberal international order, which might have far-reaching consequences for European security...

There is much to say about the motivations behind the decisions of the Trump Administration, which considerations of space do not permit to engage with. However, from the perspective of this article, what is interesting is that we are witnessing substantial changes in relationships

3 See the full transscript in Munich Security Conference 2025, Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions, Volume II of the Series "Selected Speeches held at the Munich Security Conference" edited by Benedikt Franke.

4 President of the United States. (2025). National Security Strategy. The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

within the liberal international order, which might have far-reaching consequences for European security and lead to further fragmentation of the global ordering architecture as the liberal international order might split into two orders. This is a possible outcome the polarity perspective cannot contemplate. I will demonstrate later in the article how the multi-order perspective can indeed explain the events of 2025 because it can incorporate changes other than power shifts, including the important changing dynamics within the existing international orders.

The multi-order world - order, orders, and ordering

To unpack the multi-order argument, we need to look more closely at the concept order by distinguishing between: 'order as a condition' expressing certain rules and values to guide behaviour to a specific goal; 'orders as social domains' in which the condition of order is constituted; and 'ordering' as relational practices that take place both within and between the ordering domains in the global ordering architecture. Each of these is the subject of extensive literatures, but I only briefly introduce them here.

Order as a condition

Order is difficult to define because order cannot be separated from values, which means that we must always ask – whose values? In the Global South, in Russia and China, the answer to 'whose values' is easy as the dominant idea of order is unquestioningly tied to western liberal values. Apart from asking 'whose values?' – we must also ask 'what kind of values?' Hedley Bull argues that order is constituted through rules-based patterns of behaviour to ensure a very specific purpose (Bull 1995: 7). For Bull the primary purpose is to safeguard life against violent death; ensure that promises once made will be kept; and that agreements once entered into will be respected (Bull 1995: 5). Bull saw these as the fundamental goals of social life and as universal values. But a society must also have other more positive values to ensure an appealing and fulfilling life[5]. For order to provide more than mere existence, we must invoke other, more positive values that entail a prospect of a good life – without falling into the trap that the good life equals a life based on Western/liberal values. I consider this particular purpose to be contained in a society's vision for the 'good life' – the main expression of a society's sense of purpose, cohesion, and salience.

I place the concept of the good life on centre stage within the multi-order perspective because it encompasses the values and visions that provide the glue of any society without specifying what, or whose, those values are. All societies must have a shared vision for the good life – even if the actual achievement of it might be a distant and uncertain prospect (Cooper 1985). The idea of the good life can add to our understanding of the condition of order as consisting of two kinds of values – a negative form, that without a minimum degree of security of life, truth, and property, a society cannot exist; and a positive form - that with a shared sense of the good life, a society has a moral compass for appropriate behaviour and a vision for the future. The polarity perspective primarily focuses on the negative form, which is what allows for the assumption

5 These 'other values' were implicitly western values in Bull's writing, which effectively meant that Bull's conception of the 'condition of order' was essentialist.

of sameness – once the positive aspect of the good life is included, we must accept a level of difference that goes against the essence of the polarity perspective. Most importantly, acknowledging the importance of the good life and that all societies have their own vision, means that order cannot be universally associated with western values.

Orders as social domains

When international order is invoked as a noun – as 'the international order' - the meaning is not very clear because an international order is what Searle (1997) refers to as a social fact: something that exists only through human agreement and is created through practices and shared ideas. It can be useful to think of an international order as an ideal-type social domain, consisting of specific constitutive elements. An ideal-type international order can be conceptualized as a social domain in which states cluster around a leading state, adhere to shared norms and practices and display a convergence around the order's vision of the good life. An ideal-type ordering domain consists of four elements: three changeable elements (power, principles, and practice)[6] arranged around a relatively stable element – the good life (Flockhart 2021). All ordering domains will undertake change and adaptation in their constitutive elements in response to events and influences from outside the order. The vision of the good life on the other hand, must remain stable, because change of the vision of the good life, will mean that a transition into a new ordering domain has taken place – this aspect of transformation is completely invisible to the polarity perspective, yet as we have seen in the case of Trump's changed vision of the American vision for the good life, such changes have significant impacts.

Ordering practices of self- and difference governance

We must also consider the many relational processes of ordering through which order is constituted. Here it is necessary to distinguish between two forms of ordering: ordering within a social domain, which are ordering practices of self-governance, undertaken to maintain the domain's resilience in accordance with its vision of the good life; and ordering between ordering domains, which are ordering practices of diversity governance between ordering domains that have different visions of the good life, but must coexist despite their differences within the global rules-based order[7].

Ordering within - An ordering domain is internally resilient when it can continuously adapt in response to changes in its external environment to remain fit for purpose in accordance with its vision of the good life. Ordering domains are constantly bombarded with different forms of stimuli from the external environment with a potential of destabilising one or more of the domain's constitutive elements of power, principle or practice or its vision of the good life. Ordering domains undertake ordering practices of self-governance to ensure a logical coherence through all constitutive elements being in alignment with each other. For example, if developments in the external environment make established practices dysfunctional, the other elements might also need to change to maintain the internal coherence of the ordering domain. Such changes will most often be associated with changes in contested or out-dated norms such as inequality based on gender, race or religion. More rarely change can be associated with the patterns of power and/or changes in the vision of the good life – these are the forms of

6 The power element refers to how relations within a society are managed, especially if the ordering domain is managed through consent or coercion; the principles element refers to the norms, rules, and values that define appropriate behaviour in alignment with the ordering domain's vision of the good life; and the practice element refers to practices performed through a range of formal and informal institutions to optimise the prospects of realising the vision of the good life while maintaining the society's cohesion and functionality.

7 For a more in-depth description of the ordering within and between processes see Flockhart 2024b

changes that are currently taking place within the liberal international order under the second Trump Administration, which clearly has a major impact on the liberal international order and on long-established security practices and institutions. Such changes are all but invisible to the polarity perspective, which has very little to say about the nature or consequences of ordering within.

Ordering between - Order also has an external quality that must be achieved in relations between ordering domains. As ordering domains are different on account of their individual visions of the good life and differences in their elements of power, practice and principle, they must engage in ordering practices of diversity governance to create the conditions necessary to facilitate the provision of public goods and peaceful and sustainable coexistence. However, diversity governance is complex because each ordering domain reacts to external stimuli according to its individual conditions, its specific vision of the good life, and its patterns of power, principles, and practice, which inevitably produces divergence rather than convergence between the ordering domains. The challenge for diversity governance is therefore to find opportunities for constructive interactions between different ordering domains. This diversity is overlooked by the polarity perspective, which only focusses on the power element and assumes similarity rather than difference.

Global order and changes beyond shifting power

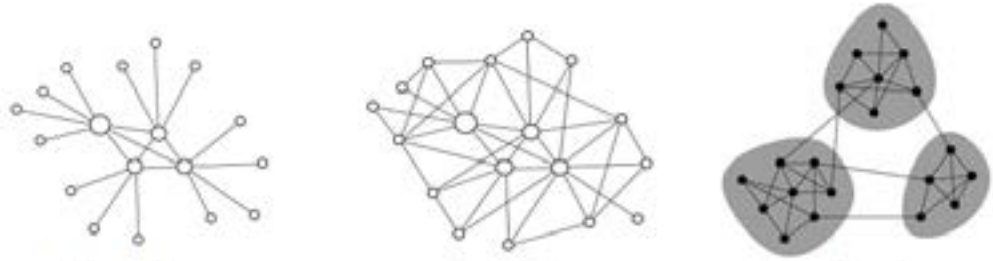
The emphasis on powershifts in the polarity literature is problematic – not because powershifts are not important – they are – but because the polarity perspective privileges powershift over all other forms of change. Yet important changes have happened in the global order beyond shifts in the patterns of power. When viewed through the prism of a relational ontology (Kurki 2020; Pugh & Chandler 2021; Qin 2018), it becomes apparent that the polarity perspective imposes a simplicity which obscures the global ordering architecture's relational complexity, compositional multiplicity, and ideational diversity. I argue that the current transformation must be viewed as more than shifting patterns of power between sovereign (pole) states and I draw attention to changes in the relational, compositional, and ideational patterns of the global ordering architecture.

Shifting relational patterns

Rather than global order being premised on a small number of atomistic sovereign states, global order from a relational perspective can be understood as a condition constituted relationally within what Milja Kurki calls 'the mesh' – the relational pluriverse that encompasses the turbulence and complexity of global life, reflecting different ways of seeing, doing, being, and relating in the world (Kurki 2020: 128). The relational perspective provides a more fine-grained picture of global life, which includes the interactive potentialities of many non-linear processes, dynamics, events, and relationships anchored in other considerations than shifting patterns of power. To be sure the relational perspective adds a level of complexity that is less elegant than the parsimonious understanding in the polarity perspective, but it is worth taking into account because casts light on forms of relationships that are invisible in the polarity perspective such as trade, migration, communication and more.

Some of the complexity arising from the relational perspective can be managed through invoking what Thorstein Kristinsson (2022) has termed the 'structure of global relations', which refers to the 'aggregate of meaningful relationships that exist in world politics at any given time' (Kristinsson 2022: 40). Kristinsson demonstrates how the structure of global relations has changed in the last century from a core-periphery structure, which coincides with multipolarity, to new, complex patterns of decentred relationality, which have coincided with de-colonization and the acceleration of globalization. I add to Kristinsson's argument, the relational pattern of 'clustering' (Flockhart 2024), as it seems that the de-centering of relational patterns is increasingly complemented with relational patterns of clustering around selected leading states. This development is invisible to the polarity perspective, but it is consistent with the idea of a multi-order world and seems indeed to be an emerging feature of the structure of global relations. The development is graphically illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: Structures of global relations (adapted from Kristinsson, 2022)



Core-periphery De-centred Clustered

Shifting compositional patterns

The traditional focus on states and their material distribution of capabilities within the international system has not only led to the view that the important units in the system are states but also to assumptions about the sameness of those units. In contrast, Justin Rosenberg (Rosenberg 2016; Rosenberg & Tallis 2022), argues that the main feature of the international is the societal multiplicity of global life, thereby emphasising difference rather than sameness. In this view of global life, ordering domains can take many different forms, including clans and tribes, professional and policy networks, large social entities, such as states, cities and regions as well as composite entities, such as international orders. The many different forms of social entities (ordering domains) co-exist in a complex system of layered, connected and nested relationships ranging from the local to the global level, allowing us to distinguish between different levels of ordering such as the state level, international level and the global level. It is especially important to distinguish between the 'global rules-based order' and the different international orders existing within the global order (liberal international order, Chinese-led Belt and Road order and Russian-led Eurasian order). The global rules-based order is an 'unbounded' (nearly) universal ordering domain (Mearsheimer 2019), while the international orders are 'bounded' ordering domains – i.e. clusters of states converging around a leading state and sharing a vision of the good life. While there can be only one global order, several international orders can coexist within it. The global rules-based order and the liberal international order are often conflated, and the terms are used inter-changeably. Whilst this is not surprising as they have always been deeply intertwined, overlapping, and infused with liberal principles and practices, constituted through centuries of liberal/Western power, they are analytically distinct phenomena, and a clear distinction must be made between them in policymaking. The polarity perspective cannot envision this distinction, and it is thus often overlooked.

Shifting ideational patterns

The view that underpins multipolarity strangely emphasises sameness rather than difference. The lack of attention to ideational differences has left us ill-equipped to contemplate non-Western political priorities and non-Western perceptions of order and governance (Reus-Smit 2018). To be fair, recently more attention is afforded to cultural difference and ideational diversity, and several recent studies embrace the ideational diversity of global life, leading to conceptions of global ordering other than multipolarity such as a multiplexity (Acharya 2014; Acharya, Estevadeordal & Goodman 2023) and deep pluralism (Buzan and Acharya 2022; Buzan 2023). These conceptions deliver a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of difference in the global world. However, most inclusions of ideational difference hold a rather static view of ideational factors. The multi-order perspective has the benefit of a dynamic approach to ideational factors through paying attention to the ordering practices of self-governance. Moreover, with the knowledge that all ordering domains – in this case, different international orders – tend to respond to the same external factors yet are likely to produce different outcomes because they each have their own ordering practices of self-governance, can imbue the policy process with a degree of realism in expectations about the prospects for global cooperation. The reality is that despite the similar ordering practices taking place within ordering domains, the processes are likely to lead to increased diversity, with important implications for the potential for 'between ordering'. Like Darwin's finches responding to their local conditions and subsequently developing different beaks, ordering practices within ordering domains seem set to lead to a diversifying dynamics among the international orders that make up the global rules-based ordering architecture. We are therefore facing a situation in which diversification must be expected, rather than convergence around specific global challenges – this aspect is also lacking in the polarity perspective.

The geopolitical implications of the multi-order world

The question remains what the coming multi-order world will look like, and what will be the major geopolitical implications of its arrival? This is where our analysis necessarily moves into more uncertain territory because the current transformation is characterized by many unknowns and many interconnected factors that defy clarity - but certainly call for reflection.

The character of the coming multi-order world will depend on the number and character of international orders within the global ordering architecture and the relationships between them. Much will depend on whether the orders support the existing global rules-based order and its institutions, and on the orders' attachments to the principle of sovereignty. The actions of Russia in Ukraine, Chinese rhetoric about Taiwan, and even American rhetoric about Greenland, suggest the attachment to the principle of sovereignty is contingent on perceptions of national security needs – the same can be said about alignment with the global rules-based order. The matrix below outlines four categories of international orders. Each category of order displays characteristics vis-à-vis its alignment with the global rules-based order and attachment to the principle of sovereignty.

Figure 2: Categories of international orders

	Strong attachment to sovereignty	**Moderate attachment to sovereignty**
Alignment with the current rules-based order	Conservative Intergovernmentalism: Sovereign decision-making based on economic interests emphasising non-intervention. 'Chinese-led 'Belt and Road' order'	Liberal Internationalism: Multilateral decision-making based on liberal/democratic values, extending domestic politics into the international. 'American-led liberal order'
Non-alignment with the current rules-based order	Illiberal Nationalism: Transactional decision-making based on populist/traditional values emphasising strength and control. 'Russian-led Eurasian order'	Radical Transnationalism: Ideological or issue-based decision-making based on a conviction that the outcome justifies the means and emphasising the collective over the individual. 'Islamic-led sharia order/ Environmental stewardship'

Before the second Trump Administration, the emerging multi-order architecture was assumed to consist of the American-led liberal international order, the Chinese-led Belt and Road order, and the Russian-led Eurasian order, with the possibility of other orders in the making in Africa and Latin America.

It is still difficult to say which orders will characterise the emerging multi-order world and what their relationships will be, but the realisation of this alone, is an important foundation for decision-making. Before the second Trump Administration, the emerging multi-order architecture was assumed to consist of the American-led liberal international order, the Chinese-led Belt and Road order, and the Russian-led Eurasian order, with the possibility of other orders in the making in Africa and Latin America. The coming multi-order world is also likely to see different forms of transnational ordering domains composed of a range of non-state actors, including faith-based transnational orders such as the Islamic State; or issue-specific orders around environmental stewardship or global climate action (Falkner2021). In addition, the multi-order world will almost certainly include several 'swing states' pursuing a geopolitical fence-sitting strategy, such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa (De Carvalho, Anand & Naidu 2025).

The second Trump Administration has dramatically increased uncertainty about what the multi-order world will look like, as it appears to be in the process of significantly changing – even dismantling – some of the constitutive elements of the liberal international order and to have essentially rejected the liberal vision of the good life. Astoundingly, it seems that America under Trump is pursuing policies that are more akin to the illiberal nationalism category of order than the liberal internationalism form of order, which American foreign policy has been built on since the end of the Second World War. If this is so, then the question is what happens to the liberal international order? The situation is still fluid, but we must contemplate the very real possibility that the existing liberal international order will break in two, with most European states along with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan, and perhaps others, continuing with the liberal international order, while the USA pursues its America First agenda with decreasing attachment to the global rules-based order. At this point, domestic politics (which the polarity perspective consistently brackets) becomes of great importance, as states with illiberal nationalist governments – including in Europe - are bound to reconsider their alignment with the liberal international order and thereby undermine its resilience.

The emerging more complex ordering architecture will undoubtedly present major challenges to traditional forms of governance such as multilateralism because increasing diversification will make multilateral decisions more difficult to achieve. It seems likely that in the multi-order world, most governance issues – even those which have previously been regarded as global challenges requiring globally shared solutions – will increasingly be governed within the multiple international orders, with a decreasing scope for global multilateral governance. We are therefore likely to see more order-specific governance programmes in policy fields such climate change, AI governance, trade, migration, and global health.

Although the difference between multipolar and multi-order may be subtle, it is important. By including the within and between differentiation of ordering, the multi-order perspective is better placed to consider other factors than just power politics. The examples referred to at the beginning of this article are not easily explained from a polarity perspective, yet they are likely to define global politics going forward. From a multi-order perspective, these developments can be explained as order-building/order-dismantling processes: Putin is building a Eurasian order through force and subjugation, China is building the Belt and Road order through economic incentives and gradual establishment of dependency, Trump is withdrawing from the liberal international order whilst its remaining members (possibly) under leadership of the EU and Canada are scrambling to keep the order together without the United States.

...if all eyes are on the powerful, we risk overlooking less powerful actors that nonetheless have a big influence and can be extremely disruptive.

Policymakers need to understand the multi-order dynamics to position themselves advantageously in the emerging geopolitical environment. If they continue to view current events as a return to multipolarity, they risk overlooking that order at the global level is constituted against a backdrop of diversity and distinct visions for the good life at the international level. Moreover, if all eyes are on the powerful, we risk overlooking less powerful actors that nonetheless have a big influence and can be extremely disruptive. Ultimately, global (dis)order will depend on how the diversity, complexity and fragmentation is managed. There is certainly a worrying potential for increased levels of conflict and that pressing global challenges are not met in time and with sufficient energy. But, if the situation is better understood and governance is approached in an innovative, inclusive and constructive manner, the move towards a multi-order world may present possibilities for a more inclusive form of global governance in which different cultures – including those based on non-Western foundations – can have a voice and a space to pursue policies in alignment with their vision for the good life and their order-specific patterns of power, principle, and practice.

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Towards a UN with Chinese characteristics?

Heralding shifts in multilateral order

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China has considerably expanded its engagement with the United Nations (UN) system, but its influence differs significantly across issue areas. Despite this unevenness, patterns in Beijing's multilateral priorities suggest what a growing Chinese footprint may portend for the future of the UN. We examine this via three main dimensions. With regard to the underlying **logic** of multilateralism, China emphasises intergovernmental control at the expense of more autonomous UN bureaucracies. On the **substance** of multilateralism, China's objective to ensure the primacy of the state challenges core liberal values long promoted by the UN. In terms of multilateral **power** dynamics, Beijing works towards increasing space for the UN's developing country majority, with China as its de facto leader. The Trump administration's attack on international organisations further strengthens Beijing's bid to reshape UN multilateralism. The paper assesses the implications of these reordering pathways and concludes with policy recommendations.

Introduction

A widely held but under-investigated assumption is that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become an increasingly powerful actor within the United Nations (UN). This assumption is reinforced by: China's own policy statements; its past simultaneous headship of four UN Specialized Agencies; its 2015 pledge of new resources, including an 8,000-troop standby peacekeeping force; and the establishment of a China-UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (MFA 2015; Tung & Yang 2020; Schaefer 2022). However, deeper probing of China's role across the UN's three pillars of security, development, and human rights, as well as its funding and staffing levels, demonstrates an unevenness in its growing influence. While these shifts in power are mostly incipient rather than fully realised and differ across issue areas (Haug et al. 2024), we can still start to identify patterns in China's policies and normative priorities for the UN.

Beijing typically has stated that the UN is the world's most universal, representative, and authoritative intergovernmental international organisation in world politics (MFA 2005). It has tried to link its Belt and Road Initiative and its Global Initiatives covering governance, development, security and civilizational matters to the UN, and has worked at the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Security Council to protect the norm of state-based consent and non-interference in internal affairs. While Beijing's voluntary funding to the UN remains low, it is strategically earmarked; and although China remains under-represented in the UN bureaucracy, efforts to increase its presence in the long term have been initiated. These trends suggest that China is attempting a multilateral reordering process with the potential to reshape UN norms and operations.

In what follows, we explore three dimensions of how a UN with 'Chinese characteristics' might diverge from the current system, which is already shifting in ways that help promote China's perspectives. These modifications include a weakening of attachment in some Western circles – particularly US – and beyond to many of the UN Charter principles associated with the use of force, humanitarian law, and development cooperation. With these changes in mind, we consider China's approaches to multilateral cooperation with an eye to what a China-dominated UN might entail. We examine the unfolding logic of China's approach to multilateralism, its major policy and normative foci as reflected in the substance of multilateralism, and the impact its multilateral endeavours have on China's overall power

position within the UN. The paper concludes by assessing the implications of these pathways to a reordering of multilateralism and offering related policy recommendations.

The **logic** of multilateralism: towards a more intergovernmental UN

Multilateralism is generally understood as mechanisms and processes that organise 'relations between groups of three or more states' (Scott 2025: n.p.) according to generalised principles of conduct (Ruggie 1992). From a principal-agent perspective, the relationship between member states and multilateral organisations is straightforward (Abbott & Snidal 1998). As principals, member states set up multilateral bodies and decide what the latter should (not) do. As agents, multilateral bodies such as the UN Secretariat operate under these mandates and have to act in accordance with members' decisions. However, the extent to which multilateral entities have leeway in acting with relative autonomy vis-à-vis their members can differ significantly over time and from one multilateral organisation to another. At the UN, the Western-centred status quo has been an evolving and idiosyncratic combination of autonomy and control (Roberts & Kingsbury 1993). Particularly through a considerable increase in their provision of earmarked contributions, a relatively small number of rich Western member states have had a de facto say over large parts of UN work (Baumann & Haug 2024). At the same time, UN bodies have often had considerable autonomy in operational terms – from the hiring of staff to the implementation of project activities. UN leaders and their bureaucracies have also played visible roles in shaping multilateral debates in attempts to steer member-state decisions in directions that are in line with their preferences.

Contrary to some Western states, China predominantly approaches the UN system as an intergovernmental platform. For Beijing, the cooperation between state representatives matters most for what the UN is and how it operates, not the multilateral bureaucracy.

It is against this backdrop that China's engagement points to a potential shift that is partly in train. Contrary to some Western states, China predominantly approaches the UN system as an intergovernmental platform. For Beijing, the cooperation between state representatives matters most for what the UN is and how it operates, not the multilateral bureaucracy. This has implications for funding dynamics, UN personnel's standing and space for manoeuvre, and, more generally, the role UN bodies themselves are supposed to play.

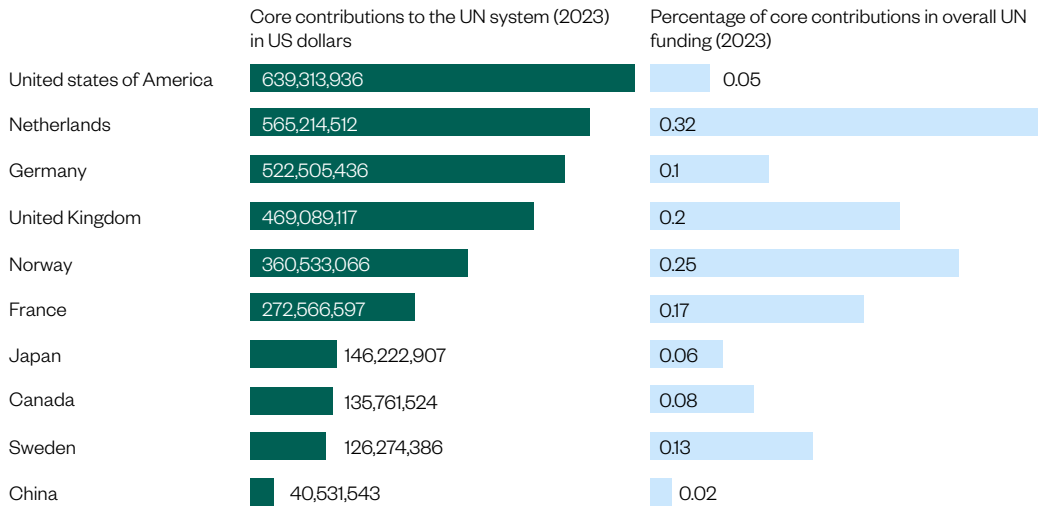
In terms of funding, a helpful proxy to gauge a member state's support for a more autonomous multilateral bureaucracy is their level of voluntary core funding. Unlike a state's assessed contributions (i.e. UN membership fees) (Haug et al. 2022), voluntary contributions are provided at a donor's discretion. Most voluntary funding across the UN system is currently earmarked: donors decide what the money they provide is to be used for (Weinlich et al. 2020). Voluntary core funding, however, is provided without a pre-specified purpose: donors provide resources UN entities can spend as they see fit in line with their mandates, allowing this to be framed as 'multilateral' funding. Traditionally, a limited number of Western member states has provided the bulk of core contributions to the UN system.

