Illiberal Regimes and International Organizations

Christina Cottiero, Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Stephan Haggard, Lauren Prather and Christina J. Schneider

Abstract

Illiberal regimes have become central players in international organizations. In this working paper, we provide a unified framework for understanding their effects. We start by outlining the theoretical foundations of this work, focusing first on why regime type matters for international cooperation. We then show how differing memberships and decision-making processes within international organizations affect the influence illiberal regimes can wield, the activities they undertake, and the impact that they have on domestic political outcomes.

Keywords: international organizations, democracy, autocracy, great powers, international cooperation

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The last decade has seen a marked turn in the study of international organizations (IOs), with increasing attention given to the regime type of their members. This move corresponds to anxiety about the fate of democratic rule and the consequences of its erosion on the prospects for international order. Long-standing authoritarian regimes, including both great powers and influential regional actors, are pursuing more assertive foreign policies and challenging dominant international norms in the process. At the same time, the Third Wave of democratization has crested if not reversed. Countries that recently transitioned to democratic rule and were once considered consolidated now appear vulnerable to democratic backsliding or outright reversion to autocratic rule. Even in advanced industrial democracies, illiberal leaders are openly challenging democratic norms.

These developments raise myriad questions about how the diverse population of illiberal regimes and political movements (including outright authoritarian ones) affect cooperation through IOs.[1] Are such regimes willing and able to cooperate effectively? If they do, around what purposes are they likely to do so? And if those aims are illiberal, what are the consequences for cooperation through IOs? What are the downstream consequences for political developments at the national level?

We are by no means the first to take note of the role that illiberal regimes have come to play in formal IOs. Viewed through a longer lens, we should not be surprised at these developments. The disciplinary attachment to the idea of a "liberal international order" overlooks the fact that norms in multilateral institutions, including the United Nations itself, were always contested by a politically diverse membership. Consider, for example, the relative weight that newly independent countries gave to economic, social, and cultural rights over civil and political rights, or to collective rights such as "self-determination." The Non-Aligned Movement and groupings such as the Group of 77 always had politically diverse memberships and were by no means democratic on average. Regional organizations in the developing world—in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Southeast Asia—were made up of competitive authoritarian regimes or outright autocracies and were often formed in part to contest global norms (Getachew 2019; Mohamedou 2016; Wichhart 2019).

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[1]   Although many scholars focus on the distinction between democratic and authoritarian regimes, we also have an interest in illiberal political movements and backsliding in democracies and thus use the broader term "illiberal regimes." Linz (1978) uses four characteristics to define illiberal political leaders or parties: the refusal to respect the democratic process as the legitimate and legal channel for securing political power; the refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of justifiable rival parties and opponents; the use or tolerance of political violence and willingness to violate the physical integrity of rivals and opponents; and the willingness to curb the civil and political liberties of minority populations. Authoritarian regimes are illiberal virtually by definition, but illiberal leaders and parties are increasingly visible in democratic countries as well.

Research on illiberal regimes in IOs was initially advanced by regional studies scholars. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, alternative regional organizations formed with and without Russia, attracting the attention of scholars of post-Soviet countries. Limited progress toward economic integration and ongoing border disputes among members of the Commonwealth of Independent States seemed to reinforce perceptions that illiberal regimes were less able to cooperate through regional organizations (Kubicek 2009). Scholars of Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America drew similarly pessimistic conclusions about the efficacy of newly formed organizations that seemed "designed to fail" at achieving the idealized model of economic and political integration exhibited by the European Union (Barnett and Solingen 2008; Herbst 2007; Malamud 2022).

However, subsequent work demonstrated that illiberal regimes enjoyed other benefits from regional organizations, including reinforcement and legitimation of illiberal sovereignty norms (Debre 2021, 2022; Libman and Obydenkova 2018a; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Russo and Stoddard 2018), for example, around "information security" (Allison 2018); coordination of common positions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's proposals around internet sovereignty advanced at the International Telecommunications Union (Hulvey 2022); and the facilitation of transnational repression, including through the maintenance of regional "black lists" of wanted dissidents (Cooley and Schaaf 2017; Debre 2021). The Color Revolutions and Arab Spring, in particular, provided impetus for illiberal regimes to strengthen their coordination against pressures to liberalize and democratize, sparking a debate about whether these efforts should be viewed in terms of autocracy promotion or democracy prevention (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Bank 2017; Risse and Babayan 2015; von Soest 2015; Tansey 2016b; Weyland 2017; Whitehead 2014; Yakouchyk 2019a). In this working paper, we outline the theoretical foundations of this burgeoning research field, focusing first on why regime type matters for international cooperation. We pay particular attention to political purposes: how autocracies, backsliding democracies, and illiberal political movements protect themselves from domestic and foreign challenges by drawing on the resources—both material and ideational—that IOs might provide.

In a second theoretical step, we consider the IO level: how differing membership compositions and decision-making processes affect the influence illiberal regimes can wield and the activities they undertake. We consider three different organizational settings and suggest that they have structured both the theoretical and empirical debates. First, there is the growing interest in authoritarian IOs, defined as those that are dominated by autocratic members. These organizations are regional. Some were founded as autocratic clubs and have persisted as such. At the same time, new

regional organizations of this sort have emerged since the end of the Cold War, often around explicitly political objectives. These regional organizations made up of authoritarian regimes are of particular interest because they provide insight into what clubs of autocrats might seek and the precise IO functions from which they can benefit. A second set of organizations are the multilateral ones, which have always had a heterogeneous membership including both significant democratic and autocratic blocs and a variety of "swing states" that fall in between. Research on multilateral IOs focuses on the role that regime type and political orientation plays in the politics of the United Nations (UN) family but also a variety of functional organizations with global memberships.

Finally, there are regional organizations that are controlled by democracies and grounded in liberal norms but which are nonetheless facing the challenge of backsliding regimes in their midst. As we will see, a substantial literature has developed around the European Union and European institutions on these issues, but other regions—most notably the Western Hemisphere and Central and South America—face similar challenges.

