

An Order of Magnitude: Insights on International Order Collapse from a Dynamic Network Model of Order Formation

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Abstract: Can the collapse of international order be measured? This paper argues yes, proposing two metrics: foreign policy ideal point distance and governance distance between an order leader and its subordinates. Using a computational network model, I endogenize foreign policy and governance alignment within hierarchical relationships, where subordinates gradually converge toward a hegemon's positions in exchange for security. Simulations show orders survive gradual shifts in leader preferences but collapse rapidly under sudden, extreme deviations. Applied to the Soviet-led Communist International Order (CIO) and the US-led Liberal International Order (LIO), order members show systematically closer ideological and governance alignment with their leaders than non-members. Time-series forecasting links order collapse to statistically anomalous breaks in alignment. The CIO's break is sharp and clear in 1990. A parallel break appears in the LIO in 2025, indicating acute stress, though whether full collapse has occurred remains uncertain.

Key words: International Order, International Cooperation, International Conflict, Ideology, Governance

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Introduction

What role do foreign policy alignment and domestic governance play in the formation, maintenance, and collapse of international orders? And can these factors be used to monitor the health of international order or serve as early warning signs of stress? This paper answers yes to the second question by extending a formal computational network model of order formation developed by van Beek et al. (2025) to answer the first. This extended model endogenizes the degree to which subordinates converge toward an order leader's foreign policy and governance positions over time, and it yields predictions that go beyond those supported by van Beek et al. (2025) that explain why subordinates maintain close foreign policy and governance positions with hierarchs, except under moments of order stress and collapse.

Understanding the role that foreign policy and governance alignment play in hierarchical relationships is made all the more important as the survival of the US-led Liberal International Order (LIO) is in doubt. The election of Donald Trump to a second presidential term in 2024, followed by a rapid deterioration in US relations with its traditional allies, a retreat from multilateral institutions, and a striking shift in the United States' own foreign policy posture, has prompted a wave of commentary and scholarly debate about whether the LIO is approaching a breaking point (Goddard and Newman 2025). Such concerns were raised during President Trump's first term (Carnegie and Carson 2019), but the current moment seems qualitatively and quantitatively different. The Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney certainly is not in the minority when he advised his fellow "middle powers" at Davos in January of 2026 to "[s]top invoking [the] rules-based international order as though it still functions as advertised."² The perception that the LIO is collapsing is prevalent. If it is collapsing, should there not also be quantifiable metrics to back it up?

Identifying, and quantifying, whether order is under stress is not easy. In 1989, few observers anticipated the Soviet collapse along with the Communist International Order (CIO) it led. Today, the LIO faces similarly hard-to-read signals. How can scholars and policymakers tell genuine order collapse from routine friction? This paper offers a theoretically grounded answer, and empirical results to support it.

² Transcript accessed from *World Economic Forum* on May 13th, 2026:

<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2026/01/davos-2026-special-address-by-mark-carney-prime-minister-of-canada/>

The starting point for my analysis is recent work by van Beek et al. (2025). These researchers proposed a computational network model of order formation based on established ideas about hierarchy and war. In this model, countries decide whether to contract their security to a hierarchy in exchange for tribute. Rather than merely replicate their model, I make substantive modifications that bring to the fore the importance of order leader foreign policy and governance preferences for the formation and maintenance of orders. This modification includes that countries contract security to a hierarchy (order leader) in exchange for tribute, paid by converging toward the hierarchy's foreign policy and governance positions. Further, this shift is adaptive rather than sudden. Subordinates move closer to a hierarchy's position gradually, and as they do, they receive a discount on the tribute cost of contracting security. Under these conditions, simulations show that hierarchs whose ideal points change slowly can maintain their orders and bring their subordinates with them. But, if hierarchs deviate substantially from their initial positions too quickly, the order disintegrates.

I then apply these insights from the theoretical model to the empirical record for the CIO and the LIO. For each of these cases I merge data on international order membership from Braumoeller (2019) with the latest foreign policy ideal point estimates data developed by Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017) and democracy data from the Varieties of Democracy Project (Coppedge et al. 2026).

The analysis proceeds in four steps. I begin with a descriptive analysis showing that subordinates in orders hold much closer foreign policy and governance interests to leaders than other countries, consistent with the theoretical model and observable across both the CIO and LIO. I then conduct a time-series forecast analysis revealing that average subordinate distance from order leaders behaves as a non-stationary process, and that moments of strain coincide with leaders failing to keep subordinates aligned. The CIO collapse produced spikes in distance well beyond predicted bounds, while 2025 marks a statistically significant break in US–LIO alignment. A follow-up country-level analysis clarifies the directionality of these breaks. CIO collapse reflected a mutual scattering, consistent with the order leader's own disintegration, while in the LIO case, it is the US that systematically diverged from member preferences, portending trouble if these shifts prove too large for LIO members to absorb.