China, however, has been more reluctant. Compared to the other top-ten government donors to the UN system in 2023, Beijing was by far the most hesitant to provide core funding in both absolute and relative terms (Figure 1), ranking only 18th place among core providers (UNSCEB 2025). This is not dissimilar from the funding patterns of the majority of UN member states which are, like China, UN 'programme' (i.e. developing) countries where UN entities receive funding – mostly from Western member states – to support national development on the ground. However, China has never been a typical programme country: it has a permanent seat

on the UN Security Council and wishes to maintain the special privileges that are attached to that role including the associated status of a great power, alongside its developing country standing. As a 'developing country superpower', then, China can strategically mobilise this duality – as a member of the Group of 77 (G77, the UN's developing country alliance) and as the world's second largest economy – to strengthen its legitimacy and power base (Baumann et al. 2024).

Figure 1[1]

Core contributions provided by the 10 largest government donors to the UN system (2023)



Core funding has not been part of that strategy. Since 2018, China's core contributions have stagnated at about 40 million USD annually, i.e. significantly less than what the small Republic of Ireland provided in 2023 and not significantly more than what India – still classified as a lower-middle income country (Metreau et al. 2024) – provided in core contributions that year. As the second largest provider to the UN regular budget and the fifth largest overall government donor to the UN system (UNSCEB 2025), China's low levels of core funding indicate a general wariness of more autonomous UN bureaucracies.

When it comes to UN staff, China favours multilateral personnel who see their task as exclusively administering intergovernmental decisions. Instead of behaving proactively and relatively autonomously, China expects international civil servants to coordinate closely and align with the objectives of their principals. When it comes to Chinese nationals in multilateral staff positions, however, they are also expected to act in line with Chinese interests, irrespective of their official allegiance with the multilateral body they work for. While the UN Charter holds that UN staff 'shall not seek or receive instructions from any government' and are 'responsible only to the Organisation' (UN 1945: art 100(1)), it is common knowledge that many member states try to position their nationals in strategically relevant positions within the UN system as a means of exercising (mostly indirect) influence. In China's case, this practice seems to be particularly pronounced. Available evidence suggests that Chinese nationals in high-level UN positions – such as Li Yong at the UN Industrial Development Organisation (in office 2013–2021) and Qu Dongyu at the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) (in office since 2019) – coordinate closely with Beijing (Baumann et al. 2022). The former Chinese head

1 Source: based on UNSCEB, 2025.

of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the UN Secretariat, Wu Hongbo (2012–2017), even stated that 'as a [Chinese] international civil servant, when it comes to Chinese national sovereignty and security, we will undoubtedly defend our country's interests' (cited in Fung & Lam 2021: 1145). The Chinese government's efforts to increase the number of Chinese nationals among UN staff have so far been of limited success, but they illustrate the extent to which the Chinese government presses its UN staff – particularly those in leadership positions – to be 'patriots' who 'love the socialist motherland' (Lam & Fung 2024: 144) and closely coordinate their actions with Beijing.

Finally, China's version of multilateralism also impacts the general role UN entities are supposed to play in multilateral cooperation processes. UN bodies such as the General Assembly as well as regular member-state gatherings in UN Specialized Agencies and the boards of UN Funds and Programmes provide platforms for intergovernmental negotiations and decision-making – an approach that chimes with the official Chinese perspective of how the UN system should function, including operationally. For instance, China has established South-South funding mechanisms that enable a high level of control over limited but strategically focused resources. Unlike voluntary core funding, Chinese South-South trust funds are tightly earmarked: the resources China provides to entities such as the FAO come with specific directives for how they are to be used (Waisbich & Haug 2022). Contrary to many Western-led trust funds whose operative processes are administered more autonomously by UN entities, the governance of China's trust funds is closely connected to its officials – usually via China's permanent representative offices – as well as Chinese UN staff. Their targeted use of voluntary earmarked contributions together with this approach to governance enable an elevated level of control over China-sponsored UN partnerships. Instead of proactively shaping the contours of these schemes, UN entities mostly act as brokers or facilitators: they provide an administrative and operational framework for member-state interactions and – via the UN branding – offer an additional layer of legitimacy to China-led cooperation processes (Haug & Waisbich 2024).

Together with the closer control of voluntary funding flows and the tighter alignment of UN staff with member state decision making, this tendency to approach UN entities not as agents in their own right but primarily as support for (China-centred) member-state cooperation are key features of what China-led multilateralism could potentially look like. The underlying logic of UN multilateralism with Chinese characteristics is a UN bureaucracy with more limited autonomy that operates under stronger (inter)governmental – including Chinese – control.

The **substance** of multilateralism: towards a less liberal UN

China's preference for a more intergovernmental UN has implications for the substance of multilateralism. Beijing emphasises the legal principle of sovereign equality of states – a position underlined yet again in the 'Global Governance Initiative' introduced by President Xi Jinping in September 2025 (MFA 2025). However, as noted earlier, Beijing does still support hierarchical structures that accord special privileges to the Security Council's permanent members. It wants a UN that pledges non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states, prioritises state security over individual security, and promotes state-led development to stabilise the global order. China has also long argued that development plays the key role in promoting and protecting human rights.

Overall, China has become more active in questioning the liberal normative content of the UN conception of a global order based on its interlinked three-pillar structure of security, human rights, and development (Foot 2020). As the UN expanded its understanding of what could constitute threats to international peace and security in the 1990s and early 2000s to include a focus on individual security and mass atrocity crimes as well as internal breakdowns of state security (Börzel & Zürn 2021), the challenge to China-endorsed norms became more acute. In 1999, UN resolutions embraced as an obligation the protection of civilians (POC) caught up in armed conflict. The recognition that women suffer disproportionately in war led to the establishment in 2000 of a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, and in 2005 a World Summit Outcome document formalised states' 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) populations from mass atrocity crimes. In the event of a 'manifest failure' to do so, R2P endorsed a role for the Security Council, as representative of the international community, to ensure that protection (UNSC 1999; 2000; UNGA 2005: para 138 and 139).

This effort to impose restraints was evident in China's approach to the civil conflict in Syria after 2011, substantially increasing the frequency of its veto use in the Security Council.

In response, the PRC – often alongside Russia – has moved to hinder the progress of this liberal agenda and to further alternatives that focus more directly on state-led approaches and host-state consent. This effort to impose restraints was evident in China's approach to the civil conflict in Syria after 2011, substantially increasing the frequency of its veto use in the Security Council (14 vetoes between 2011 and 2024 compared with only 6 between 1971 and 2010; UNSC n.d.). The outcome of the UN intervention in Libya and the eventual overthrow and killing of Muammar Gaddafi influenced this behaviour, as many statements by China's UN officials, think-tank commentators, and Chinese media indicate. Beijing's Syrian-related vetoes were overwhelmingly used to bolster regime security and to promote state-led solutions to violence (Foot 2020: 167-8; 2024: 22), as it believed should have been done in Libya.

Similar efforts to protect state primacy came in December 2024 with respect to a draft resolution dealing with a mandate renewal for a UN stabilisation mission based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On this occasion, China (with Russia's support) baulked at attempts to strengthen POC language in the resolution text, instead arguing that the host country had the primary responsibility to decide how best to protect its civilians (SCR 2024; see Zhang 2025). In addition, the two allies diluted textual references to WPS, thus continuing a steady trend of restricting an agenda they regarded as encroaching on state prerogatives. Casting WPS as a development rather than a security issue, China's UN representative stressed that 'development is the foundation of peace', and the Council 'should focus on promoting women's empowerment based on development' (UNSC 2024: n.p.).

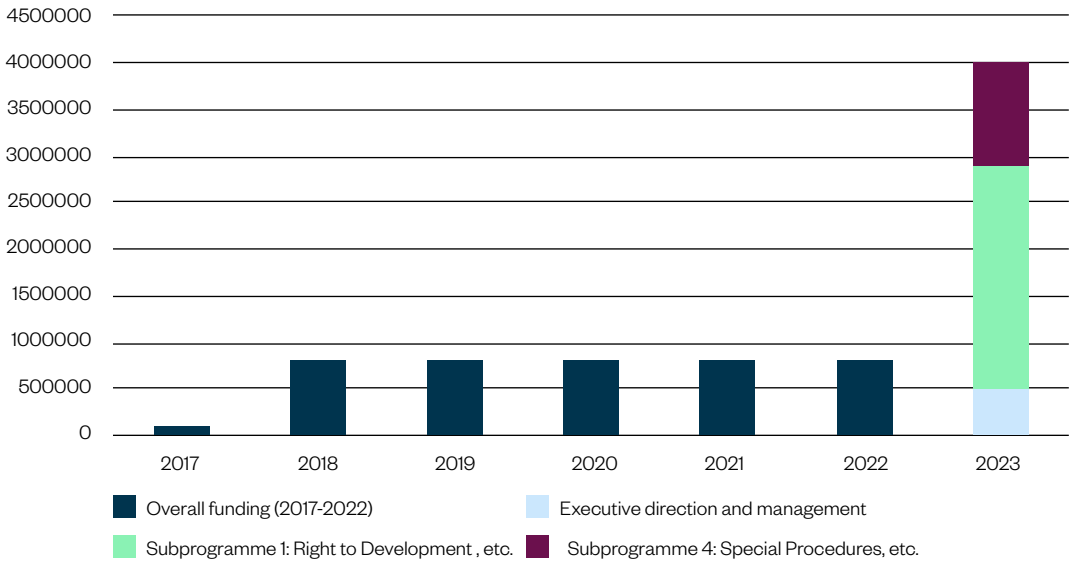
China, among other states, also contests the interventionist potential of R2P. Beijing supports pillar one of R2P, which underlines that it is the state – and not the international community – that is responsible for protecting its citizens from mass atrocity crimes. However, it remains wary of the other two pillars. Pillar two focuses on international assistance to build state capacity to prevent atrocities, while China's diplomats emphasise that states should identify their own weaknesses and tackle the root causes of conflict (Yao 2018). Pillar three, which deals with non-consensual international intervention, is of greatest concern to Beijing. It has led the PRC to challenge the idea of R2P as a universally agreed norm, stating that, for China, it does 'not constitute a rule of international law' (Liu 2009: n.p.). Indeed, in 2023, China signed a letter with the 'Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations' that described R2P as 'controversial and divisive' (GoF-FCUN 2023). Beijing presses instead for dialogue and negotiation rather than coercive international measures to deal with state failure to prevent atrocities. It believes that the stabilisation of a government in power via economic development is the main route to atrocity prevention over the longer term.

Whereas the UN officially adheres to the norm that human rights are universal and indivisible, Beijing promotes a pluralist and relativist position that advocates for each country to find its own pathway to human rights.

China's human rights perspective similarly goes against the liberal substance of UN multilateralism. Whereas the UN officially adheres to the norm that human rights are universal and indivisible, Beijing promotes a pluralist and relativist position that advocates for each country to find its own pathway to human rights. Chinese leaders state that their country 'has opened a new path of human rights protection, and added diversity to the concept of human rights with its own practices' (Xinhua 2021: n.p.). Its 'Global Civilization Initiative', announced in 2023, was connected to the UN in 2024 with an annual 'International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations'. This initiative underlines Beijing's belief in cultural pluralism rather than universality (Xinhua 2024). China and its like-minded partners have also argued at the HRC that development should be seen as a foundational right and that the universality of rights needs to be tempered by relativism. Thus, for Beijing, the so-called universality of the human rights model associated with the UN should instead be seen as an instance of Western hegemony.

Figure 2[2]

China's voluntary funding to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (2017–2023, in US dollars)



Alongside these revisions of UN longstanding norms as expressed in several China-sponsored HRC resolutions (UNGA 2017a; 2017b; 2019), Beijing has also engaged in institutional shaping through its funding choices. It has increased earmarked funding to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) designed to promote the 'Right to Development' and to raise the profile of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In 2017, this funding stood at 100,000 USD, from 2018 to 2022 at 800,000 USD annually, and in 2023 at 4 million USD (Figure 2), improving its donor ranking from 42nd to 18th. China also stepped up its - still limited - indirect financial support to UN human rights work by financing five Chinese nationals in 2023 to serve as Junior Professional Officers, compared to no support in 2019 and 2020, support for one in 2021, and three in 2022 (UNOHCHR 2024).

Overall, Beijing wants to secure a UN that defends state primacy, protects political regimes from UN-authorised international intervention, and prioritises development as the main route

2 Source: Based on UNOHCHR reports (2017–2023).

to stabilising global order over civil or political rights. China's approach to the UN tries to sideline that body's 1990s emphasis on individual protection and collective security, instead reviving state primacy in ways that are reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Power in and through multilateralism: towards a more China-centred UN

The general expansion of China's economic and political capacity has translated into a marked increase in Beijing's engagement with the UN system, with a more visible shift in China-related power dynamics from the early 2010s onwards.

In light of (potential) shifts in the logic and substance of multilateralism, what is multilateral power set to look like in a UN system in which China plays an increasingly important role? Our research into power dynamics related to China's UN footprint since the early 2000s – conducted together with 15 colleagues from five continents – paints an uneven picture (Haug et al. 2024). The general expansion of China's economic and political capacity has translated into a marked increase in Beijing's engagement with the UN system, with a more visible shift in China-related power dynamics from the early 2010s onwards.[3] Across UN pillars and issue areas, there is ample evidence of the PRC mobilising more compulsory (i.e. direct) power over the last two decades, evidenced by the increased use of its Security Council veto, the mobilisation of targeted earmarked funding, and pressure exercised behind the scenes on other UN member states to vote on resolutions in line with Chinese preferences (Baumann et al. 2024; Foot 2024; Haug & Waisbich 2024). In most settings, however, China has remained far behind Western states, up to this point at least, in terms of UN funding flows (Baumann & Haug 2024). China's institutional (i.e. indirect) power resources, such as Chinese UN staff (Lam & Fung 2024), and its attempts to shape bureaucratic agendas have also increased. Although these attempts mostly unfold in multilateral niches and remain cautious, dimensions such as China's growing combined financial footprint and its influence over South-South agendas (Haug & Waisbich 2024; Zhang & Jing 2024) indicate a visible increase in Beijing's ability to co-shape UN processes.

Across UN pillars, we also find that China's structural power – i.e. its position relative to other actors – has visibly expanded. At the Security Council, we see a shift towards the normalisation of China's role as a great power in its interaction with other permanent members (Gowan 2024). In the development sphere, we observe a more palpable challenge to North-South templates in which China mobilises its dual identity as a developing country superpower to bolster its authority over development-related processes. The Global Development Initiative (GDI) is the most prominent expression of China's development leadership ambition to date. Several UN entities are engaged in GDI projects as part of their Sustainable Development Goals implementation strategies, and more than 80 UN member states have joined the China-sponsored Group of Friends of the GDI (see CIKD 2023). Incipient China-related efforts to deploy productive power, via discourse, in order to shape systems of knowledge and meaning also appear across different UN venues. While observing the potential success of these efforts will require a longer timeframe, we already see China making inroads in redirecting discourses at the UN. This includes emphasising the Right to Development as a foundation for the enjoyment of other human rights (Oud 2024) and de-emphasising the relevance of good governance and inclusive institutions to the sustainable development agenda (Baumann et al. 2024).

3 This subsection builds on findings of a Global Policy Special Issue (2024:S2) discussed in Haug et al. 2024: section 4.

This uneven but noticeable increase in China's ability to mobilise different power types across UN pillars has arguably reached the next stage with President Trump's return to the White House. His administration's assault on established mechanisms of international cooperation (Haug et al. 2025), withdrawal from and defunding of a number of UN entities (such as the HRC and World Health Organisation), and failure to pay its assessed contributions to the UN regular and peacekeeping budgets (as of 10 December 2025) are likely to not only have a major impact on the future of UN power dynamics but also contribute to further shifts in Beijing's favour. The April 2025 announcement that the US State Department's budget could be halved (Toosi 2025)[4] immediately sent shockwaves through the UN and has underlined the urgency of the UN Secretary-General's UN80 Initiative centred on suggestions on how to reform and streamline the UN system in order to ensure its longer-term (financial) sustainability (UN 2025; see Frage & Shiffman 2025).

Against this backdrop, China's reaction to US disengagement from or challenges to established elements of UN multilateralism is set to be of particular relevance for future power dynamics. If the US government does end up slashing its UN funding, China might find itself in the position of the largest de facto contributor of assessed contributions to the regular and peacekeeping budgets. However, based on its trajectory to date, Beijing is unlikely to use voluntary contributions to fill the gap left by the United States. Instead, the PRC is set to further expand its multilateral footprint in the areas it deems particularly relevant to Chinese interests. Recent increases in China's - overall still limited - tightly earmarked funding in the human rights field (see above) illustrate the targeted and strategic nature of Beijing's financial attention as it evolves to focus more on selected parts of the UN system. More generally, the decrease in the US's relevance as a donor is likely to not only make more space for Chinese preferences but also do away with an influential opponent of China – or at least reduce that opponent's leverage. The US government has long been the fiercest critic of China in UN settings, threatening to withhold funding to UN entities that continued supporting Chinese foreign policy initiatives, for instance (Haug 2024). By contrast, Southern member states generally support China's expanding engagement (or are unwilling to voice their criticism) and actively seek to participate in China-sponsored UN schemes (Haug & Waisbich 2024). Without its financial contributions, the US government is less in a position to counterbalance the numerical force of developing countries that – proactively or reluctantly – support China's expanding UN engagement.

This developing country support base is indeed a cornerstone of China's approach to UN multilateralism. Beijing has long emphasised the need to 'democratise' multilateralism (Tsang & Cheung 2023), i.e. to provide more space and voice to developing countries (such as itself). With China's insistence that it will 'always be part of the developing world and a member of the Global South' (Xu 2023: n.p.), it positions itself as primus inter pares among the G77 in its UN role. A more democratised UN multilateralism, by this logic, is one with more space for China as a legitimate leader. China's insistence that it wants to move to a 'UN-centred' world (Xinhua 2022) – by implication, away from a US-centred world order – reflects a vision of revamped UN power dynamics in which the relevance of Western states decreases while the developing country majority takes centre stage with Beijing as its leader. 'UN-centred', then, indeed means (more) 'China-centred'.

4 In 2024, US assessed contributions to the UN system amounted to more than 3 billion USD but were only a minor portion of the more than 14 billion USD that the US government provided to the UN system overall. See UNSCEB 2025.

At the same time, China's expanding clout at the UN also comes with responsibilities that Beijing will need to review and act on carefully. It may find that in this role it needs to respond more swiftly to security crises instead of emphasising long-term remedies – such as more attention to development – to aid conflict prevention and management. In addition, together with the United States, China is one of the major culprits of the UN's worsening liquidity crisis since it now pays its membership fees rather late in the year. China's dues that should be transferred by the end of January each year only arrived in UN coffers on 27 December in 2024 and on 29 October in 2025 (UNGA 2025), adding to the major hurdles the UN Secretariat faces in ensuring a functioning world organisation (The Economist 2025; see Chen 2024). Moreover, the normalisation of China's great-power status at the UN is likely to challenge elements of the solidarity between China and other developing country member states as Beijing seeks more of the discretional privileges that come with that status. While developing countries tend to regularly ask for more resources from Western powers and are in favour of expanding UN structures (most of which they do not finance), China is now increasingly wary of burgeoning UN budgets and, out of self-interest, is likely to align more closely with other large donors in emphasising the efficient use of UN resources (Lynch 2023). Overall, then, a more China-centred UN multilateralism is also one in which China might find itself in a more complex position that forces Beijing to rethink how it mobilises its dual identity as the UN's only developing country superpower.

Reshaping the contours of multilaterialism: possible responses

The increase in China's economic and political weight over the last two decades has led to uneven and incipient but already palpable changes across different parts of the UN system. Based on available evidence, we suggest that Beijing's growing multilateral footprint at the UN might well lead or contribute to a number of important shifts in UN multilateralism (see Figure 3). With regard to the underlying logic of multilateralism, China's emphasis on the intergovernmental nature of multilateral cooperation – in contrast to a more autonomous multilateral bureaucracy – has been evident in China's mix of UN funding, its understanding of the role of UN staff, and the ways UN entities act in China-led cooperation schemes. In terms of the substance of multilateralism, China's objectives to ensure the primacy of the state (and not the individual) in UN work and embrace development as the primary human right (and not civil or political rights) reflect a political programme that challenges some of the core liberal values promoted by the UN system over the last decades. With regard to multilateral power dynamics, finally, China's emphasis on 'democratising' multilateralism centres on increasing space for the developing country majority at the UN with China as its de facto leader. This underlines the China-centric nature of what Beijing insists should be a UN-centred world.

Figure 3: Towards a UN with Chinese characteristics?

	The **logic** of multilateralism	The **substance** of multilateralism	**Power** in/through multilateralism
Status quo	Intergovernmental control and the relative autonomy of multilateral bodies coexist to differing extents across issue areas.	Since the 1990s, the UN system's liberal agenda has expanded, including a focus on protecting the security of the individual.	Western states have long dominated the UN system through financial means, while G77 countries often play more marginal roles.
China's approach	• Strengthening inter-governmental control • Reducing the UN bureaucracy's autonomy	• Emphasising sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic affairs • Prioritising state interests over human protection	• Expanding engagement across UN pillars • Positioning China as primus inter pares among G77 countries
Implication of China's increasing weight	**Towards a more intergovernmental UN**	**Towards a less liberal UN**	**Towards a more China-centred UN**
Empirical dynamics to watch	• China's use of funding modalities • The role of Chinese UN staff • The position of UN entities in China-led cooperation processes	• China's approach to security (state vs. individuals) • China's promotion of the Right to Development • China's attempts to reshape the UN human rights regime	• China's position within the G77 • How China mobilises its dual role as developing country superpower • How China reacts to the multilateral retreat of the United States
	Potential overlaps of Chinese and US interests regarding a more intergovernmental, financially constrained, less autonomous, and less liberal UN system		

Overall, the current Trump-led US retreat from and attack on established forms of UN multilateralism are set to accelerate the trend of China gaining more space at the UN in ways that tilt underlying power dynamics in its favour. The partial alignment between Trump and Xi on what multilateralism is ultimately all about might have the most far-reaching consequences for the UN system (Haug 2025). The current leaders of these two important member states face complex and often hostile bilateral relations and are engaged in ongoing power struggles in international organisations, but they seem to agree that the logic of multilateralism should centre less on relatively autonomous multilateral bodies and more on intergovernmental or great-power-led arrangements. They also seem to coincide in their assessment that large parts of the Western-backed and often liberal substance of UN multilateralism that have gained traction since the early 1990s should be contained and reduced (Foot 2025). This means that UN norms and mandates with a strong liberal and interventionist bent – such as R2P – are increasingly likely to be marginalised. Despite ongoing rivalry and tensions in other aspects of their relations, China's partial alignment with a US administration that contradicts substantial parts of what previous US governments and their Western allies had long pushed for at the UN might turn out to be a bonus for Beijing, helping it to reform UN multilateralism in line with its own preferences.

What does this mean for those who want to safeguard the liberal parts and more autonomous elements of the UN system? To start with, member state policymakers should be more explicit in identifying their countries' core interests. Instead of spreading political capital and financial

resources across a wide range of processes and issue areas, they could concentrate their efforts on parts of the UN system they see as particularly critical to protect. The independence of UN human rights experts is a primary example. Strategic increases in voluntary core funding to entities that cover central UN functions – such as the OHCHR in the field of human rights – would help improve such support across pillars.

Member state diplomats and UN bureaucrats, in turn, should deepen their engagement with China to improve their understanding of Beijing's policy priorities. Focusing on the substance and long-term interests behind China-led multilateral debates – and not only on official rhetoric – would be an important first step. Identifying opportunities for joint action with Beijing could help to safeguard liberal elements even in the context of tightening intergovernmental control. Some Chinese commentators have suggested, for instance, that a combination of liberal peacebuilding practices and the 'developmental peace' that China prefers – focusing on state capacity and infrastructure needs – might be a path to improving UN peace operations (see Foot 2020: 245). Another starting point could be a more proactive engagement with the UN's South-South cooperation support agenda, where China has come to play a dominant role (Haug & Waisbich 2024).

Finally, analysts (including ourselves) are well advised to engage with views from across different sectors and geographies in their attempts to make sense of China's UN engagement and the context in which it unfolds. An approach that combines concrete evidence and the analysis of broader patterns can help counter simplistic narratives about China's multilateral activities and uncover dynamics – such as the partial overlap between Chinese and US interests – that are set to act as key drivers in reshaping the contours of UN multilateralism.[5]

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Philanthropy and global (dis)order

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> 'Big Philanthropy is definitionally a plutocratic voice in our democracy, an exercise of power by the wealthy that is unaccountable, non-transparent, donor-directed, perpetual, and tax-subsidised. … [B]ig philanthropy is an exercise of power, and in a democracy, any form of concentrated power deserves scrutiny, not gratitude.'[1]

Abstract

This paper discusses critiques of the place of so-called 'big philanthropy' within the global order. Giant private charitable foundations such as Gates, Wellcome, NovoNordisk Fonden and others, play an increasingly influential role in domains such as global health, food security, scientific research, education, arts and social programmes. This influence has brought with it critiques from both the left and right of the political spectrum, who argue that big philanthropy's influence is not only undemocratic, but that it can exacerbate the problems it seeks to address. Responses to these critiques have focused on philanthropy's capability for risk taking and long term thinking – qualities often lacking elsewhere in the global order. Philanthropies who wish to maintain their influence within the global order may have to lean more strongly into these capabilities, and to become more accountable not only for how they make their money, but for how they take their spending decisions, too.