Our discussion therefore provides a theoretical framework that brings the role of illiberal regimes in IOs into sharper focus. Whereas IOs have traditionally been seen as instruments to promote economic and political liberalism, our approach explains why illiberal regimes can profit from participation in IOs, even those that are central to the shared democratic vision of the so-called liberal international order that is supportive of democracy, economic openness, and other liberal values. This research thus also has implications for policy: how democracies can and should cope with the challenge of illiberal regimes in global and regional organizations.

Domestic Interests of Illiberal Regimes

Given the focus on domestic political characteristics, the theory underlying research on illiberal regimes and IOs needs to be grounded at the country level. The main protagonists are liberal democratic regimes and their illiberal counterparts. Research on regime type often adheres to a democratic-authoritarian binary, but ongoing debates over conceptualization and measurement have underlined the diversity of authoritarian regimes. Like democratic regimes, authoritarian regimes come in a variety of different forms: competitive authoritarian systems, typically with dominant parties; single-party regimes; military dictatorships; and a handful of monarchies, mainly concentrated in the Middle East and North Africa.

We adopt the term "illiberal" regimes because of the growing significance of illiberal leaders and parties and processes of backsliding in nominally democratic countries.[2] Backsliding starts in duly elected democracies that cross at least some minimal threshold of electoral democratic rule. But they experience democratic regress as a result of actions taken by illiberal executives that are duly elected (Arriola, Devaro, and Meng 2021; Bartels 2023; Bermeo 2016; Grumbach 2023; Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2023; Haggard and Kaufman 2021a, 2021b; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2014; Vachudová 2020; Waldner and Lust 2018). The actions of these executives can—but need not—culminate in reversion to outright authoritarian rule. We assume that illiberal incumbents desire first and foremost to remain in power and consolidate their rule against possible challenges and that they will use cooperation in IOs to promote their interests and protect against these threats.[3] The threats illiberal regimes face can be divided into domestic and foreign ones. At home, illiberal regimes may deal with three somewhat different challenges, not altogether mutually exclusive. Two emanate from forces that may well be more authoritarian than the incumbents. First, illiberal leaders, especially in autocratic countries, face threats from within their own ranks in the form of military or palace coups (Belkin and Schofer 2003; Biddle and Zirkle 1996; Böhmelt and Pilster 2015; De Bruin 2018; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Kim and Sudduth 2021; Powell 2012; Quinlivan 1999; Roessler 2011; Sudduth 2017). Second, illiberal leaders in autocracies have a higher risk of civil war and face threats from insurgents or rebel groups who seek to install themselves as rulers (Hegre 2001; Lyons 2016). Illiberal incumbents in democracies who rig elections also face similar threats of violence and even civil war (Donno, Morrison, and Savun 2022; Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2014, 2018).

Third, illiberal regimes face threats to their rule from groups that seek to liberalize politics or press for transitions to liberal democratic rule. These challenges can come from various sources. In more democratic contexts, elections are the main threat to the political survival of illiberal leaders. Strategies that lead to executive aggrandizement are therefore often geared around creating an uneven electoral playing field that makes it more difficult for the political opposition to get into power even in the presence of regular elections (Haggard and Kaufman 2021b). But elections also take place in less democratic contexts. A significant literature shows that elections in competitive authoritarian contexts are effectively tools of regime maintenance, but they may also constitute focal or rallying points for oppositions (Blaydes 2010; Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). Threats may also come from organized civil society groups such as churches, unions, NGOs, and

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[2]   See, for example, Meyerrose and Nooruddin (2023) and Winzen (2023).

[3]   Of course, the nature and intensity of the threats we discuss vary across democracies and autocracies. While we discuss those threats for both regimes together for the sake of parsimony, our analysis on how this affects cooperation in IOs takes into account those important variations.

other professional associations. These challenges often take the form of spontaneous mass mobilization by citizens in protests (Stephan and Chenoweth 2008; Teorell 2010; Haggard and Kaufman 2016). But they frequently involve organized collective action such as strikes, coordinated anti-regime protests, or the blockage of strategic transport and communication nodes (Steinert-Threlkeld 2017; Tufekci and Freelon 2013; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). These political threats are all compounded by underlying socioeconomic conditions that can increase vulnerability, from long-standing inequities, to the business cycle and more serious economic crises.

Challenges to illiberal regimes are by no means limited to those emanating from within the domestic political arena. They also arise from pressures from abroad, which in turn can amplify the domestic pressures just outlined. Most directly connected to democratic challenges from within are so-called diffusion processes that operate across international borders (Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Gleditsch and Ward 2006). Illiberal leaders have long been concerned about democratic movements in their neighborhood, and the possible diffusion of those movements to their own countries. These challenges include cross-border networks of opposition groups as well as international and national NGOs. The likelihood of diffusion dramatically increased with the advent of the internet and the spread of information technologies. For example, advanced cell phone technology and social media allowed for more efficient cross-border mobilization against regimes in the Color Revolutions and the Arab Spring (Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Hale 2013; Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016; Steinert-Threlkeld 2017). Early victories for pro-democracy activists inspired opposition supporters in neighboring countries, helping opposition groups mobilize resources at home and abroad. Opposition groups also learn from the experiences of their counterparts in neighboring countries, updating their strategies in line with what works.

Illiberal regimes face another challenge in the form of democracy promotion by leading Western governments, NGOs, and IOs and, more broadly and diffusely, efforts to propagate democratic institutions and norms. In the post-Cold War period, the United States and the European Union generally have had lower tolerance for autocratic leaders. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the geostrategic rationale for supporting authoritarian regimes weakened. Western democracies became increasingly bold in promoting democracy globally. In the United States, democracy promotion became a central pillar in the foreign policy strategy of the George W. Bush and the Bill Clinton administrations (Kurlantzick 2013, 24).

