

Hundreds of scholars have signed a statement defending the international institutions that Trump has attacked



In July, forty-two international relations scholars published a statement in the New York Times which argued that President Trump needed to do more to preserve the post World War II international order. [David A. Lake](#) and [Peter Gourevitch](#) led the effort to publish the statement and argue why the president should consider their points of view.

What are the arguments for and against the international institutions President Trump criticized in his trip to Europe in July and earlier? Forty-two scholars of international relations published a [statement](#) in the New York Times supporting the international order and the accompanying institutions formed under the leadership of the United States after 1945, as well as condemning Trump's recent attacks. As of Monday, 572 people had signed on. (Disclosure: We led the effort to both publish the statement in the Times and collect additional [signatures](#).)

Some readers might think that this was simply liberal academics taking an opportunity to criticize the president. But these are people who have devoted their lives to researching, studying and analyzing how the globe works. Many disagree with one another quite profoundly about a variety of issues. And not every scholar in this discipline signed on; those who objected reveal significant debates among those who study these institutions.

Here's what most scholars agree on about postwar international institutions

Four broad points unite the scholars who signed the original statement or have joined our open letter — despite serious differences about how international institutions should be restructured.

1. The postwar order has produced unprecedented peace and prosperity, including the longest period in modern history without war between major powers.

What scholars call the “[long peace](#)” has been built in part on [bipolarity](#), the competition between the United States and Soviet Union; [nuclear weapons](#), the threat of which has deterred some aggression; and the spread of [democracy](#). But none of these account for the post-World War II growth of economic interdependence and the resulting prosperity, which have also contributed to [peace](#). Most research suggests that such international economic institutions as the European Union, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund have contributed immensely to the [success](#) of this international order.

2. [U.S. leadership](#) is essential.

Peace and prosperity do not arise spontaneously. They require thoughtfully [designed institutions](#), carefully exercised [authority](#) and, above all, a vision that inspires nations to cooperate for the common good. The United States has for decades been the keystone in the arches bridging its surrounding oceans.

3. Although the United States has paid a significant portion of the costs of this order, it has also benefited greatly from its [rewards](#).

The institutions that Trump criticizes as unfair have, over the long run, generally served U.S. interests around the globe. True, U.S. allies in NATO have not [contributed equally](#), either financially or militarily. But the United States has always commanded NATO and shaped its policies — first to deter the Soviet Union and later Russia, and since then in the Yugoslav civil war, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya and elsewhere.

Similarly, while the [World Trade Organization](#) has occasionally found the United States to be in violation of its rules, for the most part, the organization has consistently reflected U.S. interests. For instance, the WTO has liberalized manufacturing trade while largely sidestepping the domestically sensitive issue of agricultural subsidies.

4. [President Trump's actions](#) risk undermining this favorable order.

The administration has called into question the U.S. commitment to NATO, threatened to pull the United States out of the WTO and NAFTA, and imposed tariffs on our partners under dubious national security rationales. In doing so, the president not only abdicates U.S. leadership of these international institution but also threatens the order built by his predecessors. Institutions are much easier to destroy than they are to create.

Some scholars argue with aspects of the liberal international order

But despite that broad agreement, [some](#) scholars have long been critical of the liberal international order. In brief, they argue that its peace and prosperity have rewarded countries in the North Atlantic while leaving out much of the world; that it has been less than fully liberal, with the United States sometimes backing authoritarians elsewhere around the globe; and that it has been less orderly than proponents claim and has exacerbated inequality within countries.

Academics who chose not to sign the statement appear to come from three schools of thought. Unilateralists or [nationalists](#) agree with Trump's America First policy and his attempt to use U.S. power to extract better deals from both allies and adversaries. Conversely, [anti-globalists](#) support a more managed approach to trade and investment flows and better social safety nets for displaced workers. Both of these positions believe that international institutions overly constrain the United States, albeit in different ways and affecting different constituencies. Their critiques imply that the most appropriate course is to dismantle the international order and replace it with one more aligned with contemporary U.S. interests.

Third, [neo-realists](#) have always been skeptical of international institutions, questioning the need for and benefits of U.S. leadership, and advocating instead restraint and the use of local client states to protect U.S. interests.

For instance, Stephen [Walt](#) wrote a piece recently that explains why he did not sign the statement. His reasoning reflects a long-standing split between security specialists and international political economists. Security specialists tend to emphasize the stability provided by [nuclear deterrence](#); political economists often highlight the role of free trade and institutions in promoting cooperation.

When past scholars issued similar warnings, they predicted accurately

In 1930, 1,028 economists signed a famous letter of protest of the pending Smoot-Hawley Tariff. In 2002, 33 security scholars placed a [statement](#) in the New York Times against the Iraq War, followed by an [open letter](#), signed by more than 850 experts. In neither case did academics sway the nation's political leaders against the policies they were set on pursuing.

We are not so naive as to believe our statement will have any greater effect on the present administration. But these past petitions suggest that experts knew in advance what consequences would probably follow from these policies. Smoot-Hawley led to a retaliatory spiral of tariffs that worsened the Great Depression. The Iraq War was begun under false pretenses, became one of the longest wars in U.S. history and ultimately failed to create a stable democracy in the Middle East, as its proponents envisioned.

Existing global arrangements can certainly be criticized and improved. And yet a large number of scholars have gone on record defending the institutions that are the pillars of the postwar order, criticizing Trump's attacks. The signatories are academics from many different, often opposing, points of view. They broadly agree that the United States is now following a misguided policy.

The president and Congress, the one body that might constrain the executive, may wish to consider these viewpoints informed by lifetimes of research and analysis.

- [“President Trump & the First Lady's Trip to Europe”](#) by [The White House](#) is [CC0 Public Domain](#)
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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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