Introduction: big philanthropy

This discussion paper is a response to an emerging critical literature on 'big philanthropy', neatly reflected by the above quote from political scientist Rob Reich. The global order – particularly the fields of public health and scientific research but also education, civil society, and the arts – is increasingly characterised by the remarkable influence of massive, multibillion-dollar philanthropic foundations, including the Gates Foundation, Novo Nordisk Fonden (NNF), Wellcome, Tata Trusts, the Open Society Foundation (OSF), the Chan-Zuckerberg Foundation, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, and many others.[2]

The growth of this so-called big philanthropy has been accompanied by increasing criticism of the influence such organisations wield, a criticism that has come as much from civil society sources such as journalists and politicians as it has from academics interested in the operation of power and influence. As big philanthropy has sought to have more impact and influence (that is, as it has spent more and more money), so has it drawn more attention, not all of it positive. Critics of big philanthropy argue that its influence has been derived not from the usual sources of legitimacy in the international order – i.e. nation-states and the more-or-less democratic global system which brokers cooperation between them – but from the all-but-unregulated deployment of billions of dollars of private capital in the public sphere. There have of course always been 'non-state' actors, namely corporations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but these are highly regulated by that same global system. Big philanthropy, on the other hand, tends not to fit easily into our traditional ways of understanding who has a 'seat at the table'. As such, they can be seen to disrupt our notions of legitimacy, accountability, and power within the global order.

1 Quoted in Madrigal, C.A., (June 27, 2018) "Against Big Philanthropy", The Atlantic, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/06/against-philanthropy/563834/

2 A useful ranking of big philanthropies by financial size can be found at Arco Labs, 'World's 100 Largest Foundations List' (last updated, March 2024), https://www.arcolab.org/en/worlds-100-largest-philanthropic-foundations-list/

This paper is aimed at those who work with big philanthropies (grant recipients, delivery partners, and policymakers) and those within philanthropies who seek to engage with criticism of their role within, and impact on, the global order. The paper is in three parts: **Part 1** discusses the critiques of big philanthropy, identifying key themes present in academic, political, and civil society engagements with philanthropies' seeming disruption of the global order. **Part 2** discusses arguments for big philanthropy's potential good and the actions it could take to justify its place in the global order. **Part 3** compares and contrasts philanthropy with other disruptions to the global order such as artificial intelligence (AI) and cryptocurrency, and uses those comparisons to generate recommendations for how philanthropy can work better within a weakening global order.

Part one: big problems with big philanthropy (and Bill Gates)

As a leading philanthropy consultancy notes, the past decade or so has seen 'shifting attitudes toward philanthropy, intense debates about power and effectiveness and difficult operating environments' (Berman, Karibi-Whyte, & Tarasov, 2019:4). Far from the 'gratitude' towards charitable giving of which Reich is so sceptical, responses to big philanthropy have been increasingly negative. Perhaps reflecting the way in which a single figure is more amenable to discursive focus than a generic concept, much of this negative attention has focused on Bill Gates and his foundation. The Gates Foundation has been widely criticised for centring too much power in one person's hands and for relying on simplistic, technocratic, top-down, market-based solutions to culturally complex social problems (Global Justice Now 2016). International organisations and national governments have also come under fire for allowing the Gates Foundation to have too much influence over their operations. The Gates Foundation, for example, is regularly one of the top two or three contributors to the World Health Organisation's (WHO) budget (second only to the US in 2023–24 (Lu & Kuo 2025), leading to accusations that it is the Foundation's interests driving WHO priorities rather than those of member states (Crawford 2021). The Gates Foundation's influence in global public health is widely recognised, both as a force for good and as a potentially chilling factor in academic and policy discourse (Twohey & Kulish 2020). Highly questionable conspiracy theories about the influence of the Gates Foundation's influence over the global order abound, especially on social media (Ha, Graham, & Grey 2022), but there is also no doubt that the Foundation has been the recipient of remarkable preferential treatment by grateful national governments, for example being granted (albeit temporarily) diplomatic immunity by Kenya (Caldero 2024).

But Gates is hardly the only philanthropy under fire. Whether it is campaigns against Wellcome's investments in fossil fuels (Legraien 2022), concerns about conflicts of interest and power dynamics at NNF (Rigby & Flick 2025), or disquiet about the Walton Family Foundation's influence over education policy within some American states (Superville 2015), few if any of the big philanthropies have been free of negative news stories and press coverage. These news stories highlight a sense that big philanthropy, while putatively seeking to do good, does so in ways that call into question the legitimacy of its influence within the global order. In particular, critics note that rather than affected publics, it is often these philanthropies, through the exercise of their ever-changing strategic priorities, which effectively get to decide which social problems get addressed, when, and in which places.

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In the academy, systematic critiques of big philanthropy have largely come from sociology and political science, notably the pioneering work of sociologists Linsey McGooey (2015) and Sophie Harman (2016) and political scientist Reich (2018). The broadly progressive/liberal stance which can be said to characterise these academic critiques of big philanthropy is even more pronounced within civil society critiques, which are associated with campaigning journalists such as Anand Giridharadas (2020, 2021) and Tim Schwab (2021, 2023, 2024). Yet it is not just on the left that big philanthropy encounters scepticism. It has also been taken to task by more conservative and even far-right voices such as Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary (Walker 2018), and JD Vance, the vice-president of the United States (Bowerman 2024). Although Vance's critiques have been seen as part of a wider attempt by the presidential administration of Donald Trump 'to target a broad swath of philanthropic organizations based on their ideological views or their efforts to hold the administration accountable' (Berkowitz, 2025), they nevertheless echo progressive/liberal critiques in their (presumably sincerely held) identification of philanthropies as unaccountable or illegitimate players in the global order. Even further beyond these political axes, big philanthropy has not escaped broader trends of declining trust in institutions, shading even into conspiracy theories around vaccines, pandemics, and control of the global order (Siraki & Mohammad 2023).

While these critiques of big philanthropy come from very different political perspectives (and in the case of conspiracy theories, places of delusion), they are notably characterised by two concerns: that big philanthropy has too much power, and that big philanthropy is at best ineffective and at worst actively harmful. The first concern can be described as the 'democracy critique', which argues that big philanthropy is incompatible with democratic norms and accountability within the global order. The second can be described as the 'system critique', which argues that far from ameliorating the global problems they profess to tackle, philanthropies often cause and even benefit from them.

The democracy critique can be broken down into four parts:

1. **Philanthropy tends to concentrate power in a few people's hands.** Schwab argues that 'Bill Gates is not simply giving away money, he's buying influence. He uses charitable donations to put his hands on the levers of public policy, shaping how we medicate, educate, and feed the world. … The problem is he's helping the world in the only way he knows how – by taking control' (Schwab 2023). As before, here Gates is a useful placeholder not just for other billionaire philanthropists but for big philanthropies which wield similar influence but lack living donors. Harman goes even further, arguing that Gates's 'charismatic authority and wealth' forestalls any criticism of the power he wields (Harman 2016: 350). For Harman, that very lack of contestation is a key problem with philanthropy's claims to legitimacy in the global order, leading us to the second point:

2. **Philanthropy lacks transparency and accountability.** Oversight and regulation of philanthropy is remarkably light-touch. Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, George Soros, et al. answer to no one when it comes to making decisions about how to spend their philanthropic billions, but neither in practice do those big philanthropies without living donors, such as Wellcome, HHMI, and the NNF. As the philosopher Theodore Lechterman argues in his book The Tyranny of Generosity, philanthropy effectively privatizes what should be democratic responsibilities, giving private individuals or small unelected boards and executive staff an outsized say in the otherwise public spheres of health, education, labour, housing, communications, arts, food, and more (Lechterman 2021).

3. **Philanthropy is publicly subsidised.** As Reich (2018) argues in Just Giving, in a liberal-democratic political system, billionaires do have the freedom to give their money wherever they choose, but this does not mean that the state (i.e. the taxpayer) should subsidise that freedom. This argument is in response to the unavoidable financial and fiduciary facts of big philanthropy: massive private wealth is transferred into very lightly-taxed private foundations, which then accrue further lightly-taxed billions in investment dollars. As Schwab puts it of the Gates Foundation, 'Some years the foundation generates more income from its investments than it gives away in charity' (Schwab 2023). Philanthropists are then free to spend this money in the public sphere however they see fit, leading one reviewer of McGooey to beg the question: 'is the public value of private philanthropy greater than the value of the foregone tax revenue?' (Payne 2015).

4. **Philanthropy has opportunity costs.** The answer to this last question may well be a resounding 'yes!', but that does not answer the fundamental question of why big philanthropies get to decide which social problems get solved, how, and when. It also does not answer the question of the opportunity costs. There is no doubt that the Gates Foundation's funding of the WHO's malaria programmes has saved lives, but there is also no doubt that such donations mean that the WHO's tax-funded operational attention has been directed away from other equally important issues. When the Walton Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Foundation donate millions to promote particular forms of selective education in the United States, what alternatives are they crowding out?

In terms of disruptions to the global order, the democracy critique of big philanthropy manifests on both the left and the right of political discourse, resulting in the unusual phenomenon of progressive critiques of the Gates Foundation's work on seed diversity in Africa (Malkan 2024; Ro 2024) being based on similar principles as nationalist conservative critiques of the OSF's work in Hungary (Flamm 2022; Mikaelian 2024). In both cases, and indeed across the board, the democratic critique views big philanthropy in its current state as at best incompatible with and at worst a threat to the democratic foundations of global order.

The second critique of big philanthropy, the system critique, argues that far from addressing social problems, big philanthropies are often both the cause and perpetuation of those problems. This critique argues that there is a fundamental conflict between the source of big philanthropy's wealth and the claims big philanthropy makes of its social value:

1. Philanthropic resources are the product of our current economic and financial system. Big philanthropy makes its money from the system of global capital, either through endowed investments (as in the case of organisations such as Gates, Wellcome, and HHMI) or through close financial connections to large corporations (as in the case of NNF). As noted in the democracy critique, these philanthropies then put a lot of this money into private, highly tax-efficient foundations.

2. Philanthropic resources tend to seek to address social problems, such as inequalities or poor health outcomes. This impulse is of course admirable and laudable, but …

3. The social problems that philanthropy seeks to address tend to be caused by our current financial and economic systems. As Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, argues in his book From Generosity to Justice (Walker, 2023), the political and economic systems that allow philanthropies to prosper are the same as those that cause the pervasive inequity they seek to solve. Big philanthropies have frequently been accused of investing directly in socially irresponsible companies (Piller 2018) and even of investing in organisations directly opposed to their own charitable programmes, such as when Wellcome was criticised for continuing to benefit from investments in fossil fuels even as it

launched funding programmes addressing the impacts of climate change[3]. It is important to note that this critique goes beyond specific investments in socially irresponsible products. This is not merely about the inconsistencies of such actions, but that ultimately...

4. Philanthropic foundations, dependent as they are on the system, tend not to disrupt it. This is perhaps the most radical part of the system critique: the approaches philanthropies take to solving social problems inevitably fail to address the underlying systemic or structural issues because that would undermine the source of philanthropies' wealth. As Payne put it in his review of McGooey's No Such Thing as a Free Gift, 'far from addressing the unequal power structures that have created a massive global imbalance in wealth and resources, [philanthropy] entrenches ... the very economic and technological relationships that reinforce the dependency of developing countries on the United States and Europe' (Payne 2015).

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According to this critique, big philanthropy is hopelessly conflicted: on the one hand, it claims social value through addressing key social problems, but by deriving much if not all of its own financial value from an unequal global system, it is inextricably part of the causes of those problems. Indeed, as sociologists Luna Gluckman and Louise Russel-Prywata conclude from their study of the network connections between big philanthropies, '(it) appears to facilitate and help elites retain their advantaged positions by legitimising the system producing the inequalities they benefit from in the first place' (Gluckman & Russel-Prywata 2022: 13). Unlike the democracy critique, which views big philanthropy as in need of 'reordering' within the global system, the system critique paints big philanthropy as a prime example of the inequities and iniquities which characterise the global order.

Part two: Justifying big philanthropy

Progressive critiques of big philanthropy's shortcomings tend to reach for the same remedies that the broadly liberal left would prescribe for any other disruptive actor within the global order, namely: more regulation, stricter oversight, fewer tax breaks, better incentives. Right-wing and nationalist critiques look to the same remedies but in a more aggressive, even more punitive fashion (tellingly, as in the case of Hungary and OSF, they have also actually enacted these remedies). Both approaches would seem to hold out little hope that big philanthropy can be expected or trusted to reorder itself. However, among commentators, a potential justification is emerging,– if not of big philanthropy's current actions, then of its potential for good in the global order. The defence revolves around three ways in which big philanthropy can act, absent punitive regulation, to justify its place in the global order. The first two have been most convincingly outlined by Reich (2018):

1. **Philanthropies can be experimental.** Reich suggests that one way big philanthropy can justify itself is to double down on what he calls '"discovery," an experimentalist approach to finding and assessing long-term-horizon innovation' in public policy and investment that may not be possible for public bodies (limited by short-term electoral and tax concerns) or shunned by private corporations (limited by their bottom lines) (Reich 2018: 19). As Hilary Pearson, former president of Philanthropic Foundations Canada, puts it: 'One of the great public benefits of thoughtful philanthropy is its ability to take leaps, to fund what is risky or has unknown outcomes' (Pearson 2022). Some foundations have

3 Wellcome has since divested from these industries, or is in the process of doing so.

taken this directly to heart, announcing that they will 'take on risks and tough challenges –especially when others aren't' and that 'taking no risks today means taking incalculable risks for the future' (Wellcome and the Allianz Foundation, respectively[4]. Others, like the Chen-Yet Sen Foundation are explicitly embracing 'moonshot philanthropy' an approach which encourages philanthropies to take the risks others cannot and in doing so "seeks to 'privatise failure and socialise success... ensuring the fruits of success are shared by all" (Breeze & Chen 2022).

2. **Philanthropies can think long term.** Reich further suggests that philanthropies are well positioned not only to take risks, but to think long term in ways that presentist governments and corporations cannot or will not: 'foundations, free of both marketplace or electoral accountability regimes... with a protected endowment designed to exist across generations, even in perpetuity, are perhaps uniquely situated to engage in the sort of high-risk, long run policy innovation and experimentation that is healthy in a democratic society and that addresses the interests of future generations' (Reich, 2016). This long-term thinking is indeed present in the way some foundations position themselves within civil society. The RAG-Stiftung, a German foundation, describes itself as financing 'perpetual obligations' relating to the environmental impacts of mining. In doing so, RAG-Stiftung explicitly positions itself as reducing 'the burden on the public sector' in the future.[5] The Rockerfeller Foundation has set the 'Foresights and Futures Initiative' described as 'one of the most ambitious experiments in long-term thinking in the global philanthropic sector' (Roohi 2025).

These two arguments are grounded in what we might call the characteristic capabilities of philanthropies. The very lack of oversight and tax burden that enables them to act so freely, Reich argues, enables them to experiment and to think long term in ways that more time-constrained and regulated organisations such as public bodies and corporations cannot or will not. This capabilities approach (to borrow from Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011) in effect asks philanthropies not simply to use their powers for good (as they would all claim to already do) but to use their powers to do good in ways only organisations with those particular powers can. Rather than act like traditional players in the global order, this potential justification of big philanthropy asks them to take on the roles and responsibilities that those traditional players cannot.

The third part of the defence of big philanthropy looks less to its characteristic capabilities and more to an action it must take to engender public confidence and trust:

3. **Philanthropies should account for themselves.** If big philanthropy's place in the global order is justified by its capacity to do good, then that justification is sustained, so the argument goes, only so long as philanthropies are transparent about and accountable for their actions (Allen, George & Theron 2024)[6] critical literature on big philanthropy, the philanthropic sector itself has produced numerous frameworks and guidelines on transparency and accountability. Common to all of these frameworks is the belief that philanthropies (big and small) can be more transparent about their goals, how they make their money, and how they make their funding decisions, and that in setting their strategies they can be more inclusive of the people who have the most experience of the problems

4 Wellcome corporate website, 'Our Beliefs and Values', https://wellcome.org/jobs/our-beliefs-and-values (accessed July 2024); Allianz Foundation corporate website, '#Risktaker', '#Risktaker', https://allianzfoundation.org/risktakers (accessed July 2024)

5 RAG-Stiftung corporate website, homepage: https://www.rag-stiftung.de/en/ (accessed July 2024).

6 As the philanthropy sector has grown in power and influence, it has been accompanied by the growth of a subsector of specialist advisors and consultants. For example, see Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, The Philanthropy Framework (2020): https://www.rockpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Philanthropy-Framework-1.pdf

philanthropy would profess to solve.

It is notable that this third defence of big philanthropy is not different substantively than the 'good governance' arguments made about both corporations and public bodies operating in the global order (and the regional, national, and local orders, too). As with the democracy critique of big philanthropy, this part of the justification is in effect an attempt to reorder big philanthropies, making them recognisable as responsible players within the rules of the global order.

Part three: addressing money, power, and difference

Big philanthropy can be usefully compared to some of the other 'disordered' phenomena explored elsewhere in this collection, such as AI and cryptocurrencies. Crypto, for example, is a technology which potentially bypasses nation-state-based (in reality, US-based) financial systems to enable all-but-unregulated financial transactions between individuals and organisations. This is not dissimilar to the way in which philanthropy bypasses nation-state-based regulatory systems to intervene in the public sphere. AI is said to have disruptive potential not only because of the scale and speed at which it can perform computing tasks but also because of its lack of transparency and accountability. Again, this is akin to philanthropy's capability to act in ways other organisations cannot as well as the perceived lack of accountability and transparency that is an effect of that capability.

Much of the concern about the disruptive capabilities of AI, crypto, and other technologies comes not from the phenomena themselves but from a sense that the institutions and orders they are disrupting (labour markets, financial systems, etc.) are not sufficiently resilient to or prepared for change. This weakness is arguably also a characteristic of the global institutional contexts in which big philanthropy currently operates. Multilateral organisations, the global aid system, global health research, among others are marked simultaneously by a decline in support from so-called 'Western' nations (for example, the US pulling out of UNESCO, the WHO, etc.; European nations sacrificing aid budgets to fund increased defence expenditure) and the increased influence of non-democratic, even authoritarian states such as China, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. The challenge to philanthropy in this context is how it can play the beneficent role it seeks to play in the global order without exploiting or even worsening the weaknesses of that order for its own ends. Is there a way for philanthropy to exploit its capabilities for the public good without further compounding the challenges faced by global institutions?

The challenge to philanthropy in this context is how it can play the beneficent role it seeks to play in the global order without exploiting or even worsening the weaknesses of that order for its own ends.

In this conflicted context, and with both the critiques and defences of philanthropy in mind, I recommend three areas in which further work can be done by philanthropies and their interlocutors: power – addressing the democratic deficit in philanthropic operations; money – addressing the sources of philanthropic finances; and difference – favouring philanthropic action that cannot or will not be taken by public or corporate actors. Taken together, a concerted focus on these areas as outlined briefly below may enable philanthropies and those who work with them to make use of philanthropy's unique capabilities in ways that do not further undermine global institutions and norms.

1. **Power:** Addressing the democratic deficits at the heart of philanthropic action requires two things: i) the acknowledgement by philanthropies that they hold unusual levels of power (economic and political) which they can deploy with an unusual lack of oversight or

accountability; and ii) a willingness on the part of philanthropies to radically devolve that power away from their boardrooms and executives and towards their delivery partners and grantees (Saunders-Hastings 2018). This should include both high-level 'strategic' decision-making (about big-picture questions regarding philanthropies' focus on particular strategic issues) as well as more 'tactical' day-to-day decisions about how philanthropic money is spent. To be fair, many philanthropies already promote 'co-creation' and substantive engagement with their partners – this needs accelerating and normalising across the sector. Giving up power is an unusual thing for any organisation to do, but it is an essential component to philanthropy's healthy participation in the global order.

2. **Money:** Addressing the source of their power – bluntly, where the money comes from – is uncomfortable for philanthropies. Most invest their endowments in global capital markets (stocks, equities, property, etc.) and while most have some red lines about investments (typically tobacco, arms, and, increasingly, fossil fuels), many argue that any further restrictions on investment would limit their ability to address social problems. Of course, as the system critique goes, global capital markets play a large role in causing those problems. Even more so than relinquishing power, philanthropies choosing to restrict their money-making opportunities could be viewed by boardrooms and executives as a dereliction of their duty to maximise their ability to do good. Yet some philanthropies – for example, the Ford Foundation in the US and the Vivensa Foundation in the UK – have found innovative ways to make 'mission-focused' investments, making money for good causes while also minimally seeking to do no harm (those red lines) and maximally seeking to do good (e.g. investing in renewable energies and social enterprises). Philanthropies should be expected to understand the wider economic system in which they operate and see their money not simply as a lovely 'gift' from a founder or beneficiary but as intimately tied up in the global order they wish to ameliorate.

3. **Difference:** Finally, philanthropies above all want to have impact, and they should seek to do so in ways that fully exploit their differences from state and corporate actors: namely, their capabilities of risk-taking, experimentation, and long-termism as identified by Reich (2018). If they do not, then it is quite legitimate for states and others to question the freedoms from oversight and taxation that enable those capabilities to begin with. If philanthropies are simply replicating the priorities and (crucially) the operating processes of states or corporations (i.e. focusing on short-term efficiencies and easily quantifiable balance-sheet-like metrics), then they arguably deserve to be treated like states or corporations and regulated accordingly. It is thus in the interests of philanthropies and their partners to work together to promote long-term thinking and responsible risk-taking. This is not to say that there are not short-term, tractable issues with which philanthropies can and should be involved. Rather, it is to argue that when philanthropy acts, it should do so in a way that enables its beneficiaries to be free of the constraints that come with state or corporate action.

It is thus in the interests of philanthropies and their partners to work together to promote long-term thinking and responsible risk-taking.

Each of these three areas – power, money, and difference – is key to philanthropy's ability to operate sustainably in a weakening global order. Much of it seems counter-intuitive: to have impact, philanthropy should surrender its power and restrict its ability to raise funds. But it is only in doing so that philanthropy, whether working at the global scale or more locally, can be a responsible actor within that global order. Where others such as states and corporations are either abandoning or exploiting (dis)order, a reflexive and self-aware philanthropic sector could find ways to do real social good without earning the critiques that have dogged it up until now.

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Trump's protectionism and future of global order: how useful are appeals to history?

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Abstract

Donald Trump's trade protectionism has provoked a remarkable range of appeals to history. Comparisons have been made to various episodes in US history, US leadership in multilateral economic diplomacy, and past trade policies of other countries. None fully captures the nature of Trumpian protectionism, even if there are echoes from the past in different aspects of its content. Its sui generis nature stems from its (incompatible) trifecta of revenue, developmental, and negotiation goals, as well as the ambition behind each (particularly the third one). Exposing the limitations of the many appeals to history matters not only because these invocations of the past often serve political purposes. The task also clarifies the ways in which Trumpian protectionism is distinctive, and prompts reflection on the need to prepare for an uncertain future. More generally, it provides a reminder of the deep history of protectionist ideas and their enduring attraction to policymakers.

Introduction

Donald Trump's protectionist policies have upended the global order. They have also been accompanied by many appeals to history. Some people invoke the past to warn about the dangers of these policies. Others - including Trump himself– use historical experience to mobilise support for these initiatives. History is also used to better understand the content and implications of Trump's actions. What are the most prominent appeals to history being made in these discussions? How useful are they for interpreting Trumpian protectionism and its significance for the future of the global order?

After providing a brief overview of Trump's ideas about trade, I address these questions. I show how his policies have prompted comparisons to a remarkably diverse set of episodes in US history, US leadership in earlier multilateral economic diplomacy, and the past trade policies of other countries. While some of the historical comparisons are more convincing than others, the analysis highlights how none captures the uniqueness of Trumpian protectionism. Exposing the limitations of these appeals to history is an important task in a context where they are often leveraged to serve various political purposes. It also helps to clarify the precise ways in which Trumpian protectionism is sui generis and prompts a reflection on the need to prepare for an uncertain future. More broadly, the analysis provides a reminder of the deep history of protectionist thought and highlights some of the reasons why protectionist policies are attractive to policymakers, even if they generate costs of the kind highlighted by economists.

Trump's case for protectionism

Before analyzing the diversity of the historical appeals, it is important to identify the core content of Trump's protectionist thought. Some question whether Trump has a fixed worldview in relation to trade policy. Rana Foroohar (2024), for example, suggests that 'he's not actually even a protectionist (that would require a political belief system)... He's an opportunist.' But others have highlighted how his support for tariffs – what he has described as 'the most beautiful word in the dictionary' (Leonard 2024) - has been remarkably fixed since he first took a high-profile public position on the subject in the late 1980s (Drezner 2025, Laderman & Simms 2017, Miller 2018, Schlesinger 2018, Wright 2016). As a self-described 'tariff man'

(Boucher & Thies 2019: 713), Trump has consistently outlined three separate rationales for trade protectionism throughout this time.

First, he has seen tariffs as a useful source of public revenue. As far back as 1990, Trump (1990: 223) highlighted how a 20% tariff 'would amount to billions of dollars' which could be used to pay down the federal deficit and boost public spending. In his first term as president, he also emphasised that his tariffs meant that 'billions of dollars, right now, are pouring into our Treasury' (Trump 2019). He predicted the same at the start of his second term, arguing in his 2025 inauguration speech that higher tariffs would result in 'massive amounts of money pouring into our Treasury, coming from foreign sources' (Trump 2025a). The reference to 'foreign sources' echoes a recurring claim by Trump, that foreigners, rather than Americans, would assume the burden of paying the tariffs (see also Trump 2016).