Democracy promotion and preservation was quickly adopted by IOs dominated by democracies as well (Pevehouse 2002a; Donno 2013a, 2013b; Poast and Urpelainen 2015, 2018). These IOs promoted democracy by providing financial and technical assistance directly for democratic elections, political parties, and civil society groups. Democratic IOs also engaged in a broader set of activities to promote democracy including observing elections, conditioning membership in international institutions on a commitment to democratic norms, adopting democracy clauses and mandates, suspending or sanctioning member states for violating democratic norms, and conditioning foreign aid, trade, and investment on human rights and even democracy commitments.[4] Not only is the membership in the European Union conditional on countries adhering to democratic norms, but it has also used its economic heft to force parties to accept democratic rules as a precondition for various association agreements (Börzel and Risse 2009; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002; Schneider 2009; Vachudová 2005). The World Bank, followed by many other regional and international development organizations, started to apply broad democracy and good governance conditionality to its programs in the late 1990s (Ferry, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider 2020). The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development even specified in its charter that it would only operate in countries that applied principles of multiparty democracy and pluralism (Guriev and Treisman 2022, 187). Commitment to democracy has become a condition for membership in regional organizations such as NATO, the Organization of American States, and the African Union. And the commitment to democracy, human rights, and good governance has become a typical condition for international trade agreements as well (Hafner-Burton 2005, 2009). Even though these efforts have been applied and enforced rather inconsistently (Börzel 2015; Bush 2015; Kurlantzick 2013; Tieku 2009; Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019), democracy promotion and other instruments of socialization contributed to democratization in a number of contexts (Börzel and Risse 2009; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Vachudová 2005), and at a minimum put pressure on illiberal leaders in both autocracies and democracies.[5] It was precisely these forms of democracy promotion that generated a more hopeful literature on what multilateral and regional organizations might accomplish.

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[4]   Von Borzyskowski and Kartal (2023) offer an overview of the literature.

[5]   Although democracy promotion has been effective in different contexts, it is limited to contexts in which domestic actors are committed to democracy reform and it has also been criticized as potentially having unintended negative consequences (Börzel and Pamuk 2012; Kelemen 2017, 2020a; Meyerrose 2020, 2024).

From Domestic Politics to IOs

If the first theoretical step in this growing literature involves clarifying the interests of illiberal regimes, the second requires showing how cooperating through IOs—or obstructing liberal ones—may blunt these challenges. Underlying this argument is the empirically-grounded assumption that member state governments are the principals in IOs that take decisions and delegate powers and that the composition of the membership thus matters for the objectives and outcomes of international cooperation (Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Davies 2018; Debre 2020, 2021, 2022; Ferry, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider 2020; Gray 2009, 2013; Greenhill 2016; Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2019; Libman and Obydenkova 2018b; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Stoddard 2017; Tallberg, Sommerer, and Squatrito 2016; Vinokurov and Libman 2017). This research all reaches the conclusion that the regime type and political orientation of member states have implications for what IOs do. Although the traditional scholarship on IOs tended to see them as vehicles to promote political and economic liberalism, we expect, as a sustained hypothesis, that the domestic political objectives of their members can vary. Simply put, IOs made up of democracies are likely to pursue different objectives than those made up of illiberal regimes, *ceteris paribus*. IOs composed of democracies should be more likely to support democratic norms and institutions (Checkel 2001; Donno 2013b; Hafner-Burton 2005, 2013; Lankina and Getachew 2006; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2006, 2008; Mattli and Plümper 2002; Pevehouse 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Poast and Urpelainen 2015, 2018; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2002), either because these objectives align with their values (Moravcsik 2000) or they have incentives to lock in democratic gains against possible risks of reversion to autocratic rule (Hafner-Burton 2005; Hafner-Burton, Mansfield, and Pevehouse 2015; Mansfield and Pevehouse 2008).

But we would not expect illiberal leaders to pursue those same objectives. Indeed, a growing body of research has demonstrated that illiberal leaders cooperate to undermine democracy promotion (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Bank 2017; Cooley 2015; Diamond, Plattner, and Walker 2016; Risse and Babayan 2015; von Soest 2015; Tansey 2016a; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017; Weyland 2017; Whitehead 2014; Yakouchyk 2019b), and that regional organizations with authoritarian members are more likely to materially support and legitimize the authoritarian status quo in their member states (Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Debre 2020, 2021, 2022; Libman and Obydenkova 2018a). In the next section, we outline in more detail how autocratic clubs might cooperate to advance political objectives.

Our theoretical framework thus starts from the assumption that illiberal leaders have different priorities than their liberal counterparts, which are especially grounded in the challenges facing their political rule, and which affect the outcomes they pursue

in IOs (Ginsburg 2020). However, their capacity to use IOs to promote favorable outcomes depends to a significant extent on the homogeneity or heterogeneity of IO memberships. The framework can be articulated by considering organizations with different memberships: those that are predominantly authoritarian; those with heterogeneous memberships; and those dominated by democracies but facing illiberal challenges.

At one extreme are IOs that we will call authoritarian; empirically, these are all regional or cross-regional organizations. We call these IOs authoritarian not because of how they are governed but solely on the basis of the political orientation of their membership. Using internal decision-making processes or outcomes as the basis on which to designate regional organizations as authoritarian is problematic not only for conceptual reasons: what does it mean exactly that "decision-making processes" or "outcomes" are authoritarian? IOs controlled by autocrats sometimes mimic the practices of organizations controlled by democracies (Debre and Morgenbesser 2017). They also sometimes involve significant pooling and delegation (Daugirdas and Ginsburg 2022). Furthermore, IOs controlled by *democracies* sometimes inadvertently bring about anti-democratic outcomes (Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2023; Kelemen 2017, 2020, 2024; Meyerrose 2020, 2024) and certainly need not be structured in a democratic way.

Authoritarian IOs are thus not defined either by their decision-making processes nor any possible consequences of their actions. Rather, we focus on the regime type and political orientation of their member states, thus capturing the identity and preferences of their members. Whether measured as the share of illiberal regimes in the organization or the average democracy score, homogeneously-authoritarian organizations should have shared interests in resisting democracy promotion and supporting illiberal incumbents.

In such a setting it is easy to construct an informal model in which reciprocity provides the foundation for cooperation. Imagine an illiberal incumbent faces both current and future challenges. In the current period, they are willing to make contributions to the organization—whether in the form of financial levies, personnel, or other material support—in anticipation that the organization will promote regime stability and come to their support in the face of a future challenge (Cottiero 2023). Whether such cooperation actually takes place is an empirical question we will explore, but in principle there is no fundamental limit to the cooperation of illiberal leaders beyond the underlying resource constraints generated by what members can provide.