Trump's second rationale for tariffs is what might be called a 'developmental' one. He has long argued that tariffs would promote American industrial development by protecting US manufacturers against (unfair) foreign competition and encouraging footloose capital (foreign and domestic) to invest in the United States. He has depicted this goal as crucial for America's 'prosperity and strength', including by bolstering its 'economic independence' (Trump 2017, 2016:1; see also 2025a). Trump has also repeatedly emphasised the social benefits of well-paying manufacturing jobs, using populist rhetoric to critique free trade and globalisation for leaving 'millions of our workers with nothing but poverty and heartache' while benefiting the 'financial elite' (Trump 2016: 2).

Finally, Trump has emphasized that tariffs serve as powerful weapons to gain leverage in international negotiations because of foreigners' dependence on the US market. These kinds of 'negotiation-tariffs' - to use Gustav Schmoller's term from the turn of last century (Ashley 1904: 31) - have long been seen by Trump as a tool to 'pry open foreign markets' (Trump 2025b, see also Trump 2000). In his second presidential term, Trump has also used tariffs (and the threat of tariffs) for much wider purposes, such as supporting various geopolitical and other foreign policy objectives, securing commitments of foreign investment, and even pressuring Canada to be annexed as a 51st state (for the latter, see Drezner 2025).

The distinct 'revenue', 'developmental', and 'negotiation' roles behind tariffs are, of course, not entirely compatible with each other. For example, a successful developmental tariff will reduce imports of foreign manufactures, thereby diminishing both tariff revenue and the potential leverage that negotiation-tariffs could generate. Similarly, negotiation-tariffs are designed to be dropped once they change foreign government behavior, thereby undermining their developmental and revenue roles. Rather than acknowledge these inconsistencies, Trump has simply changed the emphasis he assigns to each of the three roles in different contexts and moments. Most prominent in his rhetoric over time, however, has been the 'negotiation' role of tariffs. As he told a Conservative Political Action Conference in 2019, in his view, tariffs are important in that 'beyond everything else, I can negotiate' because tariffs are 'the greatest negotiating tool in the history of our country' (Trump 2019). His enthusiasm for this role of tariffs was also evident in his early books (Trump 1990, 222-24; 2000:145-46) as well as in his famous 2018 tweet that read 'trade wars are good and easy to win' (Franck 2018). He has continued to place a strong emphasis on the role is of tariffs in his second term.

Back to Smoot-Hawley or Hamilton?

With this content of Trump's protectionism in mind, it is easier to evaluate the many appeals to history made in discussions of his trade policy. Amongst Trump's critics, one of the most common historical appeals has been to the US Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930. In the wake of Trump's 'Liberation Day' tariffs of April 2025, for example, many invoked the act as a warning, arguing that its dramatic boosting of US tariffs contributed to the Great Depression. As Democratic senator Mark Warner put it, 'God willing what Trump's doing is not going to lead to the same place' (Politi & Rogers 2025).

One limitation of this historical comparison is that the relationship between the 1930 act and the Great Depression is contested by historians. As Douglas Irwin (2017, 397) has put it, the Smoot Hawley tariff 'almost surely played a relatively small role in the economic crisis.' The historical analogy also misses important differences between the 1930 act and Trumpian protectionism. For example, the former raised tariffs in one single move in contrast to Trump's frequently changing protectionist policies since April 2025. The architects of the Smoot-Hawley Act were also motivated by the narrow political concerns of satisfying various domestic interest groups, particularly in agriculture (Irwin 2011), without so much focus on the kinds of revenue, (industrially-focused) developmental, and negotiation goals that have preoccupied Trump.

While his critics invoke this specific episode of US protectionism, Trump himself has appealed to other episodes in US history to justify his policies. During his 2016 presidential campaign, for example, his first major speech about trade cited Alexander Hamilton's 1791 Report on Manufactures, arguing that protectionist thought was true to the ideas of 'our Founding Fathers' (Trump 2016: 7). His supporters at the time also suggested that 'the candidacy of Donald Trump has been presented as a deviation from America's historic "free trade" policy when, in fact, America was founded on Alexander Hamilton's protectionist economic system' (Hahn 2016).

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These efforts to draw parallels to Hamilton's ideas were designed to boost support for Trump's policies, but the historical comparison has important limitations. To be sure, Hamilton noted the revenue role of tariffs and expressed an interest in the developmental role they could play in cultivating local industry for economic and security reasons. But his 1791 report actually suggested that temporary government subsidies were a better tool for promoting American industry because they would have more 'positive', 'direct' and 'immediate' effects, while tariffs could generate higher-priced imports, scarcities and smuggling, and the bolstering of local monopolies (Hamilton [1791]1965: 168). If developmental tariffs were used, Hamilton also insisted that they be very moderate and only temporary in nature. Further, Hamilton's report had none of the socially-oriented populist rhetoric of Trump.

Hamilton also did not share Trump's enthusiasm for the negotiation role of tariffs. To be sure, his 1791 report did endorse restrictions on imports from countries that restricted US exports, but Stephen Meardon (2013: 452) notes that 'he did not suggest that the measures were a means of inducing foreign countries to relinquish their restraints.' Instead, he saw the measures as serving his developmental goals. Meardon (2013: 450) also notes how, in subsequent debates, Hamilton opposed calls for US trade restrictions to be imposed against Britain in retaliation for actions against its commerce on the grounds that (in Meardon's word) 'retaliation would beget further retaliation, which would interrupt the flow of British capital needed for America's economic expansion and the tariff revenue needed for its good credit.'

Republican protectionism again?

Alongside his invocation of Hamilton, Trump (2016: 7) also cited the protectionism of the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln in an effort to widen the appeal of these policies in Republican circles. This comparison was a little more convincing. The most influential protectionist thinker in Republican circles during Lincoln's era was Henry Carey whose ideas built on Hamilton's but who – like Trump - backed developmental tariffs much more emphatically and without Hamilton's reservations. In addition to citing their economic and security benefits, Carey also anticipated Trump's populism in highlighting the social advantages of tariffs, critiquing free trade for driving down wages and benefiting a group of elite 'traders' (including financiers) at the expense of American labour and farmers (Helleiner 2021: ch.5).

Despite these similarities, the historical parallels between the views of Carey and Trump should not be overstated. Carey's rationale for trade protection, for example, did not place much emphasis on revenue or negotiation goals. Indeed, regarding the latter, his key work Principles of Social Science (1858-59) explicitly rejected the idea that the US should be trying to flex its power internationally to coerce foreign countries, arguing that it should be an anti-imperialist nation that respected their sovereignty. Carey's critique of free trade also included concerns for environmental degradation and the oppression of women, issues that receive little attention in Trump's defence of tariffs (Helleiner 2021: ch.5).

Trump's appeal to the historical Republican tradition of protectionism has also increasingly invoked the ideas of William McKinley. While serving in Congress between 1877-1891 and during his term as US president between 1897-1901, McKinley was the most prominent defender of Republican protectionism (Gould 1980; Morgan 1963). Trump did not mention McKinley in his 2016 speech on trade policy, but he subsequently invoked him 'often and favorably' during his first term (Lighthizer 2023: 46). He continued this practice during his 2024 electoral campaign and after coming into office for the second time. His 2025 inauguration speech, for example, emphasized how 'President McKinley made our country very rich through tariffs' (Trump 2025a). Journalists also report that Trump's Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent even 'made a point' of reading a biography of McKinley 'to prepare for his role of managing Trump's trade war' (Mattingly & Herb 2025).

Just as his critics overstate the link between the Smooth-Hawley Act and the Great Depression, Trump exaggerates the extent to which tariffs contributed to the prosperity of McKinley's era (e.g. Irwin 2017: 276-87). But he is right to call attention to some parallels between his own protectionist thought and that of McKinley. For example, McKinley also referred to himself as a 'tariff man' (Palen 2016: 261) and emphasized the developmental benefits of tariffs. In addition, he called attention to their revenue role and argued – like Trump - that the costs of tariffs were often borne by foreign producers 'in the form of diminished profits.'[1] McKinley suggested, too, that 'tariff taxation' was preferable to income taxation, just as Trump has speculated about whether the tariff revenue from his trade policy could become large enough 'to cut all of the income tax' (Goldman 2025). Indeed, when making this case, Trump has sometimes referenced the McKinley era (Marshall 2018).

An even more direct parallel was McKinley's interest in tariffs as a negotiation tool. This interest was first reflected in the content of an 1890 tariff bill that came to be called the McKinley Tariff Act because of his role in its drafting. The bill not only raised the average tariff rate on

1 He argued that this was the case when tariffs were placed on foreign goods that competed with American products, while acknowledging that tariffs on 'noncompeting' foreign goods would be paid entirely by American consumers (McKinley 1893: 295).

dutiable imports to almost 50% but also empowered the US president to use the threat of tariffs on specific commodity imports (such as sugar, molasses, coffee, and tea) as a weapon to negotiate bilateral 'reciprocity' treaties that lowered foreign duties on US exports (Torp [2005] 2014: 228-30). Like Trump's Liberation Day tariffs, the passage of this bill 'sent economic and political shockwaves across the globe' and prompted several countries – mostly in Latin America – to quickly sign reciprocity agreements with the US (Palen 2010: 396). After he became president in 1897, McKinley secured passage of another bill that raised tariffs again and empowered him to alter tariff policy across a wider range of goods when negotiating bilateral reciprocity treaties. Once again, his policies generated 'outraged calls from foreign consults and diplomats' as well as the negotiation of new treaties (Morgan 1963: 279).

Trump's 'reciprocal tariffs' of April 2025 echo McKinley's aggressive pursuit of 'reciprocity', a policy that one historian has described as 'a policy of blackmail' (Torp [2005] 2014: 230). At the same time, it is important to recognise that Trump's negotiation-tariffs have been much more wide-ranging in their purpose than McKinley's. The latter were focused primarily on opening foreign markets in exchange for lowering duties on imports that did not compete with domestically-produced one (although some US policymakers hoped the 1890 tariff act might also pressure Canada into annexation; Palen 2010). They could also be applied only to specific products and 'de facto targeted the states of Latin America and, secondarily, the Pacific region' (Torp [2005] 2014: 230). McKinley's ability to use negotiation-tariffs was further circumscribed by the fact that any resulting reciprocity treaties required Congressional approval which proved very challenging for him to secure.

There is an even more important difference between Trumpian protectionism and that of McKinley. While Trump has ramped up his protectionist policies in his second term, McKinley moved in the opposite direction after his re-election in 1900, emphasizing the benefits of expanding international commerce as a force for peace and prosperity and the need for a more cooperative approach to trade negotiations. As he put it in his final public speech before his assassination in September 1901, 'the period of exclusiveness is past…commercial wars are unprofitable. A policy of good-will and friendly trade relations will prevent reprisals. Reciprocity treaties are in harmony with the spirit of the times; measures of retaliation are not.' At this time, he also called for international disagreements to be resolved in 'the court of arbitration, which is the noblest forum for the settlement of international disputes' and urged his audience to 'remember that our interest is in concord, not conflict, and our real eminence rests in the victories of peace, not those of war' (McKinley 1901).

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Towards a new Bretton Woods or Mar-a-Lago Accord?

Some of Trump's advisers have suggested that the end-goal of Trump's negotiation-tariffs may include a more cooperative set of international economic rules. When making this case, they too have appealed to history, invoking past examples of US leadership in multilateral economic diplomacy as possible models. For example, before joining the Trump administration, Bessent (2024) suggested that 'in the next few years, we are going to have to have some kind of a grand global economic reordering. Something on the equivalent of a new Bretton Woods. … I'd like to be part of it.' In November 2024, the soon-to-be head of Trump's Council of Economic Advisors, Stephen Miran (2024: 29), also argued that Trump's negotiation-tariffs could result in a new multilateral arrangement 'as big as Bretton Woods' or at least a multilateral arrangement

among Western allies similar to the 1985 Plaza and 1987 Louvre Accords. He suggested that the latter could be called the 'Mar-a-Lago Accord'.

These appeals to history are interesting, but the visions of Bessent and Miran are very different from the content of either the Bretton Woods agreements or the Plaza-to-Louvre Accords. Both Bessent and Miran have called for new multilateral arrangements in which countries wanting access to US markets and the US security umbrella would be forced to accept much greater burdens than under these previous arrangements. A few days after Trump's April 2025 tariffs, Miran (2025) provided some examples of these burdens, such as proposing that other countries should 'accept tariffs on their exports to the United States without retaliation', 'boost defense spending and procurement from the US,' 'invest in and install factories in America,' or even 'simply write checks to Treasury that help us finance global public goods.' Many of these goals have subsequently been pursued by Trump and his officials in the bilateral agreements they have tried to secure with foreign governments. If a multilateral economic order was constructed with this kind of content, it would have a much different character than the arrangements emerging from the 1944 Bretton Woods conference or the Plaza-to-Louvre negotiations.

The aggressive American unilateral use of negotiation-tariffs to secure foreign agreement also has little parallel to the negotiations that generated those earlier multilateral arrangements. In the case of Bretton Woods, US policy of that kind would have been entirely contrary to the US goal in the early 1940s of building a new kind of liberal multilateral economic order which ended the trade wars and unilateral protectionism of the 1930s (Gardner 1956). The goal of constraining unilateral protectionism was also at the core of the Plaza-to-Louvre negotiations, launched by the Reagan administration. These were motivated by the hope that a realignment of exchange rates would fend off domestic protectionist pressures that were growing in the context of an overvalued US dollar at the time (Funabashi 1988).

A stronger historical precedent for Bessent's and Miran's ideas of leveraging negotiation-tariffs to forge a new multilateral order might be the 'Nixon shock' of August 1971. At that time, US President Nixon unilaterally ended the convertibility of the US dollar into gold and imposed a 10 per cent surcharge on all dutiable US imports. As Irwin notes, the latter was 'the first general [US] tariff increase since the Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930,' but Nixon also made clear that it was intended only as a 'temporary' measure that would be removed after foreign governments ended their 'unfair exchange rates' and accepted a revaluation of their currencies (Irwin 2012: 1; 2017: 545). After it had the intended effect (with US allies agreeing in December to realign their exchange rates under the multilateral Smithsonian agreement), the US tariff was lifted.

Although some analysts have drawn a parallel between the Nixon trade shock and Trump's tariff policies (e.g. Haber 2025, van Steenis 2025), this appeal to history has some limitations. Nixon's import surcharge was explicitly designed to serve negotiation goals rather than revenue and developmental ones. His negotiation goals were also described much more precisely than Trump's and their content was much more narrowly focused on exchange rates. More generally, it remains unclear whether Trump is even committed to constructing stable new multilateral economic arrangements. To date, he has only used negotiation-tariffs to forge bilateral agreements, and even those have had quite vague content, leaving countries vulnerable to further negotiations. In the past, Trump (1990: 5-6) himself has emphasised how any status quo leaves him 'impatient and irritable' and looking 'for more and more deals to do.' As he puts it, 'for me, you see, the important thing is the getting … not the having.' Instead of new multilateral arrangements, is it possible that Trump's end-game in the trade realm is a world of constant dealmaking shaped by unequal power relations in a kind of hub-and-spoke arrangement with the US at its center?

Beyond the US historical experience?

This scenario is hinted at in two final appeals to history, both of which invoke historical experiences outside the United States. The first calls attention to Albert Hirschman's (1945: 53) classic analysis of how states could 'turn foreign trade into an instrument of power, of pressure, and even of conquest.' Writing in 1945, Hirschman (1945: 12) described 'the outstanding and most recent example' of this phenomenon to be 'the German trade offensive in southeast Europe' during the 1930s. He analyzed how German officials exploited the coercive potential of trade relations 'to the fullest' via bilateral agreements they forged with less powerful countries which were asymmetrically dependent on trade with Germany (Hirschman 1945: 53). By 1938, the majority of Germany's foreign trade was governed by over two dozen agreements of this kind, resulting in a German-dominated hub-and-spoke pattern of economic relations with the region (Helleiner 2023: 225).

Philip Verleger (2024: 36-37) argues that Hirschman's analysis of trade 'as an instrument of national power' and of German policy, provides insights for interpreting Trump's 'mercantilist approach' to trade and his focus on 'dominance.' He suggests that Trump's April 2025 tariffs 'followed the Hirschman script precisely', quoting Hirschman's point that a dominant state benefits from conditions that make 'the interruption of trade of much graver concern to its trading partners than itself' (Verleger 2025). Gillian Tett (2025) has made a similar point on the heels of Trump's tariffs announcement: 'if Hirschman had been alive to watch Trump unveil his tariff strategy in the White House Rose Garden this week, he would not have been surprised.' Earlier, she noted 'we should all take Verleger's advice and re-read Hirschman's pithy warnings. Particularly if you live in a less powerful nation — like Canada, Mexico or the UK' (Tett 2024).

These appeals to history usefully call attention to the power dimensions of Trump's negotiation-tariffs, particularly vis-à-vis weaker countries. At the same time, however, there are some major differences between Trump's use of trade as an instrument of national power and Hirschman's analysis of German policies in the 1930s. For example, Trump is playing this game on a much more global scale than German policymakers did. Equally important, he is exploiting the existing dependence of many countries on the US market, whereas German policymakers were focused on cultivating dependence among southeastern European countries in the 1930s. Because of the latter goal, Hirschman (1945: 38) describes how some German trade policies were initially quite generous towards certain southeastern European countries, including the payment of higher-than-world-market prices for their products and promises of 'conditions of stability in both price and value of their exports.' Starting from a position of greater power in world trade, Trump's trade policies have not followed this pattern.

Some have suggested that Trumpian protectionism can be compared instead to China's historical tributary model of trade relations. Here, for example, is the case by Richard McGregor (2025):

> 'The so-called tributary system described the framework that the imperial court used for centuries to deal with smaller, and, by definition, inferior states. Visitors would arrive bearing tribute and acknowledge the superiority of the emperor's realm, and in return have their own states recognised and gain access to trade and security. How else does one describe the procession of national leaders arriving at the White House in recent months to consecrate deals with Trump?'

Joseph Chinyong Liow (2025) has made a similar case, arguing that 'it is now clear, with his sweeping "Liberation Day" tariffs, that Trump wants to reshape global trade and economics

around an American tribute system centered on him.' Japan's opposition leader Yoshihiko Noda has also criticised his country's top trade official for looking as if 'he was engaged in tributary diplomacy' when negotiating with Trump in the wake of the April 2025 tariffs (Asahi Shinbum 2025). Europeans, too, have lamented how their leaders are being 'expected to kowtow to the emperor in Washington' in ways that evoke 'the Ming dynasty's tributary system' (Gehrke 2025).

These comparisons to Chinese tributary model capture Trump's focus on granting bilateral trade privileges to other states in exchange for political favours, tribute, and expressions of respect for him and the United States. Indeed, Trump's Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick has emphasised Trump's goal of wanting foreign countries 'to respect him' (quoted in Hayes 2025) and Trump himself has long stressed the need for America as a whole to be 'respected again and admired again' (Trump 2025a; see also Trump 1990: 221; Miller 2018; Laderman &Simms 2017: 24-27). The comparison also speaks to Tett's point that Trump 'wants rituals that affirm his power in a very performative way' (Klein & Tett 2025) as well as Arthur Kroeber's (2025) argument that 'what Trump wants above all is to display dominance and extract submission.' As in China's past, the dealmaking around Trump's trade privileges has also extended to domestic actors who plea for exemptions to the tariffs, allowing Trump to extract economic benefits or 'to compel loyalty' (Murphy 2025). A final resonance is the fact that the tributary system was conceptualised as having potentially global reach, while in practice it assumed a spatially layered form, with some states in a tight vassal relationship with China and others having a much looser one or none at all. Miran (2024: 36) similarly anticipates 'graduated scales' of US tariffs across countries depending on the degree of their compliance with US goals and incorporation into its 'security zone' (see also Burns 2025).

As with the other appeals to history, however, the invocation of the Chinese tributary system has limitations. Once again, it is more closely aligned with Trump's negotiation-tariffs than with his interest in using trade protection to raise revenue (except indirectly through tributary payments) or to serve developmental goals (which had little equivalent in tributary thought). Even if the focus is solely on Trump's negotiation goals, the comparison also fails to capture some of Trump's objectives, particularly the enormous emphasis he has placed on using tariffs (and the threat of tariffs) to pry open foreign markets across the globe to US products and companies. The trade privileges of the Chinese tributary system were not used to serve this kind of outward-oriented economic goal in that ambitious way.

The uses of history

Summing up, it is rather striking to see the breadth of historical experiences being invoked to interpret the nature and significance of Trumpian protectionism. Are his trade policies setting the stage for another Great Depression, or are they instead returning the country to the ideals of its Founding Fathers? Are they restoring a dormant tradition of Republican protectionism associated with the age of Lincoln or of the McKinley era? Will Trump's policies lead to a new Bretton Woods or a narrower multilateral arrangement among US allies? Or are they instead ushering in a new era in which trade serves power politics as it did for Germany during the 1930s, or in which a new Chinese-style tributary order is established with the US at its center? The sheer range of these historical appeals should give anyone pause about the usefulness of any one of them. I have also suggested some specific reasons why none of the comparisons fully capture Trump's version of protectionism. While some come closer than others, Trumpian protectionism is best seen as sui generis, even if there are echoes from the past in different aspects of its content.

These appeals to history had little place in Trump's early advocacy of protectionist policies, but they became much more prominent once he formally entered the political arena in 2016 and later resonating with his broader core promise to 'Make America Great Again.

Highlighting the limitations of these various appeals to history performs an important role in a context where they are often serving political purposes of mobilising both support and opposition to Trumpian protectionism. The use of history by Trump himself is particularly significant. These appeals to history had little place in Trump's early advocacy of protectionist policies, but they became much more prominent once he formally entered the political arena in 2016 and later, resonating with his broader core promise to 'Make America Great Again.' That promise invoked the past directly, although in a vague manner that left the historical reference point open to interpretation. As I have shown, Trump has given substance to the slogan in the case of trade policy by referencing the ideas of Hamilton, Republicans in the Lincoln period, and McKinley. These references have helped to legitimate his policies by associating them with the early history of the nation, a task that has been particularly important in a country whose post-Second World War international leadership was centered around the ideal of building a world of freer trade (and an accompanying critique of the 1930 Smoot-Hawley tariffs). Left unspoken in this political move, however, has been the fact that each of these three strands of American protectionist thought were quite distinct from each other as well as from Trump's version.

What precisely makes Trump's protectionism distinctive from these early American traditions of thought as well as the other historical episodes being invoked today? I have suggested that Trump's emphasis on a (incompatible) trifecta of revenue, developmental and negotiation goals is one key feature. Also unusual is the ambitious nature of each of these goals, particularly the negotiation one which has the greatest significance for the future of global order. Indeed, Trump's extensive use of (frequently changing) tariffs in his second term to negotiate across a very wide range of issues and on a global scale is unprecedented for a state in the modern age, let alone a dominant economic power. It is very difficult at this moment to predict the results of these negotiations as well as their complex interaction with Trump's revenue and developmental goals.

What is certain, however, is that Trump's policies are ushering in a more protectionist age in which free trade policies have a less prominent place than they had in the more 'neoliberal' era of the last few decades. Some economists are puzzled by this turn of events, given the economic benefits of free trade that their models can readily demonstrate. But historical analysis provides a reminder that protectionist thought has a deep history, one that was often marginalized during the neoliberal era, particularly in economists' circles. It shows that policymakers have been drawn to protectionist policies in the past not simply to satisfy domestic interest groups in an economically 'irrational' way, as economists often suggest. They have also seen these policies as a gateway to achieving a number of other key goals, including revenue ones (which have been sometimes linked to their views of alternative revenue sources such as income taxes), longer-term developmental objectives (which have been associated with not just economic benefits but also important security and social ones), and the broader aim of strengthening negotiating power vis-à-vis foreign countries by gaining leverage over them (in order to pursue many different kinds of economic and non-economic objectives). All of these goals remain relevant today. As we enter a more protectionist age, the study of the past reminds those who analyze trade policy to take them more seriously. The world looks much less puzzling – although not necessarily less frustrating - with this wider analytical lens.

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Grassroots diplomacy in the face of global disorder: historical perspectives

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Abstract

This discussion paper approaches the subject of global (dis)order historically. The focus is on three periods – 1929–33, 1959–61, and 1995–2000 – in which concerns about the inadequacies and risks of the existing order inspired new campaigns and creative forms of action. The paper traces varieties of diplomacy 'from below' – that is, instances in which particular groups or individuals staked a claim in international matters and sought to transform the existing system. Covering different forms of transnational activism, the paper argues that the campaigns and commitments of activists allow us to gauge past perceptions of disorder, as well as the possibilities for change, during times of uncertainty.