Now consider a stylized international organization that is more heterogeneous, in which there is a bloc of democratic states that are committed to democratic norms and their enforcement; a bloc of states that are illiberal and thus challenged by and opposed to such norms; and a bloc of swing states in which preferences fall in between. Those preferences may depend on how democratic any given swing state is but also on more contingent considerations that may not align perfectly with regime type or political orientation. For example, a consolidated Latin American democracy in a multilateral organization might well align against a proposal for a free and open internet in part because of sovereignty concerns (Hulvey 2022).

In such a heterogeneous institutional setting, there is some competitive process of coalition formation with democratic and illiberal regimes presenting both arguments to persuade and inducements, both positive and negative, to secure support. Illiberal regimes can deploy the instruments of statecraft in order to influence norms, votes, procedures, and operations. Their success will depend on the relative balance of attention given to multilateral diplomacy, diplomatic capabilities, and the material and ideational resources that can be brought to bear around illiberal aims. It is clear that with growing resources, particularly coming from China and rich oil-producing states, multilateral organizations might be convinced to act in ways that blunt democratic challenges or protect authoritarian incumbents. They may establish policies favorable to illiberal regimes or, at least, obstruct policies that promote liberal democratic norms, including through the UN human rights machine. In regional organizations with heterogeneous memberships, illiberal members can also find common cause with democratic co-members by emphasizing regional stability or sovereignty norms (Davies 2018; Stoddard 2017).

Finally, we can imagine an organization that is homogenous, but democratic. We would think that these organizations—again necessarily regional rather than multilateral—would be best positioned to advance democratic norms and secure compliance from them. As a result, even the appearance of a backsliding state would not constitute a significant challenge because the majority would be able to operate to restrict the backslider's options. For example, the liberal democratic majority can threaten punishment or even expulsion. But we can see a variety of ways in which this may not prove to be the case, as the European Union's ongoing struggles with Hungary and Poland have demonstrated (Kelemen 2017, 2020). Even in a solidly democratic organization, the exercise of sanctions may prove unappealing either because of the belief that the backsliding state will reverse illiberal policies or to sustain unity. In addition, democratic regional organizations' formal and informal decision-making norms—most notably the widespread use of consensus decision-making rules—may also empower illiberal regimes and provide opportunities for backsliding states to evade censure and to even use their veto to push for policies they desire. The Association of

Southeast Asian Nations has faced this problem as the efforts of democracies to advance human rights norms have repeatedly been stymied by pushback from illiberal members (Plunkett and Tansey 2022). Where regional organizations include more complex institutional arrangements—such as parliaments—the opportunities for protective coalitions to form among illiberal states and parties expand.[6]

Following the stylized examples outlined earlier, we organize the remaining discussion by considering autocratic regional organizations, debates about illiberal regimes in multilateral organizations, and the particular problems that arise when democratic organizations confront illiberal and backsliding regimes in their midst.

Autocratic Regional Organizations

We start with a consideration of autocratic regional organizations: those made up predominantly of authoritarian members. Regional organizations are heterogeneous; they include complex institutions with a range of functions and capabilities and highly focused technical organizations. Here we focus our attention on formal organizations that could plausibly provide multiple forms of significant support to incumbents. Using a simple count of such regional organizations whose members, on average, fall above or below 0.5 on V-Dem's electoral democracy index in any given year, Cottiero and Haggard (2023) find that a majority of regional organizations have always included a plurality of authoritarian member states.[7]

Next, we need to ask what these institutions are doing and whether it matters at the national level. Autocratic organizations provide a good analytic starting point in this regard precisely because of their relative homogeneity. Building on an extant literature on how IOs made up of democracies might sustain democratic rule, we consider parallel mechanisms through which IOs controlled by illiberal regimes may contribute to consolidating illiberal rule. Cottiero and Haggard (2023) group these forms of cooperation under three widely recognized functions that IOs perform: pooling of resources; solving coordination and collective action problems; and legitimation.

First, IOs pool and channel material support to members. Material support can be particularly important in times of political challenge. As a wide-ranging literature on aid

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[6]   See, for example, Winzen (2023) and Lipps and Jacob (2024).

[7]   Those organizations with average scores above 0.5 are considered at least minimally democratic; those falling below are classified as autocratic IOs, even if made up of competitive authoritarian members and illiberal, backsliding democracies. This is a widely used conceptualization of autocratic international organizations (Cottiero and Haggard 2023; Debre 2020, 2021, 2022; Libman and Obydenkova 2018b; Obydenkova and Libman 2019). An alternative way to characterize regional organizations would be to use the share of members that are authoritarian or democratic using a threshold for electoral democracy of 0.5 (Hafner-Burton, Pevehouse, and Schneider 2024).

has shown, financial support can have the unintended consequence of bolstering the resilience of illiberal regimes (Ahmed 2012; Bak and Moon 2016; Bermeo 2011, 2016; Dutta, Leeson, and Williamson 2013; Ping, Wang, and Chang 2022; Yuichi Kono and Montinola 2009). In authoritarian IOs, the bulk of funding disbursed comes from wealthy illiberal member states with the intent of supporting illiberal co-members' resilience (Cottiero and Schneider 2024). This is the case in IOs anchored by China, Russia, the Gulf monarchies, and prior to its economic collapse, Venezuela (Carvalho and Lopes 2022; Söderbaum, Spandler, and Pacciardi 2021). Authoritarian IOs with poorer memberships, such as those in Central Africa, raise funding to support members from global institutions, donor states, and regional banks. In both scenarios, support funneled through authoritarian IOs serves multiple functions for illiberal regimes at the domestic level: funding development projects that are popular with the public; supplying liquidity during crises; or providing resources that can be distributed through corruption, clientelism, and patronage.