Introduction

Unease, anxiety, and hostility are not the only ways that people react to international crises and global uncertainties. At critical moments during the 20th century, perceptions of global disorder generated an acute sense that both state power and the existing international institutions were failing to ensure a more peaceful and equitable future. Some groups and individuals responded to the apparent inadequacies of international structures and arrangements by launching new forms of transnational collaboration, often in ways that articulated alternative visions of the world.[1]

This discussion paper draws on our expertise as historians of activism (Laqua 2023; Scott-Brown 2025a). We show how global disorder has coexisted with attempts at order creation 'from below', steered by activists who operated across national borders and reached beyond established frameworks. Rather than approaching global order as the product of state-based diplomacy and associated international institutions, we highlight ventures that partly operated outside, or on the margins of, such formal channels. The ventures in question constituted forms of 'grassroots diplomacy' – a term used for initiatives that 'expanded the opportunity for groups who lacked access to conventional diplomatic channels to become involved in international affairs' (Sobocinska 2023: 915).

Our paper highlights campaigns that saw activists intervene in the international sphere, and it interprets such efforts as vital modes of political creativity. Our examples are drawn from different points in the 20th century. In each of the periods that we consider, perceptions of disorder generated conflicting responses: on the one hand, attempts to expand collaborative and representative spaces; on the other hand, demands to erect or reinforce borders and hierarchies. Our paper focuses on the former, as it examines campaigns by feminist, pacifist, anti-colonial, humanitarian, and human rights activists. We do not claim that theirs were always the predominant, or the most successful, forms of civil society action. However, because of their intention to include, rather than exclude, these ventures illustrate how positive visions of the future could emerge during times of uncertainty.

At a time when rhetoric evoking 'the people' often challenges the very principle of international collaboration (Koch 2024), it is important to acknowledge endeavours that envisioned global

1 Our perspective reflects the agenda of the research project 'Global Governance, Trust and Democratic Engagement in Past and Present', which is run within the framework of the Trans-Atlantic Platform for the Humanities and Social Sciences (2024–7; https://research.northumbria.ac.uk/glo, UKRI grant reference ES/Z000408/1). We gratefully acknowledge the valuable comments and suggestions we received from two fellow project members, Henry Miller and Anne-Isabelle Richard, and from the participants in the British Academy's Global (Dis)Order programme.

governance as the outcome of popular, democratic, and bottom-up processes. We argue that grassroots activism of the latter kind is a highly relevant object of study when examining global disorder, in particular in three respects:

- **Barometer:** bottom-up progressive campaigns focus on understanding how change is affecting people outside of power, especially those considered marginalised within dominant political systems. As Charles Tilly (2008: 1–30) observed, that understanding is then dramatised through 'contentious repertoires' (including protests, strikes, and marches). This process gives shape and voice to how people are experiencing change and its impact on their lives.
- **Processes of adaptation:** progressive campaigns think intently about the adaptation processes that underpin change and, crucially, public acceptance of those processes. Research on contentious politics has suggested that even examples of extreme social change, such as revolutions, evolve through a series of smaller struggles where specific thresholds of power are contested (Tarrow, MacAdam & Tilly 2001). With each threshold breach, the scope and scale of struggle extends. Sidney Tarrow (1998; 2021) has shown how this process of incremental contestation reconstructs relations between movements, institutions, and parties.
- **Possibility of change:** progressive movements tend to embrace change. More flexible and responsive than official institutions, actors within those movements have the capacity to experiment with alternative orders or methods of ordering when conventional ones fail. Aspects of these experiments can help shape or eliminate potential future forms of political agency and practice (della Porta 2020).

Our paper focuses on three 20th-century moments. In doing so, it consciously avoids 1919, 1945, and 1989 – years that are associated with particular 'post-war' orders (Conway, Lagrou & Rousso 2018). Instead, we shift attention to points in time when the vulnerabilities of existing or emerging international frameworks were being exposed, generating a need for rethinking global order:

- the early 1930s, which were characterised by a multi-crisis, encompassing the Great Depression, fading hopes for disarmament and collective security, and the growth of authoritarianism and fascism;
- the late 1950s, a period of rising Cold War fears of nuclear warfare; and
- the mid- to late 1990s, during which the post–Cold War international community faced criticisms for its inability to respond effectively to war and genocide and for its inadequate response to global poverty.

Further 'moments' could be added to this list, but this selection undoubtedly provides ample material for discussion. The existence of the ventures in question is notable because of the simultaneous existence of powerful anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian currents in each of these three periods. With its rejection of 'globalism' in multiple contexts, the inter-war period provides particularly well-known examples in this regard (Zahra 2023). Shifting attention to the late 1950s, it is worth noting that some civil society efforts sought to reinforce, rather than transcend, Cold War polarities (Dongen, Roulin & Scott-Smith 2014; Durham & Power 2010). And whereas during our final 'moment' in the 1990s, prominent campaigns targeted global inequalities and injustices, a 'big switch' (Horner et al. 2018) has seen right-wing critiques of globalisation from the Global North become increasingly prominent. Moreover, the post–Cold War efforts to expand human rights provisions internationally (Hoffmann 2016) have contrasted with a growth in 'anti-rights' mobilisations (Payne, Zulver & Escoffier 2023).

Even movements and campaigns that asserted their concern for inclusivity and equality had their boundaries and blind spots.

These observations illustrate the ambivalent nature of 'reordering' attempts 'from below'. Even movements and campaigns that asserted their concern for inclusivity and equality had their boundaries and blind spots. Many protagonists in this paper can be seen as 'agents of internationalism' (Reinisch 2016) – but internationalism itself was multifarious and highly malleable (Laqua 2021; Sluga & Clavin 2017). Rather than viewing the international ambitions of, say, pacifists and humanitarians as entirely separate from exclusionary agendas, historians have stressed 'the interrelation between and the mutual dependence of liberal and illiberal internationalism' (Hetherington & Sluga 2010: 1). And while the campaigns under consideration were engaging with a world order that has often been labelled 'liberal' – in ways that aknowledged the fundamental value of institutions such as the League of Nations and the UN – they operated across liberal and illiberal spaces, both domestically and internationally. Thus, the campaigns studied here emerged within a field shaped by multiple actors and agendas, with often competing but occasionally overlapping concerns and characteristics.

The position that informs this paper is an optimistic one. We consider case studies that reflected the conviction that, while collapse was not inevitable, urgent change was necessary. In tracing bottom-up attempts at 'ordering', we highlight efforts in which groups of citizens – people not holding political, civic, or legal office – asserted their voice and claimed an active role. In relating different cases to one another, we argue that they must not be reduced to single-issue campaigns: driven by a desire to actualise an alternative order, they reimagined the nature of political participation and launched transnational efforts to attain their goals.

Case 1 (1929–33): feminism, pacifism and empire

The order that emerged after the First World War was fragile and highly contested from the start. Yet, as Peter Jackson, William Mulligan, and Glenda Sluga (2033: 33) have observed, peacemaking in 1919 amounted to an 'experiment' that 'left the way open to very different types of international order'. Bearing this open-endedness in mind, we must not treat the inter-war years as a uniform bloc. Developments in the second half of the 1920s meant that, to many observers, the prospect of a more stable and durable order did not seem far-fetched. Such hopes were nourished by the Locarno Pact of 1925 and found expression in ambitious international schemes, especially the Kellogg-Briand Pact's attempt to 'outlaw' war in 1928 (Gorman 2012: 259–84; Hathaway & Shapiro 2017). By the early 1930s, however, the existing order seemed to unravel in multiple ways: economically with the Great Depression (1929 onwards), militarily with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931), and diplomatically with the advent of a Nazi government that attacked the existing frameworks for international cooperation (1933). According to Zara Steiner (2005: 635), we can interpret the period from 1929 to 1933 as 'hinge years', owing to their location at the intersection between 'the decade of reconstruction and the decade of disintegration'. Such 'hinges' are suitable starting points for examining responses to global disorder.

Strikingly, the hinge years witnessed one of the most extensive pro-peace mobilisations in modern history: by February 1932, women campaigners had collected around 9 million signatures for a disarmament petition, which they presented to a plenary session of the World Disarmament Conference. The conference itself – while ultimately ending in disappointment – involved multipronged efforts by diplomats, politicians, and experts (Webster 2005; 2017). Crucially, however, disarmament activists played a key role, too, mounting an international

campaign that 'generated impressive programmatic and normative unity among peace groups as well as extensive mass participation' (Lynch 1999: 99; see also Davies 2007). One particular actor warrants specific attention for its centrality in the disarmament petition: the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

As a feminist-pacifist organisation, WILPF was strategically placed to act as a connecting node between the networks of the women's and peace movements. It drew on long-standing experience in grassroots diplomacy (Laqua 2023: 107–10), having originated in a wartime congress that brought women activists from warring and neutral nations to The Hague in 1915. After forming the Women's Committee for a Permanent Peace – WILPF's forerunner – these activists pioneered a form of 'citizen diplomacy' by travelling to wartime capitals, where they argued for peace negotiations (Patterson 2008). To them, the pursuit of peace was entwined with democracy: in calling for the 'democratic control of foreign policy', the Hague congress specified that 'it can only recognise as democratic a system which includes the equal representation of men and women' (Addams, Balch & Hamilton 1915: 154–5). The writings and pronouncements of key WILPF figures during the inter-war years have led historians to appraise the organisation's pioneering contribution to both international theorising (Ashworth 2021; Stöckmann 2018; Sluga 2021) and feminist thought (Vellacott 1993). These intellectual contributions were complemented by practical efforts to galvanise public opinion, for instance the Peacemakers' Pilgrimage of 1926 and the Women's Peace Crusade of 1929 – two initiatives by British WILPF members (Hellawell 2017: 158–69).

WILPF's disarmament campaigning highlights its ability to operate on several scales. On the one hand, the act of gathering signatures and parading them through the streets of Geneva indicated a conviction that effective action required action outside of congress halls and committee rooms. On the other hand, WILPF also operated within the Geneva system, for instance by participating in a committee through which women's organisations worked with the League of Nations. Indeed, these formal collaborative mechanisms helped forge links with other women's groups, which, in turn, facilitated the launching of the petitioning campaign (Garner 2016).

At the very moment that WILPF was targeting armaments as a disruptive factor in international politics, it was facing another source of global disorder: the contested nature of imperial rule. Inter-war women's organisations such as WILPF claimed to be 'international' but were dominated by European and North American activists, only slowly detaching themselves from imperial frameworks and assumptions (Rupp 1997: 51–81). As a result, some women's activists organised themselves separately, in bodies such as the All-Asian's Women's Conference (AAWC). The AAWC first met at Lahore in 1931 – and hence at a time when European and North American feminists were busy gathering signatures for their disarmament petition. Ventures such as AAWC have sometimes been labelled 'regional', but their existence simultaneously reveals the covert regionalism of ostensibly 'international' organisations in the Global North (Sandell 2015: 171–208). AAWC promoted another understanding of internationalism, with a rejection of colonialism as its heart (Mukherjee 2016; Nijhawan 2017; Robinson 2022). Nonetheless, one of AAWC's 1931 resolutions also addressed the question of peace – a stance that Asian feminists could adopt 'without working through local, national, or international governing structures' (Robinson 2022: 1006).

The challenge of imperial politics shifts attention to WILPF's evolving critique of colonialism. Having first denounced imperial rule in 1926, WILPF's disarmament efforts during the hinge years coincided with its involvement in international efforts against the opium traffic. To activists such as French WILPF member Camille Drevet, 'international opium trafficking

highlighted the inherent injustice underlying the imperial system, a system she came to reject as fundamentally incompatible with the goals of peace and freedom' (Siegel 2011: 37). Others, by contrast, framed anti-opium efforts as a humanitarian and 'technical' problem that fell within the remit of the League of Nations' work on 'social' questions. Indeed, the League – an institution that did not question imperial rule as such – maintained an Advisory Committee on the Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs. WILPF was represented on this body. Seen from this angle, WILPF's manifold interactions with the League highlight 'the variety of modalities of imperial internationalism' (Jerónimo 2020: 879). From another perspective, they also indicate that mobilisation, grassroots diplomacy, and 'technical cooperation' were all part of the activist repertoire that was being developed and expanded during the hinge years of 1929–33.

Case 2 (1959–61): Cold War anti-nuclear activism

In the late 1950s, fears of nuclear warfare reflected wider unease with the Cold War order. The twin challenges of East–West polarisation and decolonisation had a destabilising effect on the international system which, in its UN incarnation, had been 'nourished by the contention and convergence of competing universalisms' (Amrith & Sluga 2008: 252–3). Yet the Cold War also generated new impulses for internationalist thought and practice, including innovations among and within non-governmental organisations (NGOs), regional bodies, and UN agencies (Kott 2024).

The activists practised forms of 'diplomacy from below' that contrasted with concurrent forms of 'official' civic engagement which often reinforced Cold War divisions.

This section offers another angle by focusing on two specific examples of civic responses to the spectre of nuclear warfare: on the one hand, activist responses to nuclear testing in the Sahara (1959–60); on the other hand, an anti-nuclear march from San Francisco to Moscow (1960–1). While both ventures operated in dialogue with national governments, transnational NGOs, and global institutions, they were also independent. The activists practised forms of 'diplomacy from below' that contrasted with concurrent forms of 'official' civic engagement which often reinforced Cold War divisions.

The first example to be discussed here was triggered by French plans to test nuclear weapons in the Sahara (Allman 2008; Skinner 2015; Scott-Brown 2025b). In November 1959, an international group of peace activists – coordinated by the British Direct Action Committee (DAC) but based in Accra, Ghana – submitted a statement to the United Nations General Assembly, urging a condemnation of the tests and warning that any failure to do so would gravely antagonise race relations around the world and risk popular uprisings (Randle 1959). While the activists embraced the symbolic value of appealing to the UN, they were sceptical about the organisation's capacity to realise its humanitarian commitments, given the ongoing influence of colonial powers within the organisation. Indeed, faced with French objections that the tests were a national matter, and with British interventions that portrayed African concerns about public health impacts as unfounded, the UN General Assembly issued only a weak objection, expressing 'grave concerns' about French intentions and 'requesting' that France refrain. On 13 February 1960, the French government proceeded with the first scheduled test.

In response, the activists worked with Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah to devise a counter-assembly of their own. On 7–9 April 1960, they hosted the 'Positive Action Conference', attended by leaders of newly or imminently independent African nations, as well as sympathetic leaders from Asia. Nkrumah was persuaded that effective resistance to

nuclear imperialism depended on a stronger African position in the UN, with strategic alliances as a key means to achieve this. Events such as the conference were an opportunity to display the unity of these alliances and indicate their potential power. In contrast to the UN's caution, participants unanimously resolved to act against French tests, the French war in Algeria, and South African apartheid. They also declared their broader support for African liberation struggles and developed plans to cultivate an Indigenous activist network (Hennaoui & Nurzhan 2023; Lacovsky 2023).

The second example featured here also addressed the threat of nuclear warfare. In October 1960, A. J. Muste, chair of the US-based Committee for Non-Violent Action, declared that the 'circle of distrust' that had formed within the UN must be broken. With fellow activists Bayard Rustin and Bradford Lyttle, Muste devised an ambitious peace walk from the US to the Soviet Union to heal breaches and call for world peace. On 1 December 1960, 31 anti-nuclear protestors left San Francisco on the first leg of a global 'Walk for Peace'. They planned to demand immediate unilateral disarmament from all national governments and ask local people in every community they encountered to pressurise their governments into compliance for the sake of humanity. In their journey across the United States, however, they soon discovered how state by state, even town by town, understandings of 'humanity' radically differed, making simple appeals to humanitarianism impossible (Scott-Brown 2026; Wittner & Wernicke 1999).

This was only magnified when, in June 1961, 13 of the American marchers arrived in Europe. They were joined by a team of European activists, organised by the British and West German peace movements (Donnelly 2016), with cautious support from the World Peace Council (WPC). Having been formed in 1949, the WPC was a communist-dominated organisation with affiliates in both East and West. While these ties caused issues for the WPC's perceived legitimacy in Western contexts, they enabled marchers to cross Cold War boundaries. Their journey across Cold War Europe reinforced what they had learned in America: being human was an intensely local matter. In West Germany they were accused of communist propaganda, while in East Germany they were charged with being fascist apologists. For Polish farmers living near the abandoned Chelmno extermination camp, the Americans were not the enemy, West Germany was, and nothing could persuade them that Germany wanted peace while former Nazis remained in official positions. In Moscow, students demanded to know how peace could coexist with American capitalism while factory workers shouted names of the kin lost in two world wars.

The march successfully reached Moscow, yet it did not achieve its goal of inspiring a mass movement of people calling for disarmament on behalf of humanity. Instead, marchers came to view the significance of their campaign differently. If the march's symbolic value had been undermined, the physical act of entering different communities, meeting local people on their own terms, and treating them as responsible agents of social change had transformative potential.

What do the examples of the Sahara protest and the Walk for Peace reveal? The Cold War anti-nuclear protestors initially thought about their campaigns with and through the established order, especially as it was embodied by the UN. Both groups used the apparent dislocation between the UN's ideals and its practice as the starting point for their campaigns. Protestors believed that the dissonance arose from marginalising 'ordinary' people as serious political actors. They sought to redress this imbalance by stimulating popular direct action. To achieve this, both groups recognised the value of working with emerging political actors or intermediaries. In the case of the Moscow marchers, this meant cooperation with bodies such as the WPC. In the Sahara, it involved collaboration with the organisations created by new and emerging African states.

Ultimately, the process of attempting to stimulate direct action forced protestors towards more ambitious forms of political creativity, especially when conventional methods failed to yield desired results. The march transformed itself from a straightforward protest into a travelling 'people's forum' to serve the participants' wish to better understand popular sentiments about the bomb, while the Sahara group was motivated to imagine new ways of training a global community of organisers that would ensure they no longer had to rely on formal governance institutions for support.

Case 3 (1995–2000): advancing humanitarian agendas

In his State of the Union address of 1991, US president George HW Bush outlined the 'big idea' of 'a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind – peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law'. Less than a fortnight before Bush's speech, the United States had launched Operation Desert Storm – the military campaign that sought to enforce the UN Security Council's demand that Iraq end its occupation of Kuwait. At one level, Bush's remarks can therefore be read as a justification for an ongoing military intervention. At another level, they seemed to continue a long-standing tradition of US exceptionalism couched in universalist terms. However, from yet another angle, these comments exemplified a wider sense that, after the end of the Cold War, a new order could be imagined and forged.

As with the other post-war orders we have discussed, the 1990s were far from orderly – a point illustrated by the inability to halt the humanitarian disasters of the Bosnian war (1992–5) and the Rwandan genocide (1994). These crises caused intense reflection and debate, also among activists. Already at the time, international relations scholars noted that well-established – and ostensibly 'neutral' – humanitarian actors more frequently chose 'to make public statements on certain unacceptable situations' (Roberts 1999: 38).

The CICC's central aim was the creation of a new institution – an international court that would sentence perpetrators of crimes against humanity, in cases where state institutions were unable or unwilling to take action.

Beyond such changes in attitude, the crises of the 1990s sparked specific attempts to transform the international system. The Coalition for an International Criminal Court (CICC) was one important protagonist. Having launched in February 1995, it grew rapidly, attaining over 800 member organisations by the summer of 1998. The CICC's central aim was the creation of a new institution – an international court that would sentence perpetrators of crimes against humanity, in cases where state institutions were unable or unwilling to take action. At a more abstract level, the CICC's activism raised the question of 'what role could citizens' organizations play in the new world order emerging after the end of the [Second] World War', with its protagonists sharing a belief that 'transformation *could* come about in the global *legal* order, just as had occurred in the world *political* order with the end of the Cold War' (Welch & Watkins 2011: 963–4; italics in the original).

The CICC backed ongoing UN efforts for an International Criminal Court. In June–July 1998, government representatives debated the statute for such a body at a diplomatic conference in Rome, yet any actual agreement was not a foregone conclusion. After all, those who construe the international system as a 'society of states' – including successive US administrations – have opposed a court that challenges the principle of national sovereignty (Ralph 2007). Faced with such objections, the adoption of the Rome Statute in 1998 and the opening of the International Criminal Court four years later were remarkable.

The CICC played a major role in reaching this outcome. With 236 CICC member organisations deploying representatives to Rome, 'the Coalition delegation was … far bigger than any state delegations' (Glasius 2005: 27). The CICC's internal culture helped it gain and maintain acceptance among its members. While larger NGOs – notably Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch – were centrally involved, coordination rested with the World Federalist Movement, which 'was perceived as small, neutral and non-threatening by smaller NGOs, in particular those from "southern" or "developing" countries' (Welch & Watkins 2011: 975). Moreover, the CICC's pluralistic nature enabled women's organisations to form a 'coalition within the coalition' (Glasius 2005: 32), which helped place gender dimensions on the agenda in Rome.

In its external relations, the CICC struck up an effective working relationship with the so-called 'like-minded group' – states that were committed to the project of an International Criminal Court. Both before and during the Rome Conference, the CICC became an important source of expertise, exemplifying how 'information politics' is a major feature of 'transnational advocacy networks' (Keck & Sikkink 1999: 16). A degree of adaptability became evident when the CICC subsequently expanded its mission, 'from the creation of a court to broadly ensuring a fair, effective, and independent' one (Haddad 2013: 199).

While this case showed how humanitarian crises could trigger efforts to transform the international legal order, another strand of activism in the 1990s explicitly linked humanitarian activism to global economic governance. Kevin O'Sullivan (2021: 78–96) has shown that, from the 1970s, humanitarian efforts became entwined with more fundamental critiques of the global economic order. While O'Sullivan's study ends in the 1980s, anti-poverty campaigns gathered fresh momentum in the subsequent decade, linked to the speed, nature, and effects of economic globalisation. A focus on anti-poverty issues in the 1990s directly takes us to Jubilee 2000, the final case under consideration.

Launched in 1997, Jubilee 2000 was an international campaign that sought to pressurise political leaders and international financial institutions to cancel the debt of the world's most impoverished countries. As with the CICC, Jubilee 2000 was a broad coalition – and one that largely attained its proclaimed goal: in 1999, the G8 summit in Cologne agreed on an extensive debt relief package, followed by commitments from individual creditor nations. It is not the task of this paper to probe the limitations or effectiveness of these relief measures. Moreover, existing work has already highlighted the factors that allowed the moral case for debt relief to find a receptive audience among some political leaders (Busby 2007). What is relevant for us, however, is that Jubilee 2000 constituted another case in which groups claimed a stake in global matters.

In some respects, the campaign resembled earlier cases discussed in this paper. Similar to disarmament campaigners in the inter-war years, activists used the medium of a petition – which, with 24 million subscribers, still claims to be the most widely signed document of its kind (Guiness World Records 2025). Jubilee 2000 also used symbolic actions – in this case, not a transcontinental march but a large-scale human chain: the campaign first attracted widespread news coverage when over 50,000 people encircled the city centre of Birmingham during the G8 summit in 1998.

One aspect of Jubilee 2000 was its apparent breadth. It brought together established poverty campaigners but also, by invoking the millennium as a 'jubilee' year, attracted substantial religious support. In that respect, it shared features with the CICC, which included substantial numbers of religious organisations (Glasius 2005: 34–5). At the same time, Jubilee 2000 members had divergent outlooks on the international economy: while many supporters

deemed reforms within the existing system feasible, the campaign also 'included those who argued that capitalist globalization was inherently inimical to the interests of the poor' (Mayo 2005: 145). This diversity of positions generated tensions, with coalition members from the Global South embracing a fundamental critique of the global order (Baillot 2021: 227–36).

Given the range of potential perspectives on global order, it is striking that, in the late 1990s, broad and ultimately effective coalitions rallied behind two global causes – the creation of an International Criminal Court and debt cancellation. These examples suggest that we can see 1995 to 2000 as another set of 'hinge years'. This was a time when key features of the international system generated a sense of discomfort, without yet generating the widespread, politically variegated rejection of globalisation that became more prominent in the new millennium. These campaigns also occurred at a time before the 'war on terror' (autumn 2001 onwards) inaugurated new political cleavages and anxieties, further complicating the quest for consensus on global causes.

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Novel forms of diplomacy: conclusions for addressing global (dis)order today

While the case studies in this paper were inevitably shaped by distinct historical contexts, they also help us consider the current moment of global (dis)order. Our conclusions map onto the three levels of insight that we noted in the introduction:

- **Barometer:** we have focused on periods of flux and disruption within the political order and global economy. Such times generated complex dialogues between existing institutions and non-state actors that went beyond simple support or contestation. The movements considered here were as explorative as they were oppositional. They used activism as a form of social inquiry, finding shape and giving early expression to the nature of changes of the ground as well as identifying the limits of existing orders for responding to and representing those changes.
- **Processes of adaptability:** another thread linking these studies was the capacity to recognise significant new political, social, and economic actors quickly, and engage with them early. This was not always positive recognition; it often meant anticipating potential threats to an established or idealised order. However, at other points, it involved crafting novel kinds of alliances or collaborating with unusual partners.
- **Possibilities of change:** while many of the campaigns featured here prefigured alternative methods of organisation or techniques of democratic practice (often because of the new transnational alliances they were forming), these methods and techniques were not in themselves their strongest contribution to addressing global disorder. More significant was their way of recognising and responding to the experience of change itself. Each produced or even improvised new political platforms or languages that permitted groups who considered themselves marginalised from the international political mainstream a voice in a globalised social debate. Although this was inevitably campaign-specific, and therefore temporary by nature, it stimulated a more fluid thinking about the possibilities of political space than institutionalised orders were able to generate.