IOs dominated by illiberal regimes can also support members' military and police forces. Security cooperation in authoritarian IOs ranges from regional training programs and information-sharing platforms to peacekeeping brigades. Although a minority of authoritarian IOs create mutual defense pacts, a significant number of authoritarian IOs organize drills to reveal and strengthen military and police capabilities. Some authoritarian regional organizations have also coordinated interventions to defeat challengers under the guise of counterterrorism or peace enforcement operations, with extensive contributions from illiberal regimes (Cottiero and Haggard 2023). Moreover, there are limited, but nonetheless important, examples in which authoritarian regional organizations have intervened in the face of anti-regime protests. The Collective Security Treaty Organization intervention in Kazakhstan in 2022, for example, symbolized regional leaders' support for the Kazakh government's efforts to suppress protests and attempted to deter other regime opponents (Libman and Davidzon 2023). Second, authoritarian IOs are sites of coordination, where illiberal members agree on collective responses to threats ranging from counter-regime protests to coups d'état. Coordination between illiberal member states produces common messaging and legislative action in the face of pro-democracy protests, as well as promises to extradite wanted individuals, regardless of whether they are engaged in political speech or armed resistance. Latching onto the "war on terror" to justify their actions, authoritarian IOs have coordinated not only against widely recognized terror groups, but also labeled opposition groups as terrorists. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for example, has supported its members' coordination against "terrorism," defined very broadly to cover a wide array of threats to illiberal regimes, including those that emanate from human rights activists (Aris 2009). The goal of this coordination is to prevent regional democratic diffusion.

Third, authoritarian IOs support the consolidation of illiberal regimes through socialization and legitimation. Such organizations endorse illiberal incumbents and promote statist norms such as "unlimited sovereignty" at the expense of participatory institutions. Although democratic as well as illiberal IOs may enshrine norms of noninterference, illiberal IOs are more likely to support regimes restricting activities that democracies would tolerate, such as protests.

Three of the contributions in a forthcoming special series on illiberal regimes focus on the type of ideational and normative support authoritarian regional IOs can provide. Hafner-Burton, Pevehouse, and Schneider (2024) provide an example of how authoritarian IOs challenge liberal norms and deflect attention from their own behavior. A large and growing number of illiberal regional organizations formally adopt good governance mandates in issue areas such as democracy promotion, corruption, and human rights. However they adopt these good governance mandates, which appear to conflict with the norms and standards these regimes apply at home, when they face pressure from inside or outside the IO to adopt them. Moreover, not all aspects of good governance are equally threatening and autocratic IOs minimize those challenges by imposing the norms on outside actors and strategically defining norms to minimize actual commitments.

A particular form of legitimation that we identify in a number of authoritarian IOs is the dispatch of low-quality election monitors to endorse the results of rigged elections (Debre and Morgenbesser 2017; Kelley 2012; Merloe 2015), a practice we call "election validation." Illiberal leaders face significant domestic and international pressures to organize elections. For illiberal incumbents that hold elections, maintaining power often necessitates rigging elections to ensure victory. Yet flawed elections can be used by domestic actors to mobilize against incumbents (Donno, Morrison, and Savun 2022). Moreover, international pressure to democratize has constrained incumbents to invite international election monitors who report on the quality of elections and call out instances of cheating (Donno 2013a; Hyde 2015; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Kelley 2012). Authoritarian IOs' low-quality or "zombie" monitoring missions offer a means to muddy the informational waters. Instead of identifying and calling out instances of election fraud, they seek to validate victory for illiberal incumbents. Two of the articles in the forthcoming special issue grapple with the phenomenon of low-quality election observation. Bush, Cottiero, and Prather (2024) document the rise of low-quality monitors and investigate the characteristics of countries that invite them. They theorize that incumbents invite low-quality election monitors as a result of both international and domestic factors. One set of international incentives comes from powerful authoritarian states such as Russia, which are challenging the norms and practices of the liberal international order. One way Russia has done this is by supporting the supply of

low-quality election monitoring, frequently through authoritarian IOs of which Russia is a key member. Bush, Cottiero, and Prather show that countries with strong ties to Russia are more likely to invite low-quality monitors to their elections. However, Russia and the authoritarian IOs it leads are not alone; regional organizations in Africa and elsewhere also engage in the practice of election validation through low-quality monitoring. A second finding from this paper is that countries with membership in more autocratic IOs are also more likely to invite these election validators.

Morrison et al. (2024) also take up the issue of election monitoring and work it through to national-level outcomes. They show that inviting low-quality election observers to elections may be a successful strategy for illiberal incumbents. They test whether zombie monitors actually provide the validation that incumbents seek and whether they convince domestic audiences. Theoretically, they highlight how low-quality election monitors will offer competing judgments about election integrity to those of high-quality election monitors invited to the same elections. Because low-quality observers tend to offer more positive judgments than high-quality monitors, the competing judgments dampen the ability of opposition actors to mobilize protests around a flawed election. Bogus election monitoring thus helps to neutralize electoral threat to illiberal leaders.

We started this discussion of authoritarian IOs by asking what they did, but also whether it mattered. The activities described here are examples of the actions authoritarian regional organizations can take to support illiberal member states. However, as Morrison et al. (2024) demonstrate, research on illiberal regional organizations has not stopped at parsing what organizations do; it has increasingly extended into the task of explaining how membership in illiberal organizations has deleterious consequences for democracy at the country level. In this research, political developments at the country level become dependent variables. Cottiero and Haggard (2023) and Debre (2022) find that membership in authoritarian IOs is associated with reduced odds of liberalization or democratization. Such research naturally raises important selection issues. However, if regional organizations are investing in the functions we have outlined above, then there is good reason to believe that they are doing so for a reason.

Illiberal Regimes in Multilateral Organizations

Multilateral organizations with global or near-global membership have always encompassed regimes and governments of vastly different sorts, running from hard autocratic regimes, through competitive authoritarian ones, to the full array of democratic governments, with some now challenged by illiberal leaders and parties. The advanced industrial democracies historically enjoyed a variety of organizational advantages in these institutions, which allowed them to exercise significant influence if not outright control of agendas. However, new research in this area has highlighted how illiberal regimes have sought to challenge norms, sway votes, and influence procedures that ultimately affect what these organizations are able to do.

Norms, such as those having to do with political and economic liberalism, have always been contested in global multilateral organizations but now are even more sharply so; as a result, this new set of theoretical concerns is fundamentally ideational and thus links to a variety of constructivist concerns. The nature of the contestation is wide-ranging, but we can outline several examples of ideational cleavages in these organizations.

The interpretation and weight given to sovereignty norms.

Principles of nonintervention and noninterference have long stood as constitutive elements of multilateral institutions, but those norms have been repurposed to combat liberal normative commitments. The long fight over the Responsibility to Protect principle (R2P) is exemplary of these differences, pitting liberal interventionists who view sovereignty as a contract with limitations against illiberal regimes that promote expansive conceptions of sovereignty. The latter are cautious about the prospect of facing external meddling and pressures around human rights (Chen and Yin 2020). Contestation over unlimited or constrained sovereignty is also rife in the arena of global internet governance. The notion that states' rights to regulate the internet are unlimited has butted heads with the multi-stakeholder internet governance model where private actors have a seat at the table. Illiberal regimes argue that existing governance should be replaced by a multilateral state-led model, and these ideas have gained popularity among illiberal and backsliding regimes (Flonk, Jachtenfuchs, and Obendiek 2020; Harnisch 2020; Hulvey 2022).

Economic, social, and cultural versus civil and political rights.

Illiberal regimes are growing more assertive in contesting what constitutes fundamental human rights, contradicting the positions of global multilateral and liberal IOs. An important line of argument that dates to the 1950s, if not earlier, is that developing countries should prioritize economic and social rights over political ones and norms such as "stability" over participation and consent of the governed. China has, for example, sought to lessen the UN Security Council's focus on civil and political rights as a source of human protection and foundation for peacebuilding (Foot 2020). By contrast, liberals argue that without civil and political rights, economic and social rights are unlikely to be realized. Illiberal regimes have also framed certain rights espoused by liberal IOs, including women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights, as contrary to traditional values (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Pauselli and Urzúa 2024; Sanders and Jenkins 2022; Velasco 2023). In establishing these counter-positions, they seek to undermine liberal norm promotion.

The commitment to economic openness.

Economic liberalization has been a leitmotif of the Bretton Woods system, the World Trade Organization, and the myriad trade and investment agreements that grew up over the last three decades. New revisionist thinking has challenged these norms and argued for more interventionist states and the freedom to pursue selective protection. Illiberal regimes have demonstrated that they do not view deep economic liberalization as an inevitable, necessarily desirable outcome of cooperation through multilateral or regional organizations (Weiss and Wallace 2021).

Security arrangements.

A new line of challenge to the post-Cold War order—carried by both China and Russia—is that alliances are outdated, old-fashioned Cold War relics. Rather, security should be managed through less restrictive strategic partnerships (Nadkarni 2010) or other forms of cooperative security. For those that see alliances as foundationally protective, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine War, these claims ring hollow.
These are perhaps the most prominently contested norms, but by no means the only norms that are in play. Illiberal regimes have sought to push idiosyncratic normative projects, such as the sustained Russian campaign at the UN to enshrine anti-Nazi norms (Baturo 2023). But norms are at risk more generally, including epistemic ones. Carnegie, Clark, and Zucker (2024) show that illiberal governments are motivated to withhold and distort scientific information, thereby stymieing the ability of IOs to govern in areas of pressing global concern. It is easy to see that along many of these normative divisions, regime type and political orientation are likely to play a central role in defining preferences and position taking in international forums; illiberal regimes have divergent preferences from liberal ones.

Promoting alternative norms is one thing; securing support in line with them is another. A striking feature of the new research on multilateral institutions is the attention to the determinants of voting by illiberal regimes in general assemblies (Binder and Lockwood Payton 2022; Brazys and Dukalskis 2017) or high-profile bodies within multilateral organizations such as the UN Human Rights Council (Hug and Lukács 2014; Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023). Meyerrose and Nooruddin (2024) show how illiberal coalitions in backsliding democracies take actions in the UN Human Rights Council that are surprisingly similar to the posture of autocratic regimes. They vote against targeted resolutions that name and shame specific countries and de-emphasize issues that threaten state sovereignty and control over citizens. Moreover, they turn the tables on advanced industrial democracies in their Universal Periodic Review reports, tending to lodge more critical observations against them than they pose to illiberal regimes.

The extent to which illiberal regimes are successful at affecting IO decision-making and operations depends on at least four factors. The first is their sheer heft: the resources they bring to bear and whether they are dominant actors within the organization. Based on the notion that formal decision-making power in IOs usually rests in the relative structural power of its members, ample evidence points to the ability of powerful states and their allies to tilt the outcomes and benefits of IOs in their favor (Hug and König 2002; Schneider and Urpelainen 2013; Steinberg 2002; Stone 2002, 2004, 2008; Thacker 1999). Just as the United States government used its structural power to tilt decision-making outcomes in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, illiberal leaders in powerful autocracies may also bring about policy change by leveraging their outsized formal or informal influence.

This type of influence frequently manifests itself in vote-buying or vote-influencing activities. The ability of the United States and advanced industrial states to influence voting in global multilateral IOs, and particularly the UN, is well-documented (Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Thiele 2008; Vreeland 2019; Vreeland and Dreher 2014). An emerging literature is now tracking Chinese vote-buying efforts in the multilaterals (Brazys and Dukalskis 2017; Dreher et al. 2022; Kaya, Kilby, and Kay 2021; Lu 2024; Raess, Ren, and Wagner 2022; Steinert and Weyrauch 2024). Rising illiberal powers also seek to influence bureaucratic procedures at the multilaterals. For example, in 2012 China succeeded in pushing the IMF to reform its surveillance policies (Zangl et al. 2016).

The second factor is whether weaker states are able to form interest coalitions within the multilateral institutions (Lyne, Nielson, and Tierney 2009; McLean and Stone 2012; Schneider and Tobin 2013). Developing countries have long caucused in the multilateral organizations, either through formal organizations of their own or through formal groupings within the UN, such as the G77. Inboden (2021a, 2023) shows how the leaders of China and Russia have relied on these voting coalitions, especially the Like-Minded Group in the UN human rights bodies, to constrain the international human rights system and to peddle favorite narratives.