The specific movements that provided the basis for our observations have now all subsided – but this feature makes them more, rather than less, valuable when seeking insights into periods or experiences of global disorder. Notwithstanding their differences, the campaigns and initiatives in question all implied that the very permanence of existing institutional arrangements made it difficult for them to adapt to emerging social formations and their demands. Seen from this angle, the virtue of the activists' 'grassroots diplomacy', or attempt at 'ordering from below', was its transience, which allowed it to be responsive.

That said, none of the issues that these movements stood for – feminism, pacifism, disarmament, crimes against humanity and global poverty – have gone away. In recent years, movements such as Occupy, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion and pro-Palestinian campaigns have all staked claims in the global arena. For most of the participants in these movements, their activism does not entail a fundamental critique of internationalism as such. Instead, their critique tends to be based on the argument that international institutions are failing to uphold their self-proclaimed values and principles.

What resources can be drawn from the above conclusion for use in today's context of global disorder? While social movement literature recommends selecting techniques – such as referenda from below, crowd-sourced constitutionalism, mini-publics, and citizen commissions – developed by movements and implementing them into governance practice (della Porta 2020; Altman 2019; Baiocchi & Ganuza 2017), we do not share this view. Our case studies indicate that what allowed activists to be responsive and innovative in their approach to reordering was the fact they were not limited to specific techniques or positions. In many cases, this independence from governance institutions also underpinned their capacity for original critique.

In this respect, activists' interventions in international affairs might appear as a distinct form of 'unofficial diplomacy'. Fiona McConnell, Terri Moreau, and Jason Dittmer (2021: 805) have used this term for 'the tactical use of diplomatic discourse by non-state groups to subvert the international system and contest its exclusions'. However, they have focused on protagonists that 'mimic' established diplomacy and 'leave the international system itself intact'. By contrast, the actors covered in this paper varied in their approaches: while some of them strategically engaged with existing discourses and institutions, others sought a radical departure from past practice. Our cases have demonstrated the potential uses of social movements as sources for reordering during periods of crisis, but they also show the difficulty of practically conveying these insights 'from below' to governance and policy spheres in ways that create impact while retaining the full authenticity of the message.

This variegation highlights a core problem and potential action point. Our activists used unorthodox methods of organisation and expression to engage with communities who felt distant or excluded from international governance institutions. While the activists' methods allowed them to claim privileged access to the experience of those communities, it was difficult to then transmit these insights 'from below' back to the institutions which they were, at least tacitly, criticising for ignoring it. Building on this observation, we believe that a key outcome must be action towards new frameworks for diplomatic pluralism – in ways that recognises a range of expressive forms as legitimate diplomatic media. Here, we draw on Costas Constantinou and McConnell's concept of the 'right to diplomacy' (2022: 53), which they describe as 'a right that is claimed but also contested'. This, we think, offers a constructive perspective, as diverse civic groups and alliances have sought access to international fora such as the UN, without wanting to relinquish their independence or moderate their critique. Such an approach facilitates a greater depth and quality of thinking about democratising international reordering – and one that goes deeper than just refining and expanding mechanisms of mass democracy alone.

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‘Decline and fall’: the ancient foundations of modern disorder

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Abstract

Claims that the study of the past can provide insight into present circumstances and future developments have a long history. In many cases, however, the past is invoked not as a source of understanding but as a rhetorical trope, especially within political discourse. The Roman Empire is well established as the dominant analogy for the contemporary West. This manifests above all in claims that Rome provides a case study in decline and decadence. The familiar narrative of 'decline and fall' is assumed to show the future path of modern society – unless revolutionary action is taken against unaccountable elites, culturally alien invaders, and morally depraved members of the community, to restore an imagined golden age. The efforts of governments and public bodies to combat disinformation and promote media literacy need to recognise and engage with this historical dimension.

Introduction

Classical antiquity has long offered models of stable constitutions and unifying political ideas (cf. Carter, Foxley & Sawyer 2025; Straumann 2016). Equally, however, it presents vivid images of power, corruption, and excess, along with compelling narratives of crisis and decay. Its history gives later readers a checklist of the supposed symptoms of disorder, including treacherous self-interested elites, the decline of masculinity and other traditional values, the loss of dynamism and self-belief, and the impact of foreigners and their culture. Ideas about the 'decline' of nations, empires, and cultures, grounded in the narrative of ancient history, pervade contemporary discussions of global politics (e.g. Chaunu & Suffert 1976; Chaunu 1981; Douthat 2020). The new National Security Strategy of the USA clearly invokes such rhetoric in its description of Europe: 'this economic decline is eclipsed by the real and more stark prospect of civilizational erasure… Should present trends continue, the continent will be unrecognizable in 20 years or less.' (White House 2025: 25).

The aim of this paper is not to establish a historical account of ancient 'decline and fall' as a basis for analysis of global disorder; at best, such narratives are distorted and mythologised versions of the actual past. Rather, it will outline the use of these tropes, explicit and implicit, in legitimising interpretations of contemporary developments. The use of such tropes is one of the means by which discontent and disorder are promoted and the present situation discredited, to create opportunities for other political actors and movements. These narratives work to integrate multiple sources of anxiety or discontent – changing social norms, economic insecurity, incomprehensible new fashions, the erosion of communities, alienating technology – into a single explanatory framework (Morley 2021; Schilk 2024). Conversely, they legitimise every individual grievance by seeing it as further evidence of 'decadence'. Understanding the nature of the authority of such accounts of the past, as well as their emotional appeal, is a vital prerequisite for responding to their effectiveness as tools of disruption and mobilisation.

The Roman example

While classical Greek thinkers like Thucydides and Aristotle first developed theories of the roots of social disorder and political breakdown (Gray 2015), ancient Rome has long been established as a key model (and/or historical rival) for modern states. It has been a source of ideas, visual and architectural exemplars, model institutions (such as 'republicanism'),

approaches to empire, and approaches to government (Jenkyns 1992). Most importantly, its history has been taken as a template for the development of later civilisations. Even as theorists of 'modernity' increasingly emphasised the superiority of modern economy, society, and technology compared with their Roman predecessors, they were haunted by the sense that modern development might simply repeat the same trajectory, from triumph to decadence (Theodore 2016).

Republic and principate

The term 'decadence' derives from medieval Latin; it acquired its current associations only in the 18th century, when it was first applied – more or less metaphorically – to nations and civilisations rather than just to dilapidated buildings (Weir 2018). Although Roman authors never used the term, their accounts of their own society established the basis discourse of decadence and decline that continues to shape discussions today. The first phase ran from the mid-1st century BCE to the early 2nd century CE, during which the republican system – one of whose cardinal principles was that no person should hold too much power – first was dominated by a small number of excessively powerful individuals and their factions, and then collapsed altogether into civil war, eventually to be replaced by one-man rule. Many authors interpreted this crisis in terms of a fall away from the virtues of the ancestors that had been the basis for Roman greatness (Shumate 2006). Some focused on political changes: the replacement of the traditional virtues of moderation, self-restraint, and devotion to the state with selfish ambition and luxuriousness, and/or the failure of the constitution to constrain excessively ambitious individuals (Straumann 2016). Rome's success in defeating Carthage and establishing domination over the Mediterranean was perceived as the source of its new softness and loss of masculinity (in the absence of any serious external threat), as well as promoting luxuriousness through the flood of wealth and exotic goods into the city (Malik 2019). A range of evidence suggested to some the existence of a population crisis, due to falling marriage and childbirth rates, excessive female freedom and abortion, and the influx of enslaved people and foreigners. The outbreak of civil war and the eventual triumph of Julius Caesar then appeared – from some perspectives – as the only solution for a Rome that had become too degenerate to govern itself, foreshadowing modern ideas of 'Caesarism' and the 'state of emergency' that legitimises the suspension of democracy (Dijn 2025; Kelly 2016; cf. Engels 2013, drawing explicit analogies with modern Europe).

Augustus, the first 'emperor' (ruling from 27 BCE), claimed to be restoring the Republic and making Rome great again, but there is little sign that anyone took this at face value. As the historian Tacitus observed, the rule of the princeps – the 'first man' – retained the formal institutions of the old system but subjected them to the de facto dominance of a single autocrat. 'Politics' became a matter of court intrigue, influence, and gossip, while the public sphere was dominated by the ruler's activities and self-presentation. Tacitus's account offered posterity a cynical view of life under autocracy and the moral corruption of the old elite. Accounts of emperors and their deeds, such as the 'Lives of the Caesars' of Suetonius (covering the first 12 emperors) and the later 'Historia Augusta', supplied lurid anecdotes of excessive behaviour – violence, sexual deviancy, irrational and capricious decision-making, grotesque luxuriousness – that were later taken to represent the whole of Roman 'decadence' (Malik 2024). The 'Satires' of Juvenal (source of the phrase 'bread and circuses' and the idea that Rome had been taken over by foreigners) and the 'Satyricon' of Petronius were taken as both depictions of cultural decline and symptoms of it, when compared with the more 'classical' styles of the previous century. The fact that the empire's boundaries now mostly stopped expanding was, likewise, both explained by the degeneration of the Roman spirit and proposed as an explanation for its malaise.

Late antiquity

The idea of the 'fall of the Roman Empire' became widely recognised after the publication of Edward Gibbon's monumental 'The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' at the end of the 18th century (Gibbon 1994; Winkler 2009). Previously, historians mainly viewed Roman rule as a continuous tradition, with the empire's legacy flowing from ancient to Christian Rome. Since then, as the great 20th-century historian Arnaldo Momigliano argued (1973), the fall of the Roman Empire has often been used as a symbol for societal collapse, particularly in European and American contexts.

Gibbon argued that Christianity played a major role in the Roman Empire's political collapse (Liebert 2022). He believed that the new faith disrupted the cohesion of Roman culture; young Romans no longer wanted to become soldiers but turned instead to the religious life. He also blamed the church for undermining classical culture by censoring works and discouraging education. This negative view of the church's influence chimed with Enlightenment arguments and has experienced a modern revival in parallel to growing suspicion of religious extremism (Nixey 2017). Late antiquity was indeed marked by the destruction of ancient monuments, temples, libraries, and statues, though arguably less comprehensively than this catastrophising narrative claims. It provides a template for defending traditional institutions and beliefs against any perceived attack – in particular, against the supposed threat of new, fanatical religions coming out of the east, but also the failure of native elites to defend their own culture.

Migration narratives have long been a simple and appealing way to explain shifts in history.

Another key theme in the narrative of 'decline and fall' was the role of migration. Migration narratives have long been a simple and appealing way to explain shifts in history. From the Romans' own supposed origins at Troy to the spread of Indo-European languages, migration has been used as an explanatory tool for large-scale historical transitions (Steinacher 2017). Empire did increase mobility – and hostility towards it. Already at the end of the 1st century CE, the satirist Juvenal depicted a Rome in which 'true' Romans were increasingly marginalised, overwhelmed by a flood of foreign migrants – enslaved and formerly enslaved people above all – and their barbaric customs and beliefs. This was vastly magnified from the 3rd century onwards, with the perception that the empire's boundaries were being overwhelmed. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus evoked 'uncountable Barbarian hordes' attacking the Empire in the late 4th century, depicting the Huns as undead or barely human. The idea that Rome was destroyed by a combination of external attacks and internal barbarisation has repeatedly fed into modern claims about the harmful effects of 'race mixture' and cultural erosion on the health and prospects of a society (cf. Sarrazin 2014; Murray 2017).

Some historians have argued that the period between 300 and 600 was indeed a time of civilisational conflict, a 'clash of cultures', and that the Huns and 'Germanic' tribes destroyed the advanced Roman Empire and threw Europe into a 'dark age' (e.g. Heather 2009). But this is a great simplification of a long period of complex transition (e.g. Kulikowski 2019; Steinacher 2017), which depends on imposing concepts created during the Enlightenment onto the past, and then implying that this historical image offers important lessons about the dangers of uncontrolled migration today.

'Learning' from the past

It is scarcely surprising that such ideas and images persist in modern discussions of order and disorder, as the modern rediscovery of classical antiquity coincided with contemporary concerns. Early modern political thinkers were concerned with the relative importance of

virtue or constitutional design in maintaining the stability of the state, drawing directly on texts and historical examples from the Roman Republic (Straumann 2016). Enlightenment theorists worried whether growing prosperity represented the spread of debilitating 'luxury', or whether social change would lead to the same problems of excess 'civilisation' (a newly invented term) undermining the integrity of the state, as happened in Rome (Berry 1994; Sonenscher 2016). The sense that ancient narratives offered a guide to the symptoms and causes of 'decadence' fuelled much 19th-century counter-revolutionary thought (McMahon 2001). The fear – real, or deliberately stoked up – of social, cultural, and biological degeneration fuelled the rise of fascism and Nazism and found willing hearers in other countries (Schulman 2006). Propaganda generated by Russian and Chinese communism regularly included denunciations of Western decadence, a theme that persists in the writings of the Russian writer Aleksandr Dugin (Shekhotsov 2008).

In recent decades, such themes have been ever more prominent in (predominantly right-wing) challenges to Western democracy, culture, and liberal values (e.g. Buchanan 2001; Engels 2013). The image of barbarian hordes overwhelming civilisation is central to the tactics of the so-called identitarian movement, the 'great replacement theory', and other programmes mobilising hostility against migrants and foreigners, whose values and beliefs are presented as irreducibly alien and hostile to the 'true' natives of Western countries (Almeida 2014; Müller & Precht 2019). The claim that the root cause of present discontent (whether economic, political, or cultural) is betrayal by elites who have lost touch with the people echoes familiar narratives of Roman history. At the global scale, ideas of 'decline' – whether of 'the West', 'the post-war order', or 'capitalism' – are pervasive.

Using historical analogies

The idea that the past can be a source of insight for the present is well established in Western history-writing. This idea is offered as the basic rationale for one of the earliest works in this tradition, Thucydides' 5th-century BCE account of the war between Athens and Sparta – that the present and future will tend to resemble past events, which is why an accurate account of the past is useful (Thucydides 1.22.4; Roberts 2024). This is explicitly evoked in modern attempts at reviving the claim, for example the Applied History Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, which claims to ground policymaking in the specialist knowledge of historians (Allison & Ferguson 2016).

Rome continues to be discussed simply because it has always been a preferred case study for Europeans.

Any such project faces serious theoretical and methodological issues. The first is the choice of analogy or past example, given that human history offers a vast, if not infinite, choice of possibilities (Ghilani et al. 2017; Keulen 2023). Professional historians can always suggest possible comparisons between the period and/or topic of their research specialism and the present, however apparently obscure; the past, one might say, is always 'good to think with'. But 'applied history' practitioners, let alone commentators who invoke historical examples in passing without exploring these in any depth, tend to return to the same familiar examples time and again. Case studies from Asian or African history rarely feature in discussions of Western or even global developments; the examples are drawn from the mainstream of European national histories and the 'grand narrative' of 'Western civilisation' (Scheidel 2025). Rome continues to be discussed simply because it has always been a preferred case study for Europeans.

Second, there needs to be some basis for claiming that the past example might be relevant to the present, even if this is often left implicit. Until the mid-18th century, it could be assumed that Rome was the same kind of society and economy as contemporary Europe. Thereafter,

a growing consciousness that 'modernity' marked a significant break in continuity meant that more differences between past and present needed to be discounted in order to develop comparisons (Morley 2009). One possibility is to emphasise underlying human biological continuity, albeit with the risk of making historical evidence appear irrelevant, if contemporary psychology or social anthropology tell us all we need to know about 'the human' (e.g. Harari 2014). Another is to focus on ideas of historical and/or cultural continuity in specific instances, such as the idea of 'Western civilisation' as a unifying strand in historical development. Connections to Rome were imagined in different ways; early modern France claimed direct descent, while Britain tended rather to argue that Rome was a sufficiently complex and quasi-modern society, founded on the rule of law and with an imperial mission, so comparisons with the present could be useful. In German-speaking territories, precisely because a Holy Roman Empire remained a political reality until the early 19th century, there was a greater sense of continuity, and ideas of collapse, decline, and decadence were taken up noticeably later (Ehlers 2012).

Strongly linear and progressive ideas of world historical development, often associated with the European Enlightenment, largely rule out simple historical analogies, except as a way of revealing the dynamics of development; modernity is perceived as radically different (Koselleck 2004). However, these are not the only kinds of narrative available. In the 20th century, writers like Arnold J. Toynbee and Oswald Spengler developed explicitly cyclical theories of history, which claimed to identify a regular cycle of development at the level of cultures or civilisations (McIntire & Perry 2019; Lewis 2022; Weiß 2022 on Spengler's influence on the contemporary far-right). This perspective dovetailed neatly with the ideas of 18th-century figures like Gibbon and Montesquieu, observing the 'decadence' of Rome as a prophecy of the future of their own society. If all societies follow the same trajectory (often conceived in organic terms, as birth, maturity, and senescence), then we can draw on the Roman example to evaluate where our own civilisation sits in the cycle, and to identify the key symptoms and causes of this decay (Morley 2004). Rome is relevant precisely because we cannot expect our society either to remain unchanged or to improve indefinitely. This perspective can even be drawn into the progressive historical narrative of Marxism–Leninism: the ultimate goal of history may be communism, but getting there involves the rise and decay of earlier modes of production – the 'decadence' of capitalism is precisely the moment that must be seized in order to bring forth the new order. 'There are symptoms of decay reminiscent of the horrors recorded of the latter days of the Roman Empire', Karl Marx observed in a speech in 1856 (Marx 1980).

Invoking decline

The 'decline and fall of the Roman Empire' is a history-writers' construct, an interpretation developed over a millennium later. Presenting this as a historical fact from which lessons can be drawn and normative principles extracted is a purely rhetorical exercise. (Consider, for example, the meme of which Elon Musk is fond – 'Hard times create strong men; strong men create good times; good times create weak men; weak men create hard times' – often illustrated with pictures of a changing neoclassical landscape[1]; Hayward 2024). The collapse of the Roman Republic can be understood in multiple competing ways, some of which bear a stronger resemblance to contemporary concerns than others, but all of which can be contested (e.g. Smil 2014; Strunk 2023). Insofar as this analysis is carried out as an intellectual exploration of possible interpretations, balancing speculation with specialist knowledge, it has

1 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hard-times-create-strong-men

the potential nevertheless to be illuminating: for instance, thinking about Cicero's ideas about the functioning of a constitution and the proper role of the general populace within the 'body politic' does offer new ways of thinking about contemporary populism (Mebane 2024).

The majority of instances, however, are much cruder: they invoke familiar images of decadent Rome as historical facts, legitimising diagnosis of the present, without acknowledging any issues of evidence or interpretation. Rhetorical claims that the Roman Republic was undermined by the decay of traditional morality, marriage, and religious belief are presented as evidence that contemporary society's questioning of some traditional norms and practices (e.g. acceptance of same-sex relationships or sex outside marriage) is 'decadence' and must be stopped (e.g. Douthat 2020; Engels 2013). The idea that Rome's fall was brought about by the influx of 'alien hordes' and (still more frightful) intermarriage and cultural exchange between 'natives' and 'invaders' fuels the racist agenda of 'Great Replacement Theory' (Beer & Greiner 2023; Mohn 2024). Historians arguing that these narratives are, at best, overly simplistic carry little or no weight against the long tradition of belief in them –such quibbles merely reflect (so the argument goes) the out-of-touch elitism of scholars in their ivory towers.

The decadence discourse drawn from the evocation of ancient Rome weaponises individual discontent and nostalgia.

This is arguably the most powerful and dangerous aspect of the deployment of Roman tropes in contemporary politics. Change is frequently disconcerting, especially if it happens relatively quickly. Further, many of the changes that have been experienced over the last 50 years, especially in Western countries, have had negative results for many people – such that an imagined past of, for example, stable jobs, affordable housing, and homogeneous community can seem worth jettisoning other aspects of 'progress' for (Andress 2018). The decadence discourse drawn from the evocation of ancient Rome weaponises individual discontent and nostalgia. It ascribes responsibility for all unwelcome change to external forces and unaccountable elites (conveniently loosely defined) – either for encouraging the changes or for failing to prevent them through self-interest (e.g. Badenoch 2025). Further, it can be used to direct resentment against multiple out-groups and 'others' as both symptoms and causes of this decadence: migrants and ethnic minorities as alien, primitive and sexually depraved (Robson 2018), non-Christians as hostile to national identity and values (Vetch 2025), LGBTQIA+ people as deviants from traditional morality (Wippell 2025).

From the point of view of practical politics, the difficulty is that a national cultural problem such as 'decadence' is not susceptible to conventional political remedies. If decadence is accepted as a real threat to well-being, then it requires wholesale revolution and the destruction of existing institutions, whether to build the new society or to return to an earlier golden age – not least because the narrative itself has established that there will be opposition from those with a vested interest in maintaining their status quo. This is a powerful rhetorical weapon even for populist politicians who have no real wish to overthrow the system, since any opposition to their ambition can be portrayed as a symptom of elite corruption.

Policy implications and recommendations

It is important to recognise that the tendency to conflate multiple grievances into a single narrative of 'decadence', implying the need for radical action, is a well-embedded problem, exacerbated but not created by social media. It has featured in extremist rhetoric since the late 1960s and draws on ideas established in the 19th century. The combination of some genuine anxieties and a confected narrative of cultural crisis means that addressing a single element

(e.g. hostility towards migrants, opposition to trans rights) may be positive but will be insufficient to combat the overall mindset.

1. The efforts of governments and public bodies to combat disinformation and promote media literacy need to recognise and engage with this historical dimension – in the UK, for example, within the 'People and Partnerships' element of Ofcom's Positive Vision for Media Literacy 2024–7 (Ofcom 2024). Ideas about decadence and decline are not in themselves illegal, of course, nor even necessarily problematic, but they can be a path towards radicalisation.
2. The involvement of academic historians in policymaking and strategy development needs to prioritise specialists in how the past is represented and mobilised in public discourse and how this shapes individual social identities, rather than those who claim to identify useful analogies or simply debunk pseudo-historical claims.
3. Further research is needed to understand the emotional appeal of these narratives, as the basis for better understanding how to counter them; this should involve collaboration between historians, political scientists, and social psychologists. This research could support the development of study packs, for example, for use in schools or with young people at risk of radicalisation. The meme 'Hard times create strong men' could be used to open up discussion of historical change, social identity, belonging, and masculinity.
4. Strategies for history teaching and the public representation of the past (which sometimes face calls to promote greater national pride and reject critical perspectives) must recognise that triumphalist narratives can legitimise resistance to change and hostility toward 'outsiders'.
5. In public discourse, characterising the key elements of this narrative and mindset as 'decadent thinking' may help to discredit them. This may be supported by the production of a short, clear guide to the concept and its essential features.

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What can we (not) know about the future? Predicting future (dis)orders

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Abstract

Modern governments partly derive legitimacy from the ability to foresee, assess, and address threats – from 'natural' to social/political, as well as their intersection. At present, this ability is significantly challenged by climate change, as a process both surpassing and amplifying traditionally conceived risks, but also by the rootedness of anticipatory practices in the order whose future they are meant to predict. This paper identifies a key mechanism in these limitations, called epistemic attachment. It uses two historical cases of (non)prediction – Covid-19 pandemic and the dissolution of former Yugoslavia – to illustrate how this mechanism works in particular knowledge/governance arrangements, and derives policy implications for the organisation of predictive systems.

Introduction

Anticipation is central to the governance of contemporary, complex societies. Modern political regimes derive at least a part of their legitimacy from anticipatory capability – their ability to (accurately) predict, assess, and mitigate (if not neutralise) threats, from those seen as 'natural' (such as hurricanes, volcanoes, and floods) to those designated political or social (wars, terrorism, and economic crises) (Andersson 2018; Bacevic & McGoey 2024).

At present, this ability is significantly challenged by several interconnected factors; one such factor that has been extensively studied is climate change. Climate change not only crosses the (arbitrary) boundary between natural and social/political risks but also raises the question of the threshold of survivability: what happens at the point at which the conditions on Earth start looking very different from those in recorded history (Dunn 2021). A related but less explored factor concerns the fact that contemporary systems, methods, and processes of prediction are themselves based on the historical configuration of power we usually refer to as the 'global order' (e.g. Anderssion 2018; Bacevic 2020a). This poses questions about the ability of these processes, methods, and systems to conceptualise a future that goes beyond the constitutive elements of the existing order.

This paper argues that it precisely because we are rooted in the categories of this global order that we are limited in what we can and cannot know about the future. The paper sketches out the philosophical nature of this problem and derives its implications for contemporary predictive systems, including the scientific advisory committees, institutes, and think-tanks at the intersection of policy and research. It illustrates this with two case studies: a recent one, concerning the limited prediction of the trajectory and effects of Covid-19 in the UK; and a slightly older one, concerning the (non)prediction of the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. These cases allow us to observe a key mechanism at work in shaping how, and if, we make predictions.

While this paper has implications for all systems with a significant crossover between knowledge (knowing something) and intervention (doing something about it), the discussion focuses on the political and policy context of countries characterised by high predictive

capacity and liberal-democratic political governance (Bacevic & McGoey 2024).[1] While the mechanism theorised here will probably take different forms depending on the specific purposes of prediction – e.g. whether in the context of public health planning, military or intelligence forecasting, or community resilience – all of these contexts involve communities of knowers (politicians, advisors, civil servants, analysts, and so on) who derive at least a part of their legitimacy from their relationship to specific objects (or classes of objects) of knowledge, as well as to each other.