A third factor that influences illiberal influence is formal decision-making procedures, which we take up in more detail in the following section. In some multilateral settings, unanimity or consensus-based decision-making provide opportunities for illiberal regimes to influence outcomes or simply to stymie action (Blake and Payton 2015; Lewis 2005; Steinberg 2002; Zamora 1980).[8] The dysfunction of the UN Security Council—rooted in the veto power of its permanent member states—and the breakdown of the World Trade Organization's Doha Round are well-known and as we will see, this is a widespread problem across democratic organizations.

Finally, we need to trace the causal chain from norms, through decision-making and voting, to whether these prior steps matter at the operational level: in what organizations do. Much more work needs to be done in this vein, but a newer strand of research focuses on how illiberal states can influence multilateral organizations' staff, procedures, and operations. This work emphasizes that illiberal states attempt to control important committees and elected positions within global multilateral organizations to secure agenda-setting power, block undesirable proposals, and use organization resources and influence for regime-boosting purposes (Fung and Lam 2021). Scholars have raised the alarm about China's efforts to fill UN committee positions so that it can block criticism and prevent accreditation of human rights NGOs, an outgrowth of increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy and efforts to reshape the content of human rights norms under President Xi Jinping (Dukalskis 2023; Inboden 2021b, 2022). Illiberal regimes have also sought to take the reins of functional, issue-specific IOs like Interpol, the global policing organization (Lemon 2019). After liberal members of Interpol and Interpol staff pushed for reforms that would prevent member states from abusing Interpol's red notices to target exiled regime opponents and asylees, one of the prominent Interpol abusers, the United Arab Emirates, successfully campaigned for the Interpol presidency.[9]

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8   Note, however, that underrepresented states can also link their veto power in one issue area to achieve policy success in other issue areas (Schneider 2011).

9   BBC. "UAE general accused of torture elected Interpol president," https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59417409. Published November 25, 2021.

Just as the research on authoritarian IOs has moved beyond what those organizations do to their causal effects, similar arguments have been made about illiberal regimes in multilateral organizations. Posed most bluntly, does participation in the liberal international order necessarily promote liberal values and behaviors? Although norm-contestation and the undermining of the deliberative process has been at the center of attention, an equally concerning trend is the ability of illiberal leaders in democracies and autocracies to use membership in multilateral organizations to undermine democracy or consolidate autocracy at home (Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2023). Participation in IOs certainly can promote healthy democracies when leaders espouse pluralist values and aspire to promote democratic norms and institutions, but it also creates powerful political opportunities for illiberal leaders to pursue executive aggrandizement. Illiberal leaders can use any economic benefits from integration into multilateral IOs (i.e., through material resources) and the inflow of additional resources (i.e., through foreign aid and loans, foreign direct investment, and trade) to increase their legitimacy, to buy political support from relevant elites and citizens, and deter political opponents (Ahmed 2012; Bak and Moon 2016). In short, integration into these institutions provides established and aspiring autocrats with a powerful toolkit in the campaign to undermine democratic institutions at home, to consolidate their power, and to shift the global dialogue away from civil and political rights and related democratic norms.

Illiberal Regimes in Democratic Regional Organizations

Finally, we turn to the third organizational setting: the challenges that democratic regional organizations have faced vis-à-vis the rise of illiberalism among its members. Many of the preoccupations in this literature mirror the challenges liberal regimes face in the multilaterals, but with the surprising result that they can occur even where illiberal challengers are in a distinct minority. The Western Hemisphere provides a ripe research opportunity that is underexploited. As a region that stood at the center of the Third Wave it has recently been challenged by a wave of backsliding, an experiment in illiberal IO building, and complex struggles over how organizations like the European Union, Organization of American States, Mercosur, and Union of South American Nations should respond.

However, this debate is most developed in the case of the European Union, and centers on three questions. The first is how membership in the European Union, or other democratic organizations, might have contributed to the rise of illiberal leaders and democratic backsliding in its member states; this debate parallels that of the multilaterals just reviewed. One argument focuses on the strengthening of executive power vis-à-vis domestic legislatures and judiciaries through increasing delegation of

policy autonomy to the European Union and other IOs (Meyerrose 2020, 2024). Another argument has highlighted the ability of illiberal regimes to exploit the economic support and financial resources provided by regional organizations to gain and maintain political power at home (Hafner-Burton and Schneider 2023; Kelemen 2020; Mares and Young 2019; Scheiring 2020; Scheiring 2021; Scheppele 2022). Many illiberal leaders were also able to exploit the growing anxiety about economic inequality and immigration to politicize the European Union as the scapegoat and to portray themselves as the only viable option to protect citizens against those negative forces (Agh 1999; Bartels 2023; Grzymala-Busse 2019; Vachudová 2020).

The second debate centers around how democratic backsliding has affected cooperation within the European Union. The nascent work provides strong evidence that illiberal regimes have used their standing in regional organizations to push their positions and to derail cooperation where they deem it necessary for political survival. In his contribution to this volume, Winzen (2023) shows that illiberal leaders have started to vote against proposals in the Council, the European Union's main decision-making body, especially when the proposals threaten their ability to pursue executive aggrandizement. He calls these EU measures "backsliding-inhibiting competences," and demonstrates clearly how illiberal governments oppose them. Similarly, in their contribution, Lipps and Jacob (2024) provide evidence about the increasing assertiveness of illiberal leaders by considering roll call votes in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, one of the most powerful international parliaments and one clearly committed to promoting liberal values. They find that illiberal parties from illiberal domestic environments challenge the majority most often and gain a platform for doing so. To the extent that more countries are governed by illiberal leaders, there is a rising concern that this will lead to gridlock in the EU decision-making process, ultimately hindering cooperation in the European Union.

A final debate is around the question of why the European Union failed to respond more aggressively to what can now be seen as a campaign not only to evade censure but to fundamentally challenge EU norms with respect to democracy and the rule of law (Kelemen 2024). Keleman argues that the outcome was overdetermined, but rested on a number of features of the European Union as an institution. Although the European Union is the most supranational of all IOs, intergovernmentalism continues to play a powerful role in the politics of the European Union. Even in the European Union, norms of sovereignty, noninterference, and tolerance shape the organization's politics (De Búrca 2022; Kelemen 2020; Priebus 2022; Winzen 2023). For example, Winzen (2023) shows how norms of accommodation and even consensus decision-making allowed Hungary and Poland to evade censure. He shows that backsliders limit their opposition to a well-defined subset of EU competences, what he calls "backsliding-inhibiting competences," that threaten their autocratic projects the most. Moreover, they can

only rely on accommodation in the Council if the democratic member states perceive their opposition as having some legitimacy. Yet the conclusion is clear: even in an organization with outsized democratic majorities and at least qualified majority voting, the organization was reluctant to lower the boom on clear derogations from the rule of law.

Similarly, backsliders are able to use unanimity and consensus rules as a way to veto decisions they dislike, including the sanctioning of like-minded leaders in the organization (Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019). Strategic incentives matter as well in the willingness of more liberal leaders to shield their illiberal counterparts from sanctions and increased pressures to democratize. For example, much evidence points to strategic incentives in the European Parliament. The European People's Party, under the leadership of conservative parties in Europe, was deeply concerned about what the expulsion of Hungary's Fidesz would mean for its ability to maintain majority status in the European Parliament (Herman, Hoerner, and Lacey 2021; Kelemen 2020; Meijers and Van Der Veer 2019).

The extent to which this erosion will continue is an open debate. After nearly a decade of turning a blind eye as democracy was incrementally being rolled back, the European Union shifted its stance and started to express concern (Blauberger and Sedelmeier 2024). They put into place a new sanctioning regime in 2020 in reaction to egregious violations of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary, as well as Poland (EU Regulation 2020/2092). At the same time, there is evidence that the European Union has also started to apply measures to help liberal countries fend off Eurosceptics and illiberal threats in the domestic political arena (Mariano and Schneider 2022).
But it is neither proven that these actions will be effective (Stiansen et al. 2023). Even though the European Union has withheld significant funding from Hungary, the unanimity rules in some areas of EU policy-making have given the Hungarian regime significant abilities to force the release of at least part of the funds. For example, in 2023 Viktor Orbán threatened to veto the Council decision to support Ukraine's membership in the European Union and successfully negotiate the release of a significant portion of the withheld funds. More research is needed to understand the effectiveness of EU sanctions and the ability of illiberal regimes to withstand them.

Conclusion

This rich body of research on the effects of illiberal regimes on IOs is likely to continue to grow. And it is important to underscore how this line of research upsets conventional presumptions and has important implications for policy that remain to be fleshed out. The idea that liberal international institutions are "easy to join but difficult to overturn" (Ikenberry 2018) is clearly under challenge. The advanced industrial democracies once used IOs to advance their material and ideational interests, but the fight is now on with illiberal regimes over the future direction of these institutions. To understand the policy implications of these developments, we see three avenues of research that are particularly relevant.

First, there is significant variance in the extent to which authoritarian IOs cooperate and in the capacity of illiberal regimes to influence existing institutions. Earlier generations of research assumed that democracies were not only more capable of cooperating; they would also be more willing to pool autonomy and delegate authority in the first place. Empirical research, however, has found little evidence that the regime type of the membership matters for delegation and pooling (Hooghe and Marks 2015). Yet we should not necessarily overstate the challenge either. Democracies face some illiberal actors and IOs that are capable of leading material and ideational challenges to existing IOs; other illiberal institutions and coalitions are much less effective. We need a better understanding of the effectiveness of authoritarian coalitions in these institutions and what they are seeking to do with respect to norms, mandates, voting, staffing, and operations. For example, our discussion highlighted attempts by illiberal regimes to influence the staffing of IOs, as well as their budgets. Given the proven effectiveness of these informal means of influencing the design and decision-making outcomes of IOs, a better understanding of these developments is critical for our understanding of the effects that illiberal regimes have in IOs.

Second, we are just starting to gain a better understanding of the influence of IOs at the country level. It is one thing to track what IOs do; it is another to trace their effects. Initial studies have focused on broad outcomes such as the propensity to democratize or liberalize, or the stability of authoritarian rule. But the menu of relevant outcomes is much wider. For example, the contribution by Morrison et al. (2024), and the emerging literature on election monitoring, shows how zombie organizations can easily sow confusion among publics, influencing both election outcomes and the propensity of publics to protest contested or fraudulent elections. Similarly, even though Winzen (2023) demonstrates that illiberal regimes have to navigate politics in democratically led IOs very carefully, their ability to challenge existing norms and block particular decisions

is likely to have consequences for the effectiveness of these institutions. Our theoretical framework that treats members as principals that pursue preferences that are driven at least in part by their regime type, provides new insights into studying the effects of IOs on domestic political outcomes.

Finally, we cannot understand the consequences of the rise of illiberalism without considering the reactions of the democracies. As the discussion of the European Union highlighted, democratic members have potentially conflicting preferences when trying to react to the actions of illiberal regimes within their midst, frequently hesitating to take strong and decisive action. At the same time, democratic-led IOs have pursued various strategies to the rise of autocratic institutions, ranging from dismissive to adversarial to accommodating. Understanding the conditions under which democracies are willing to counter the illiberal threat to international cooperation, whether bilaterally or multilaterally, and when it is successful, is *the* core policy question raised by this new research.

Beyond the more short-term responses of democracies to the rise of illiberalism in international cooperation, there is much uncertainty about the long-term consequences of these developments. While we do not expect democracies to exit existing multilateral regimes wholesale, selective examples of such a response, such as the American and Israeli withdrawal from UNESCO, do exist. An alternative response entails continued cooperation by democracies, but with a rebalance of participation across organizations through a greater focus on "allies and partners," as an effort to strengthen IOs of the like-minded and the creation of alternative, liberal spaces that would necessarily be plurilateral in form. While each of these alternatives have found supporters, at the time of writing this article it is not clear whether these withdrawals or rebalancing efforts will enhance the bargaining power of democracies or end in a declining commitment to multilateralism that illiberal political movements in the advanced democracies have long sought. A final possible outcome is that democracies understand the political risks of inattention and re-engage with global institutions more forcefully. This does not mean anything resembling victory, but would help understand the protracted strategic competition unfolding in the complex and fragmented institutions of global governance.

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