The relationship between people as knowers (knowledge subjects) and things they know about (knowledge objects) is something I call epistemic attachment. This concept describes the link between subjects of knowledge – scientists, analysts, journalists - and objects of knowledge – things like 'the state' or 'global order'. This is different from approaches that attribute predictive limitations to individual processing traits or habits of thought (e.g. cognitive biases), because knowing about these objects (being an expert on the state, or on regime change, or on a particular part of the world) is at the same time an enablement and a constraint. It allows us to be seen (and recognised, and credited) as knowers, but at the same time defines what we can be seen as knowing about. Rather than an outcome of individual psychological factors, epistemic attachment is an interaction between individual factors, social relations, and the social organisation of knowledge, including institutions, structures, and policies related to anticipation/forecasting. Better understanding this mechanism can highlight opportunities for intervention, including in the organisation of spaces and platforms for the production and exchange of knowledge about the future.

The following sections develop this argument, first, through an elaboration of the elements that shape epistemic attachment and, second, through two case studies illustrating how it operates, both at present and historically. The penultimate section offers some implications of the present analysis, while the final derives from this analysis policy implications and suggestions for the organisation of predictive systems and processes.

From dreams to prophecies, divination, and omens, human cultures have – for most of recorded history, anyway – engaged in some form of prediction. Yet, contemporary prediction encompasses a vast system at the intersection between politics and knowledge production.

The knower and the known

Predicting the future, of course, is not unique to modern, liberal, or capitalist societies. From dreams to prophecies, divination, and omens, human cultures have – for most of recorded history, anyway – engaged in some form of prediction. Yet, contemporary prediction encompasses a vast system at the intersection between politics and knowledge production. Institutions include universities, government agencies, institutes, think-tanks, community organisations, scientific advisory committees, as well as the media – both traditional (the press, radio, and television) and 'new' (including social media). The actors that engage in prediction include politicians, policy advisors, and civil servants, but also scientists, researchers, and modellers. These epistemic communities engage in prediction in different ways, using different methodologies and often focusing on different aspects (e.g. 'climate' vs. 'the economy' vs. 'population health'). This means our ideas about the future are not only projections about likely future states of certain objects but also – more fundamentally – judgements about what is there to be known about; in other words, what are the relevant objects of knowledge when it comes to predicting the future.

1 High predictive capacity is a characteristic of countries with developed public knowledge production systems (higher education/research) and intelligence systems (Bacevic 2020a). As I have discussed elsewhere (Bacevic 2022, 2021, 2020b,c, Bacevic&McGoey 2024), the combination of high predictive capacity and liberal-democratic governance leads to an understood relationship between legitimacy and (perceived) predictive accuracy – as reflected in the question Elizabeth II posed to economists at the London School of Economics in 2008, referring to the failure of prediction before the financial crisis: "Why did nobody notice it?"

Furthermore, these objects of knowledge influence not only the kind of predictions we can make but also who we are – in other words, our identities and practices – as knowers. This may seem strange at first. Even if we are accustomed to the idea that researchers shape their objects of research – that the nature of what we are studying will be shaped by how we are studying it (the observer effect) – we are much less accustomed to the idea that we are shaped by what we are studying. Yet, there is ample evidence for this, from biologists being shaped by the forms of life they study (e.g. Carson 1962; Safina 1999) to social scientists being influenced by the injustices suffered by those they study.

But our objects of knowledge shape us in a way yet more basic: their existence is necessary for our existence as knowers. After all, we can only be experts if there is an object to be expert about. For instance, we can only be humpback whale scientists if there is such a thing as humpback whales. This does not mean we cannot observe, document, and aim to counter the decline in humpback whale populations, but it does have implications for our capacity to imagine a world without humpback whales. We depend on the continued existence of these objects not only for our legitimacy as experts but also for our continued existence as knowers. Epistemic attachment is this mutually deterministic relation between knowers (knowledge subjects) and objects of knowledge.

This brings us closer to the main issue: how we relate to objects of knowledge – the things we think there are to know about – shapes our ability to predict. Our attachment to things that we think exist in the world and things we are taught to focus on influence us when we try to predict the future of that world or its relevant parts (Bacevic, 2022; 2020b). Importantly, these relations need not be evaluative; an epistemic attachment is not the same as thinking something is good or bad. What attachment means in this sense is that we assume our objects of knowledge are relatively durable, at least in part because this legitimises our practice of viewing them as objects of knowledge. Both the perception of epistemic objects as discrete objects, and the perception of their (relative) permanence, is necessary for prediction (cf. Amoore 2013). This has important implications for our ability to conceptualise transformations – and disappearances – of these objects.

Adding in consideration of social and political systems further complicates this problem. To begin with, social and political systems entail more than a few objects or classes of objects, as well as their interactions. Of course, scientists studying humpback whales do not study whales as isolated from their environment – including hunters, corporations polluting feeding grounds, recreational boat users, and governments regulating sea and fishing rights. Difficulties in studying these systems arise because these different parts of the whales' environment fall within the domains of different disciplines. Even ecology, which by definition aims to understand complex systems and their interactions, uses very limited models of human behaviour, usually derived from evolutionary psychology. Social and political sciences are no less prone to disciplinary partitioning. This applies not only to formally defined domains – for instance, international relations study relations between states, law and legal studies focus on legal regulation – but also to the classes of objects they engage with.

Confusingly, these objects can sometimes carry the same name: for instance, both anthropology and political science study 'states', but what they mean by 'state' is very different. Even more problematically, these objects are rarely the only ones relevant to understanding the dynamic of a particular system and thus predicting its trajectory. While what is usually dubbed 'complexity science' aims to integrate different disciplinary insights, a systematic and intentional orientation to different disciplines is still far from standard practice in most forms of scientific training.

What does this mean? To illustrate how this shapes the possibility to predict, I now turn to two cases of (non-)prediction. The first case is well known and concerns the (limited) prediction of the trajectory and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK. The second case has been somewhat forgotten but offers important lessons for thinking about the mutual determination between knowers and objects of knowledge: the (non)prediction of the violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. These cases (see e.g. Byrne and Ragin, 2009, for the use of case-studies) offer distinct but complementary illustrations of how specific forms of epistemic attachment can shape the possibility of projecting trajectories of complex systems composed of but not limited to those objects.

Covid-19: the pandemic everyone (could have) predicted

The relationship between scientific advice and the UK Government's approach to the Covid-19 pandemic has been extensively studied, including in my own work (Bacevic 2020a, b, c; Bacevic, 2021, 2022; Bacevic & McGoey 2024). While public inquiry will determine accountability for the UK's high rate of virus-related deaths and disabilities, what stood out in the first months of the pandemic was the degree to which government bodies seemed unable to comprehend or accept the seriousness of the situation. This was reflected in casual remarks that Covid was 'just like a common cold' and in the delayed introduction of non-pharmaceutical interventions aimed at mitigating the spread of the virus, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), testing and tracing techniques, and social distancing measures. What made this particularly problematic was that the Covid-19 pandemic was not unpredicted; on the contrary, 'a global pandemic' was on the UK's risk register and the specific subject of at least one cross-government preparedness exercise.

In this sense, the puzzle of the Covid-19 pandemic is not due to an absence of prediction that a pandemic could happen but rather to the absence of prediction concerning its particular trajectory in and effects on the UK population. There are several possible explanations for this. One, following Nassim Taleb's work on 'black swans' (2010), would suggest that political actors tend to discount the possibility of major disruptive events that challenge the regularity of prediction. Another would see delays as a consequence of the choice to not use EU resources as part of the then-governing party's ambition to be seen as 'delivering Brexit'. While both of these played a role, I suggest that the specific trajectory of pandemic (mis)management had more to do with how scientific knowledge production during the pandemic reflected the division between domains of expertise – and how this conceptualisation of the pandemic as composed of discrete (classes of) objects overlooked the pandemic as a totality.

During the pandemic, the UK Government took official scientific advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). SAGE summarises existing evidence into briefings on relevant topics for the team meetings of the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (popularly referred to as COBRA), where they are used to inform policy. SAGE is composed of a number of subgroups, some predating the Covid-19 pandemic and some formed during it: Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Modelling (SPI-M), Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B), Environmental Modelling Group (EMG), and so on.

The Government chiefly sought the advice of SPI-B in two domains: the risk of public disorder and the likelihood of adherence to specific measures, i.e. behavioural and social interventions. They also asked for guidance for people who were asked to self-isolate. In addition, throughout

this period, the Government was following public opinion and commissioning research into public approval for different kinds of interventions.

SPI-B advised the government that large-scale rioting was unlikely: 'Acts of altruism will likely predominate and the Government could promote and guide these' (SPI-B-07, 2020, 1). They were asked to consider interventions such as stopping large events ('mass gatherings'), school closures, isolation of people with symptoms, isolation of people with symptoms and also their households, general social distancing, and lengthy social distancing for people in at-risk groups. They cautioned that such interventions would increase the chances that there would be areas or groups who were visibly not complying or not seeming to comply.

The group was somewhat split around certain aspects of adherence to behavioural and social interventions. One chief source of disagreement came from the assumptions concerning the likely behaviour of the UK population. The only preceding large-scale dataset concerning behaviour in a pandemic, including adherence to measures such as mask-wearing, came from China and other Asian countries. There was a consensus within the SPI-B that enforcing such measures would be unlikely to work, as, presumably, the UK population was less docile and disciplined than the Asian population. This assumption seems to have been unquestioningly accepted across the group.

Public perception of the difference between the UK's strategy and those of other countries was identified as another possible source of discontent:

> Expectations of how the Government will react will be set by media reports of public health strategies in other countries. This increases the risk of public concern if interventions that are perceived to be effective are not applied. A clear explanation as to why expected interventions are not being implemented may be necessary (SPI-B-04, para 14).

It denied the possibility that the UK population might be rule-abiding or rule-following; and it saw the population as, overall, on the verge of descending into disorder.

The model of human behaviour that the UK government used to predict the trajectory of the Covid-19 pandemic, then, was a particular one. It denied the possibility that the UK population might be rule-abiding or rule-following; and it saw the population as, overall, on the verge of descending into disorder. What it did not take into account was that the very knowledge of the virus's nature might shape how the public would react. In other words, that awareness of the high rate of fatalities, the threat of medium- and long-term effects on the immune system (long Covid), and the disproportionate effects on certain populations might, in effect, change how the population acted.

The chief lesson is that the UK government was trying to do two things: (1) predict the behaviour of the virus, and (2) predict the behaviour of the population. In this context, it sought advice from people who were experts in either, but there was no space or platform where the two could be usefully hybridised. SAGE, which was meant to compile and summarise the input and recommendations of its respective subgroups, was composed of people whose ability to creatively engage with evidence was severely constrained by both the limited mandate they had as science advisors and the timeframe. In this context, predictions had to be made based on the 'best evidence available'. SPI-B were asked to provide advice and comment as experts on human behaviour. SPI-M were asked to provide mathematical models as experts on reproduction rates. The New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) were asked to provide knowledge about the nature of the virus. There was, however, no expertise or method to bring these together in a way that would have enabled thinking about how the nature of the virus would change the nature of the social – and vice versa.

Could there have been? Scientific knowledge depends on an infrastructure for producing and mediating evidence. In the UK, this infrastructure has been oriented towards inter-institutional competition through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which privileges disciplinary evaluation. The REF places high value on research impact, which is primarily defined as influencing policy. This means that scientists and research organisations that have a relatively direct link to governmental bodies are unlikely to jeopardise this connection. Being seen or credited as experts, in other words, gives them legitimacy; but it also limits what they can be seen as having authority on.

Furthermore, scientific knowledge is rarely accessible to the general public, most of whom have very limited interdisciplinary scientific literacy, given the UK's tendency towards early streaming in education. In this context, the only attempts at intervention that allow for the possibility of interdisciplinary expertise outside established venues for scientific advice communication can be expected to come from informal networks of scientists who depart from (or even go against) government-mandated ways of sharing knowledge with the public, as eventually happened with members of Independent SAGE in the UK and scientists with a large public (usually social media) profile, such as Carl Bergstrom in the US.

The example of Covid-19 shows that prediction depends on how we see the nature of the object – in this case, a pandemic. The fact that scientists were trained to see only one part of this object – the virus or the behaviour of the population – means they were unlikely to step outside of the area of expertise that gave them legitimacy. In other words, they were content to provide evidence on the topic and within the confines of the questions that political actors were asking.

The fact that scientists were trained to see only one part of this object – the virus or the behaviour of the population – means they were unlikely to step outside of the area of expertise that gave them legitimacy.

One possible interpretation of this is that the fragmentation of scientific expertise – a too-tight coupling between epistemic subjects and epistemic objects – can undercut the ability to predict. However, this is not the only way in which epistemic attachment works. To illustrate how epistemic attachment to an object of research can prevent seeing its fragmentation, we turn to the case of the former Yugoslavia, a country whose dissolution no one – or almost no one – foresaw.

Yugoslavia: a war (no)one foresaw

When the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated in the 1990s, the scale of violence shocked observers. Europe's deadliest armed conflict in the 20th century since the Second World War (estimated 130–140,000 dead), it involved genocide, torture, rape camps (resulting in the official recognition of rape as a weapon of war), and a massive displacement/refugee crisis. It led to the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which convicted 161 individuals of serious violations of international humanitarian law, including violations of the laws or customs of war, genocide, and crimes against humanity. It durably transformed both the political and economic face of the region – there are now seven states (though the statehood of Kosovo, formerly Serbia's southern province, is still disputed) of which two are EU members, residual occasional conflicts (most notably in the north of Kosovo), and significant differences in economic and political orientation.

Yugoslavia was an object of intense interest and scholarly attention in both the East and the West, not least because its hybrid form of socialism[2] and non-alignment made it an early example of the 'third way'. Of course, there were also less purely scholarly motivations – at least a part of US state-funded academic research in the Yugoslav federation was aimed at keeping tabs on a model of socialism that could more easily appeal to 'Westerners' than the Soviet one. Yet, for all the attention paid to Yugoslavia after the Second World War and the intensity of academic knowledge production concerning its future, no one predicted the nature of the political crisis that would lead to its collapse. With one exception: Bogdan Denitch, a Yugoslav American professor of sociology at the City University of New York (CUNY), whose The legitimation of a revolution: the Yugoslav case (1976) was eerily prescient in both describing the ethnic divisions and the likelihood of violent conflict.

What made Denitch more successful in 'predicting' this crisis than virtually anyone else writing on Yugoslavia at the time? Born in 1929 to Croat Serb parents, he spent his childhood following his diplomat father to a series of countries, including Greece and Egypt; in 1946, the family emigrated to the US (the fact that his father was a civil servant in the previous government would have made it impossible for them to continue living in Yugoslavia after the Communist regime, led by Josip Broz Tito, formally took over). There, Denitch trained as a factory worker while studying for a degree in sociology at CUNY. In 1968, Denitch was awarded a major research grant to study Yugoslav elites, which would eventually become The legitimation of a revolution. He retired in 1994 and his last book, Ethnic nationalism: the tragic death of Yugoslavia, came out in the same year. It is a reflection on the conflict that was still going on at the time, whose architecture he had foreseen with such clarity eighteen years earlier.

Did personal history, in this sense, have bearing on his capacity to predict? One explanation could be that Denitch's position as both a Yugoslav and an American allowed him to see the situation with less attachment. In fact, many scholars depended on the continuing existence of Yugoslavia as an object of knowledge.[3] For scientists from Yugoslavia, the 'exceptionality' of the Yugoslav model was a source of epistemic legitimacy, particularly in the context of international collaboration. Many of them were educated abroad and had access to networks and funds from both the West and the East. Their authority was, at least in part, constructed on their positioning as possessors of 'local' knowledge (Bockman & Eyal 2002): while this kind of epistemic relationship could be exploitative, in the sense of benefitting West European and American scientists, it also provided Yugoslav scientists with links to internationally-renowned theories and scholars, thus solidifying their status both at home and abroad. For scholars from the West, on the other hand, Yugoslavia served as a perfect experiment in mixing capitalism and socialism. Some saw it as a proof that socialism need not go hand-in-hand with Stalinist-style repression. Others saw it as proof that limited market exchange could function even in command economies, deducing (correctly) that the promise to support failing economies in exchange for access to their future consumer markets could be used as a lever to bring the Eastern bloc in line with the rest of the capitalist world.

For both epistemic communities, then, Yugoslavia represented more than a natural 'laboratory': it was an anchoring device for legitimating their own positions as scholars – particularly as scholars of Yugoslavia. In this sense, the identity of both groups depended on the existence of Yugoslavia as an object. If no one foresaw the war, it was because it played no role in either of these epistemic constructs. The anchoring function of Yugoslavia made scholars who

2 Yugoslavia's hybrid socialism was sometimes referred to as market or state socialism because it had relatively open borders and trade and maintained relations with both the Eastern bloc and the West.

3 The historian Polybius, who predicted (accurately and exceptionally) the fall of the Roman Empire, is another example of such an 'in/outsider' (thank you to Dr Cornwell for this example).

specialised in the area unlikely to imagine a world in which their epistemic object could simply cease to exist. They certainly imagined, thought, and debated different ways it could be transformed, but not really that it could be obliterated.

The case of former Yugoslavia presents a different form of epistemic attachment. Whereas in the case of UK Government's scientific advisory panels during the Covid-19 pandemic the failure of anticipation comes from the fragmentation of expertise – separate knowers, separate objects of knowledge – in the case of former Yugoslavia it comes from the anchoring of expertise to one unitary object, whose resilience was the prerequisite if not raison d'être of the work all of those knowers were involved in. Both cases, however, demonstrate the importance of the relationship between subjects and objects of knowledge.

This domaining of expertise (Bacevic, 2021b) is itself a product of the historical and political process of professionalisation and stratification of knowledge production specific to the modern liberal order (e.g. Jasanoff & Hyung-Kin 2015). In this sense, we need to consider the implications of this for the social organisation of knowledge, both in terms of concrete expert and advisory teams, and for the possibility of predicting future (dis)orders.

Conclusions and implications

In addition to the ontological characteristics of complex systems and the characteristics (individual or collective) of those studying them, relations between knowers (subjects of knowledge) and what they know about (objects of knowledge) play a crucial role in shaping the accuracy and very possibility to predict. This relation, which is in this paper described as epistemic attachment, is both an enablement and a constraint: it provides legitimacy by 'attaching' knowers to specific objects or domains of knowledge, but it also limits their capacity to see beyond these objects, both in terms of the totality of the picture and in terms of the future.

In the case of Covid-19, the key element of this relation was that epistemic communities were defined and legitimised by their focus on specific aspects –humans or microbes – rather than on those aspects' interactions. While in theory these perspectives should have been complementary, there was no procedure, method, or field to unify them, in part because the structure of government scientific advice did not support it. The experts, in turn, at least formally accepted the circumscription of their expertise – in part because their continued validation as experts rested on claiming knowledge over a particular domain of the world. Even those who eventually broke out of the government-mandated field of intervention (e.g. members of Independent SAGE) tended to preface or frame their interventions within specific domains of expertise. In the case of the former Yugoslavia, the key characteristic of different epistemic communities with an interest in its future was that, regardless of disciplinary, political, or institutional affiliations, they equally depended on the continued existence of Yugoslavia as an object of knowledge. After all, if it suddenly ceased to exist, what would they be studying? This kind of epistemic attachment made them capable of imagining different transformations of the Yugoslav federation, but not that it would literally cease to exist.

The cases of (non)prediction of Covid-19 and the dissolution of Yugoslavia teach us that prediction depends on the questions we ask, who answers them, and under what conditions. The first tends to be the domain of the philosophy of science; the second of the creation and negotiation of authority and expertise; the third, in turn, of the social and political organisation of knowledge. In this sense, the accuracy of prediction is not an outcome of individual or even

disciplinary 'biases'; it is an outcome of the relational nature of knowledge. This relational nature applies to both the relationship between knowers and objects of knowledge (attachment to objects of research), and to the way this attachment itself shapes, reflects, and reproduces the social organisation of knowledge (who can be seen or credited as knowing about what). In this sense, it is, of course, neither possible nor practicable to entirely eliminate epistemic attachment, as long as there is an association between knowers and the known. This, for that matter, is no less the case with computer-driven (AI) forecasting, which tends to reflect the biases of the human-made model cases it was trained on. Instead, this paper offers some suggestions for the organisation of social production of knowledge and expertise, especially when it comes to knowing about the future.

One set of suggestions concerns the questions that we ask. For instance, instead of asking "How will the population react to intervention X", "what is the reproduction rate of the virus under conditions Y", or "How will this constitutional reform shape object Z", we could focus on the elements of the present situation we are not seeing. While this may appear to resemble Donald Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns', but it primarily refers to the need to note which epistemic objects (objects of knowledge) we have been disciplinarily trained to 'unsee' or not pay attention to. For instance, we could ask: are our assumptions about popular reactions based on the belief in state authority? Are our questions about constitutional reform allowing for the possibility of a suspension of the constitution or a coup?

Further, we could question what elements of any totality (society, global trade, international order) we are holding constant in our predictions. What aspects do we take for granted or assume cannot change? This question addresses both our ontological bias – the assumed stability of objects – and the likelihood that we are basing our projections on (sometimes unexamined) assumptions about the nature of objects, most often manifesting as assumptions about human behaviour. For instance, we could question why is the UK population (on the whole) considered not rule-abiding, as much as we could ask why was the Yugoslav population (as a whole) considered unlikely to commit inter-ethnic violence?

This also connects to the degree of confidence in our projections. Experiments suggest forecasting confidence rests on successful prediction in the past (Himmelstein et al. 2021; Ptasczynski et al. 2022). While there are reasons for this, it is also a liability, both because it can lead to overconfidence and because, as the case of the former Yugoslavia suggests, it might make us disinclined to make projections that contradict our previous assumptions. Therefore, we could ask what degree of confidence in projections (ours or others') rests on inference from past cases? For instance, why was Yugoslavia seen as similar to Romania but different from Abkhazia? Why was Covid-19 seen as similar to SARS but the UK population 'different' from Vietnam or Korea?

As the two cases analysed here suggest, the relations between expertise, legitimacy, and objects of knowledge can limit the ability to predict if authority of knowers remains circumscribed to specific domains of knowledge.

The second set of suggestions concerns the social organisation of prediction, including the mediation, communication, and circulation of knowledge within scientific networks, expert teams, or scientific advisory panels, and the 'users' – equally state actors and the public. As the two cases analysed here suggest, the relations between expertise, legitimacy, and objects of knowledge can limit the ability to predict if authority of knowers remains circumscribed to specific domains of knowledge. One way to address this is to encourage the construction of teams of people with different disciplinary backgrounds, who are encouraged to contribute without sole reference to those disciplinary backgrounds. While some forms of scientific knowledge production do this, especially through exploratory or 'scoping' programmes, true interdisciplinarity remains an exception, rather than the norm. Systematically creating opportunities for such encounters – not only between already pre-defined disciplines, but also

between different groups involved in knowledge production, including scientists, policymakers, analysts, and knowledge communicators/the media – could go a long way towards countering the 'siloing' of expertise.

This also relates to relations between different epistemic communities, including dynamics within such teams themselves. Ideally, conversations should not constrain or restrict people's contributions because they lack disciplinary expertise, but instead require or encourage team members to gain the aptitude to read discipline-specific data outside of their home disciplines (e.g. to be able to understand epidemiological projections even if working on behavioural science). In the case of scientific advice to governments and other political actors, this would also require a heightened degree of reciprocal transparency, insofar as epidemiologists should be able to understand political strategies, policy objectives, and international relations concerns, much like politicians have the right to demand that reproduction rates be explained to them. Of course, this may sound like science fiction – in all possible senses – at present (indeed, it bears some resemblance to the expertise modelled in Isaac Asimov's Foundation series[4]). However, it is important to remember that the division between science and politics is also a peculiarity of the modern world – and thus, predicting its possible end(s) and/or transformation may just call for the creative rethinking of their relationship in the future.

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4 The Foundation series is a series of sci-fi novels written by the American author Isaac Asimov and published between 1951 and 1993. The premise of the series is that a 'psychohistorian', Harry Seldon, predicts the fall of the Galactic Empire, and sets to save what is possible of humanity's knowledge during the 'dark ages', in a project known as The Foundation. The novel(s) have been turned into a TV series for Apple TV+, currently (2025) in its fourth season.

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Mapping threats from terrorists and tyrants: language-based detection of socio-psychological risk factors of mass violence

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Abstract

What makes some political leaders resort to extreme forms of violence despite heavy costs that would deter most other political strategists? We present a new risk assessment framework drawing on robust theory and empirical evidence from cognitive anthropology, social psychology, and linguistics. Our project is the first analysis of the links between leader psychology and mass violence based on statistical analysis of the language used by authoritarian leaders. Originally developed to assess the risk of non-state actor violence based on a statistical analysis of terrorist manifestos and chat logs, our psycholinguistic framework may provide a set of diagnostic tools for forecasting levels of violence likely to be instigated by authoritarian leaders. We discuss implications for policy makers and security professionals.

Introduction

Violence against civilian populations, whether perpetrated by state or non-state actors, poses an urgent threat to global security and stability. Emerging technologies have changed the nature and scale of such violence, raising the stakes for prediction and prevention. While the security landscape continues to evolve, our research aims to identify telltale socio-psychological markers associated with extreme forms of violence against civilian populations across time and space. We shed light on cognitive drivers associated with different types of violence and discuss the potential to trace these factors in the language of terrorists and despotic leaders. Many authoritarian leaders strategically use threats of violence to intimidate internal and external adversaries, but is it possible to assess the likelihood that they will turn their words into action?

Several studies have explored patterns in the micro- and macro-environments that make the occurrence of genocides and mass killings more likely. However, the cognitive and psychological mechanisms that link certain identified structural conditions to different types of state-led violence were, until recently, quite poorly understood (Strauss 2012: 546). Our paper discusses new ways in which computational psycholinguistic analysis can contribute to the development of tools to assess the risk of violence in authoritarian regimes and terror groups. We present insights from our previous work, drawing on both theory and empirical evidence from cognitive and evolutionary anthropology, psychology, and linguistics. We originally developed a psycholinguistic framework to establish robust methods to assess the risk of terrorist violence based on a statistical analysis of manifestos of political activists and chat logs of online users (Ebner et al. 2022, 2024). Our ongoing project seeks to adapt and fine-tune this model and to apply it to heads of state and their followers. The aim is to identify the statistically significant warning signs of state-led violence.[1]

Our aim is to explain why some heads of state resort to violent means against segments of their own population and/or other countries despite heavy costs that would deter most other political strategists. Our framework may allow us to predict the risk of seemingly irrational (e.g. high-risk or costly) acts of aggression, resulting in genocides and other atrocities, based on the socio-psychological drivers that leaders unintentionally reveal via their speeches, writings, and

1 In this paper, we discuss different types of state-led violence, from targeted killings of political opponents to mass violence. We use the terms 'mass violence' and 'mass killing', following Ulfelder and Valentino's definition (2008: 2) as an event 'in which the actions of state agents result in the intentional death of at least 1,000 noncombatants from a discrete group in a period of sustained violence'.

posts, and to use this knowledge to develop better prevention and intervention mechanisms. This risk assessment approach operates independently of explicit threats of violence, which, we argue, are not sufficient predictors of actual violence unless combined with other relevant factors identified below.

Theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence

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Our approach to understanding why some tyrannical leaders unleash mass violence against their perceived enemies is grounded in previous research into the motivations of violent extremists. The intelligence community typically assesses the risk of violent behaviour by examining capability, opportunity, and motivation, but all too often motivation is narrowly attributed to ideology, overlooking the underlying psychology. Ideology takes the form of assorted doctrines and narratives that people explicitly endorse, largely based on ideas they have acquired from others. However, the psychology driving extreme behaviour is much more deeply rooted in life experiences and personality characteristics, rather than in ideology. Here, we draw upon two well-established fields of research that can shed light on the underlying psychology of violent extremism: identity fusion theory and theories of personality and political behaviour. We will then also explore what makes leaders with high levels of fusion and/or with 'dark triad' personality traits successful in mobilising mass support for violence.

Identity fusion theory

Identity fusion (or simply 'fusion') is an extreme form of group alignment whereby an individual's personal identity becomes fused with the group identity, in turn motivating extreme forms of pro-group action (Swann et al. 2014; Whitehouse et al. 2017). Although fusion can motivate many forms of peaceful pro-group action – from helping those in need to protecting the environment (Buhrmester et al 2015; Reinhardt & Whitehouse 2024) – it can also prompt willingness to fight and die to protect other members of the in-group. Multiple studies have linked high levels of fusion to significantly elevated risk of pro-group violence when the group is felt to be imperiled; these include studies with Libyan revolutionary battalions (Whitehouse et al. 2014), Indonesian Islamist fundamentalists (Kavanagh et al. 2020),[2] Brazilian football hooligans (Newson 2019), Cameroonian farmers (Buhrmester et al. 2020), and far-right terrorists (Ebner et al. 2023, 2024).

Fusion results from sharing features essential to personal identity with other members of a group – for example notions of shared blood or ancestry, or shared personally defining experiences stored in episodic memory (Whitehouse et al. 2017).[3] The shared biology pathway to fusion likely has its evolutionary origins in kin selection. Our willingness to place ourselves in harm's way to protect a family member evolved because we share genes with close relatives. This may also help to explain why the primary target for fusion in most societies is one's family, as well as why the language of kinship and familial ties is strongly associated with high levels of fusion (Swann et al. 2012). But close relatives may also share life-changing experiences that become defining for the family as a whole, and so the shared experiences pathway to fusion

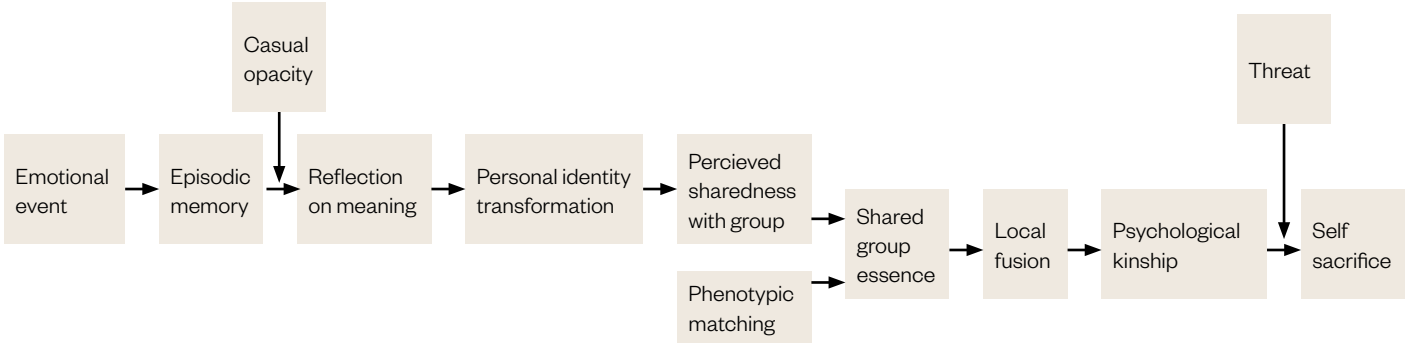
2 Note that this study in the Indonesian context did, however, find that identification was a stronger predictor of extreme violence than fusion.
3 Episodic memory describes the "memory of a specific event; spec. the conscious recollection of events in a person's life; (also) a memory of this type." (Oxford English Dictionary). For more details on fusion via shared transformative experiences.

is also strongly associated with psychological kinship, helping to explain why groups that suffer together (e.g. on the battlefield, or through the performance of painful rituals) are often described as 'bands of brothers', sisterhoods, or fraternities (Buhrmester et al. 2015).

Fusion should not be conflated with identification. In highly fused individuals, personal and group identities are activated in unison. By contrast, identification is a 'depersonalising' form of group alignment, in which activation of social identities makes one's personal identity less salient or accessible. Individuals who identify with a group may become fixated on the group's ideological beliefs, norms, and values, but they lack any personal investment in group interests and are therefore less inclined than fused individuals to risk life and limb to protect the group. Identity fusion is therefore a more powerful form of group cohesion, capable of motivating extreme pro-group action that comes at high risk to self, including acts of terrorism and mass violence (Whitehouse 2018). These differences between fusion and identification are thought to be rooted in the way memories contribute to identity formation (Whitehouse & Lanman 2014). In the case of identification, group alignment is based on the sharing of identity markers (e.g. ideologies, norms, conventions, ritual practices) that are socially learned from other members of the group and stored in semantic memory as part of a general repository of knowledge about how to behave as a normal group member.[4] This way of aligning with a group does not engage personal identity – indeed, it is a notably depersonalising way of relating to the group, such that thinking about the group makes unique features of the personal self less accessible or relevant. By contrast, fusion results from the sharing of personal essence with the group, creating a synergistic relationship between the two, such that the self is emboldened by the power of the group and any attack on the group is taken personally (Swann & Buhrmester 2015; Whitehouse 2021).

Although fusion creates very strong group bonds, it does not automatically lead to out-group derogation or violence. For example, being fused with one's family does not entail negative attitudes towards other families. Indeed, fusion often leads to peaceful forms of prosocial action (Buhrmester et al. 2018; Klein & Bastian 2023), and may even motivate efforts to limit or prevent out-group hostility if this is perceived as being in the best interests of the group (Newson et al. 2018). According to the 'fusion-plus-threat' model of violent extremism, fusion only leads to willingness to fight and die to protect the group if the group is threatened (Whitehouse 2018).

Figure 1: The 'fusion-plus-threat' model based on Whitehouse (2018)



Key:
Horizontal arrows = mediations Vertical arrows = moderated mediations

4 Semantic memory is"the part of memory that deals with meanings and concepts, and underlies the ability to recall factual information that is not based on past experience; a memory or recollection of this type" (Oxford English Dictionary)

Personality and political behaviour research

While fusion provides a powerful motivation to engage in extreme behaviours – including forms of self-sacrificial violence if that is what it takes to protect the group – there is also evidence that certain features of personality and individual psychology can affect a person's willingness to engage in acts of seemingly irrational aggression toward out-groups. Indeed, the CIA has been systematically profiling the political personalities of dictators for many years, based on the pioneering work of American psychiatrist Jerrold Post (2004; 2015). Of particular interest is Post's work documenting the widespread presence of narcissistic features across a range of world leaders adopting violent political strategies.

There is growing evidence that the dark triad of personality traits – namely narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy – is strongly linked to anti-social behaviour, aggression, and violence (Jonason & Webster 2010; Yendell et al 2022). Research in this area also suggests that narcissistic individuals exhibit a higher propensity for violence than other personality types, particularly when threatened, humiliated, or provoked (Baumeister et al 2000; Lambe et al. 2018; Kjærvik & B.J. Bushman 2021; Liu et al. 2021, McDermott 2024). Post's analytical research supports the hypothesis that leaders exhibiting the characteristics of threatened narcissists tend to be prone to violence. For example, Post observed that Osama bin Laden exhibited a highly aggressive form of narcissism, whereas Saddam Hussein demonstrated the fragility and wounded self-esteem typical of vulnerable narcissism (Post 2004; 2015). Research using wargame simulations equally found that individuals with elevated levels of narcissism had a higher likelihood of launching attacks on opponents (Johnson et al. 2006).

Narcissistic traits are frequently observed in the realm of politics, with research indicating that individuals with these characteristics are more frequently found in leadership roles than in the general population (Klaas, 2021). As political scientist Brian Klaas has argued (2021), these dark triad characteristics can have a dual impact – fueling the desire for power among unethical individuals while simultaneously enhancing their effectiveness in acquiring it. Research shows that, while psychopathic traits are present in about 1 per cent of the general population, the incidence among those in senior leadership roles rises to approximately 3.5 per cent (Ibid.).

Leader–follower relationships and the roots of mass support for violence

Fusion theory and personality research also help to explain mass support of political violence. Highly fused leaders who believe that the groups they represent can only be defended through the use of violence excel at mobilising legions of hyper-loyal followers – just like leaders with strongly narcissistic personality characteristics. Feelings of fusion and perceptions of out-group threat can be amplified through the oratory and rhetoric of charismatic leaders and the spread of ideas and images via propaganda, news reporting, and (in today's context) social media. Vicariously sharing the sufferings of other in-group members through immersive footage of atrocities in newsfeeds and YouTube clips can lead to extended fusion, contributing to the spread of violent extremism rooted in events affecting people living thousands of miles from one other (Whitehouse 2024). Research has also shown that fusion with a political leader predicts the willingness of followers to engage in violence against political opponents and out-groups (Kunst et al. 2019). Similarly, charismatic leaders with dark triad personality traits are capable of mobilising devoted, cult-like followers (Post 2004; 2015). They often portray themselves as having supernatural abilities or being 'divinely chosen', activating intuitive beliefs that legitimate social dominance and command loyalty (Meng et al. 2021). As research shows, these narratives leverage psychological predispositions and evolutionary biases of followers, making them more likely to support charismatic leaders who offer salvation (Whitehouse 2024).

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The deadly cocktail of violent extremism

In previous research, we performed a computational linguistic analysis of the manifestos and communication materials of terrorists, comparing them with a non-violent control group of political activists and extremists who never turned to violence (Ebner et al. 2022, 2023). Our study uncovered a consistent pattern across the violent actors: they were fused with their in-group, perceived the demonised out-group as highly threatening, and endorsed the use of violence as a means of defence (Ibid.). We dubbed this blend of psychological factors the 'deadly cocktail of violent extremism' because – like otherwise inert chemicals that only detonate when combined – each factor is harmless in isolation but becomes dangerously explosive when they come together.

Our risk assessment model is grounded in rigorous academic research but has been designed with a view to helping tackle key policy challenges, particularly the development of better early warning systems and conflict prevention strategies. From a prevention and intervention standpoint, one of the most pressing challenges in counterterrorism and strategic intelligence has been to distinguish genuine threats from empty rhetoric. By illuminating the psychological and linguistic hallmarks of credible dangers, our findings have informed the work of intelligence and security agencies, as well as tech firms who have used it to augment their own risk assessments.[5]

Our approach differs from previous efforts to explain mass violence using identity-based theories. Several scholars have made the point that ethnicity-based approaches offer insufficient explanation of different pathways that lead to state-led mass violence and varying degrees of popular participation (Strauss 2007; Fujii 2008). 'Shared biology' – based on ties of kinship or ethnicity – is not the only pathway to fusion. As mentioned earlier, shared traumatic or otherwise personally transformative experiences can also lead to identity fusion and motivate high-risk pro-group activities, including extreme violence in the face of out-group threats. Straus has argued that genocidal violence in Rwanda was dynamic, resembling 'a cascade of tipping points' (Ibid.). Identity fusion can explain these tipping points in both the leadership decisions towards mass violence and popular support for violence (Cf. Buhrmester et al. 2020). In the case of the Rwandan genocide, the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana has been widely recognised as the spark igniting widespread violence against Tutsis. However, this also presupposes a highly flammable environment, in the form of heightened levels of identity fusion among Hutus, which in turn likely motivated widespread civilian participation in the genocide.

An important advantage of our framework is that it can be applied to different demographic, economic, cultural, and religious contexts. As the relevant variables are revealed unconsciously in speech, they also reach beyond strategically chosen words of escalation or de-escalation and promise to provide a more reliable predictor than explicit threats of violence. While the strategic use of violence and coercion is relatively well studied, less research has focused on predicting seemingly irrational decisions to use violence on the part of authoritarian and

5 Based on its contribution to terrorism prevention efforts of intelligence services and tech firms, this research won the President's Medal of the Market Research Society and was a finalist for the ESRC Impact Award: https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/article/influential-and-life-changing-research-recognised and https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/article/work-predict-extreme-violence-amongst-online-users-wins-mrs-presidents-medal

despotic leaders. Nevertheless, our work at the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion suggests that psychological diagnostic tests that can be carried out without the voluntary participation of the subjects under study may contribute to more accurate forecasting of self-sacrificial acts of violence.

After we noted anecdotal parallels between Putin's language and our 'deadly cocktail of violent extremism', we started investigating the language of violent heads of state more systematically, working towards an evidence-based risk assessment of violent leadership. Based on our previous work, it appears plausible that some violent heads of state share socio-psychological characteristics with violent non-state actors.

Towards an evidence-based risk assessment of violent leadership

Our aim is to develop sets of theoretically grounded, psycholinguistic characteristics, based on the documented communication of leaders, which can help predict behavioural outcomes. To do so, we propose a new model, rooted in fusion theory and personality research, which is loosely based on the psycholinguistic framework we developed previously to assess the risk of terrorist violence, based on a statistical analysis of manifestos and chat logs of online users. We argue that similar psychological characteristics may be found in despotic heads of state who resort to extreme acts of violence that carry a high risk to the self and may (for that reason) be described as extreme. Our ongoing project is therefore an effort to connect research on non-state terrorism with the study of state-led terrorism.

To develop our research design and hypotheses we conducted interviews with 20 experts on specific violent leaders. Based on these interviews, our hypothesis (pre-registered with the Open Science Framework[6]) is that there are three kinds of deadly despots – the Narcissist, the Fanatic, and the Narcissistic Fanatic – each associated with different kinds of state-led violence. It is important to note that this is not a typology but rather a set of cardinal points or 'attractor positions' towards which different leaders may gravitate.

The first, the Narcissist, describes leaders whose decisions to use violence are driven by selfish interests, to maintain or enhance their own power. When they feel that their life or political career is threatened (by enemies), they may be inclined to use violence against specific opponents to achieve their ends. The Fanatic, by contrast, elevates benefits to the group over personal gain. They are willing to risk their own life to protect their in-group from a perceived existential threat. State-led violence in this scenario would not be a political gamble driven by selfishness but rather a high-stakes activity that is felt to serve a higher purpose. Some leaders, however, gravitate towards both attractor positions, and we refer to these as Narcissistic Fanatics. We would expect these to be the deadliest leaders, combining extreme commitment to their group with grandiose delusions of their own importance and value. Figure 2 illustrates these three pathways towards different forms of violent behaviours, and Figure 3 visualises the traits associated with each.

6 See Julia Ebner and Harvey Whitehouse, "When Despots Become Deadly", Open Science Framework, 2024. Online: https://osf.io/t9s83.

Figure 2: Hypothesised Pathways to State-Led Violence

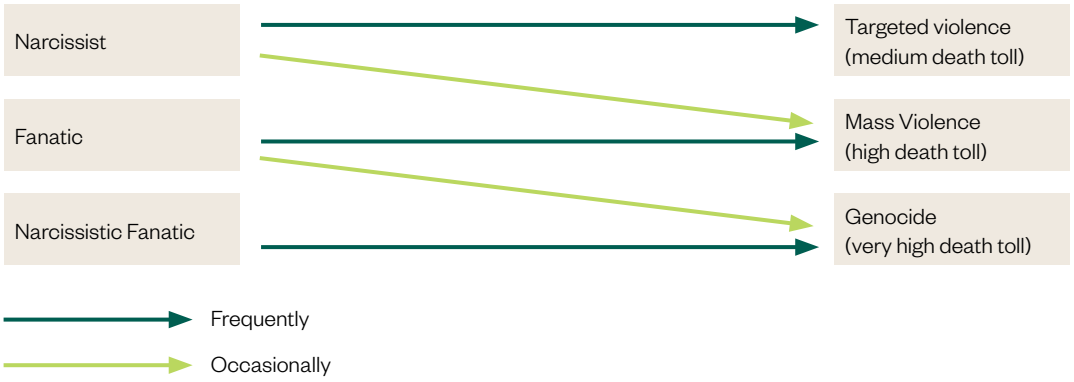
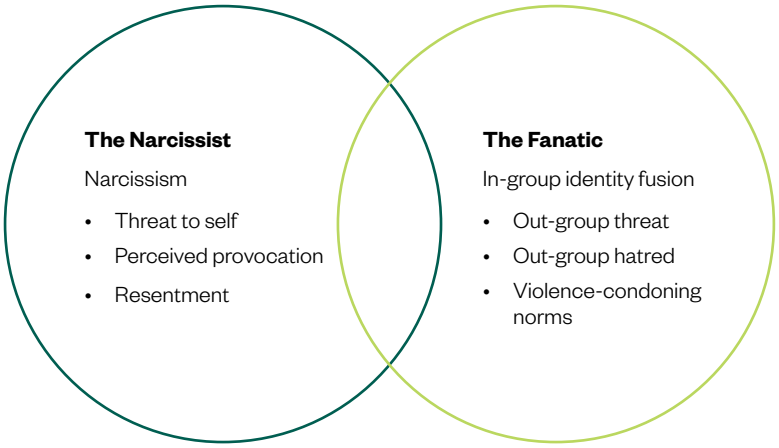


Figure 3: Psychological Clusters of Violent Leaders



To test these hypotheses, we have developed a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative text analysis with quantitative natural language processing (NLP) analysis to identify patterns in the language of violent leaders over the past 120 years. To this end, we have assembled a unique dataset of the communication materials of historic and contemporary leaders responsible for mass violence against civilian populations, as well as control group leaders who had the capability and opportunity to use systematic violence but did not do so. We have been working with expert translators to produce first-ever translations of primary sources of a number of violent heads of state from across the globe. Specifically, our database covers leaders such as Talaat Pasha, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Slobodan Milosevic, Nuon Chea, Augosto Pinochet, Yayha Jammeh, Theonestre Bagodsora, Hissène Habré, and Omar al-Bashir, as well as a control group of low- or no-violence authoritarian leaders. The selection of the twenty leaders in the pilot study was based on three criteria: 1.) they were authoritarian and faced with no or low institutional constraints; 2.) they played a critical role in directing or enabling political violence, and 3.) sufficient authentic formal and informal primary sources were available to enable meaningful NLP analysis.

After determining all dependent and independent variables and their respective linguistic proxies, we carried out an intercoder reliability check with five hypothesis-savvy and five hypothesis-blind coders to ensure the reliability of our coding framework. We then proceeded to the NLP analysis, using a three-stage approach to minimise false positives and false negatives: first, we used R to identify relevant linguistic proxies, then carried out manual reviews, followed by AI-based reviews of all resulting datasets. The results were then examined

for their statistical significance, finding initial support for our hypothesised pathways illustrated above. As of July 2025, we are currently in the process of writing up the findings for publication. Having found statistically significant psycholinguistic patterns associated with different violent behaviour outcomes in our pilot study of 700,000 words from twenty historical leaders, we are now expanding the database to over 120 leaders, including contemporary leaders (e.g. Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-Un, Bashar Al-Assad, Joseph Kony) to further increase the predictive power of our model.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

War studies and military strategy have relied heavily on rational actor models (e.g. game theory), which assume that political activists are driven by ideologies and that leaders try to optimise their advantage and minimise their losses based on rational calculations. Approaches that draw on empirical evidence from evolutionary anthropology and social psychology suggest a different view of the motivations of violent extremists and fanatical leaders but have been neglected in both academic literature and policy practice. While recent studies have increasingly examined processes of ideological radicalisation in terrorist organisations and psychiatric conditions and psychopathologies in leaders, there has been little focus on other psychological drivers that lead to acts of violent extremism.

Our violence risk assessment research can help us understand psychological indicators of proneness to violent action before the signs of a planned intervention become visible in operational or military activities. The insights presented in this paper have implications for both research and policy practices. Next, we provide some recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to improve early warning systems, enhance awareness among populations, and introduce more effective intervention approaches to avoid the rise of leaders prone to extreme forms of violence.

Integrated risk assessments

Our new psycholinguistic approach can complement rational actor models, as well as enhance risk assessments that take threats of violence at face value without considering the more consequential 'deadly cocktail' of ingredients traceable in language. While it is impossible to reliably predict every act of mass violence perpetrated by authoritarian leaders, our research indicates that there are statistically significant psycholinguistic patterns that are detectable in the language of leaders and followers. These include psychological kinship with the in-group, existential threat from a demonised or dehumanised out-group, violence justification or glorification – often in combination with narcissistic personality markers. Our model may therefore offer analysts of authoritarian leader behaviour a powerful new method of assessing the likelihood of state-sponsored violence, substantially extending the predictive power of previous approaches. This could enhance the work of international and national intelligence agencies seeking to forecast and mitigate the violent activities of existing and potential future authoritarian leaders. It is, however, important to treat our findings with caution to mitigate risks associated with psychological profiling and surveillance in the pre-crime space. We encourage continued collaboration between researchers and security services to establish robust ethical standards and evaluation practices, thereby minimising systematic bias.

While it is impossible to reliably predict every act of mass violence perpetrated by authoritarian leaders, our research indicates that there are statistically significant psycholinguistic patterns that are detectable in the language of leaders and followers.

Raising awareness among civilian populations

Targeted education programmes can empower both democratic electorates and citizens under authoritarian rule to critically evaluate political rhetoric and behaviour, enabling them to spot early warning signs of dangerous leadership. In particular, awareness-raising campaigns should equip communities to recognise the manipulation tactics employed by each of the three categories of violent leaders discussed in this paper. Given that the algorithmic architecture of tech platforms can be effectively exploited by authoritarian leaders, strengthening psychological preparedness and resilience among digital citizens should be a priority for educators and policymakers in liberal, democratic countries. For example, misinformation inoculation techniques[7] and digital citizenship curricula[8] can help reduce the 'contagion' of leaders' messaging on social media. Although we do not explore leader–follower dynamics or the interaction between state and non-state actors in depth here, further guidance on these topics is available on request.

The role of media and tech platforms in fostering global cohesion

If we develop more effective methods of forecasting state-led violence, this could enable the mass media to provide the public with early warnings that could in turn impact voting behaviour and spark civil response to the rise of authoritarian leaders. It is also possible to imagine ways in which media outlets and digital platforms could help to temper (rather than inflame) ingredients in the 'deadly cocktail' at the heart of violent extremism. For example, when disturbing and upsetting images of in-group suffering are broadcast via newsfeeds, it could become part of good journalistic practice or a feature of bridging algorithms distributing pieces of content to social media users to also include similarly potent images of suffering on the other side of the conflict in question. Such an approach may not harm the commercial interests of news and big tech platforms – yet it could serve to reduce out-group hostility and increase support for peaceful outcomes, by activating the shared experiences pathway to fusion to help prevent and resolve intergroup conflicts rather than deepening divisions and perpetuating cycles of violence (Reinhardt & Whitehouse, forthcoming).

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7 See Inoculation Science (https://inoculation.science/), drawing on Roozenbeek et al (2022).
8 See ISD's Digital Citizenship Curriculum (2025): https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/digital-citizenship-education-programming-toolkit/.

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