This study contributes to research on international order and hierarchy in three key ways. It extends the computational network model of van Beek et al. (2025) by endogenizing foreign policy and governance alignment, which their model fails to adequately capture. It demonstrates empirically that this extension explains systematic regularities in both the CIO and LIO that the original model

cannot. Finally, it offers actionable insights for policymakers and researchers navigating present-day debates about the LIO's survival and America's role as its hierarch.

Defining Order and Hierarchy

International order and hierarchy are well-worn concepts in the field of international relations, but a diversity of views lie beneath the surface (Beardsley et al. 2020; Braumoeller 2019; Lake 2011; McDonald 2015; Travlos 2016; Wallensteen 1984). Before any empirical analysis of international order is possible, it is necessary to clearly define what international order is. The starting point adopted here is the one recently presented by van Beek et al. (2025).

As van Beek et al. (2025) recently summarized, some conflict scholars define order, hierarchy, or hegemony purely in terms of the distribution of power (Gilpin 1981; Organski and Kugler 1980). In this view, the country with a preponderance of power is the hierarch that sets the rules for other countries in the system. A recent statement by US President Donald Trump's deputy chief of staff for policy, Stephen Miller, illustrates the idea succinctly: "you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world...that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power."³ It is a might-makes-right understanding of hierarchy and order.

In contrast, some, like Goddard and Newman (2025) most recently, treat international order as a description of how the international system operates as a whole. In their view, something like the Liberal International Order is more akin to the Westphalian state system in that it describes a set of accepted norms and patterns in the way countries interact with each other. Ikenberry (2011) offers a related perspective. Might-makes-right is a kind of international order that can exist, but so is a rules-based system defined by cooperation and respect for norms.

What both of these views lack is an appreciation for the reciprocal nature of international order, which van Beek et al. (2025) emphasize in their framework. They argue that relationships qualify as international orders if they are based on the logic of tribute-for-security, or equivalently patronage-for-privilege. This idea is similar to Lake (2011) and Braumoeller (2019), who view order

³ CNN interview with Stephen Miller by Jake Tapper:

<https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/05/politics/video/senior-white-house-aide-stephen-miller-says-us-military-threat-to-maintain-control-of-venezuela-digvid> (accessed May 27, 2026).

as hierarchical, but also relational and reciprocal. An order leader's "right to rule," to borrow Lake's phrasing, comes from the benefits it provides in exchange for subordination.

The purpose of orders is limited in this view: to function as a multilateral security regime, maintained by at least one major power, and legitimated by common norms and interests (Braumoeller 2019). International orders describe a relationship of legitimate authority between a hierarch (or leader) and subordinates, and the basis of this relationship is an institutionalized bargain in which hierarchs offer security in exchange for tribute. The goal is to maintain political order by reducing the chance of war.

The balance of power matters within this framework, as do norms. van Beek et al. (2025) assume explicitly that the only countries capable of sustaining an order are major powers with sufficient capabilities to offer security to subordinates. Further, van Beek et al. (2025) argue that tribute-for-security exchange is far cheaper when subordinates share interests in common with their leader. Unlike a might-makes-right perspective, a preponderance of power does not on its own confer status as a hierarch. And unlike the view that an order is simply a description of how the international system operates, an order is not simply a collection of norms and expectations for how countries behave. Both power and norms matter, and reciprocity and consent are the glue that holds them together.

Other recent perspectives, while not identical, complement this view. Related perspectives variously frame the US as a "system maker and privilege taker" (Mastanduno 2009), or emphasize patronage and declining hegemony (Cooley and Nexon 2020), but these accounts focus narrowly on the LIO. Mearsheimer (2019) is a recent exception, though he uses slightly different semantics, reserving the term "international" for an order that includes all great powers instead of at least one, and developing an order typology based on the ideological ends, or lack thereof, of the order leader. The van Beek et al. (2025) framework goes beyond these perspectives to generalize across orders by centering the reciprocal logic of tribute-for-security.

van Beek et al. (2025) do make some simplifying assumptions that bracket away factors considered by others, but this is necessary for the framework to generalize. While the exact content of hierarchical relationships might vary across time and space, van Beek et al. (2025) contend that all orders share common features and follow the same basic logic. Some might see this simplicity as a weakness, but it provides analytical clarity about what an order is that can be applied to many different contexts and periods of time. Unlike Cooley and Nexon (2020) and Mastanduno (2009),

for example, van Beek et al. (2025) do not try to explain only the LIO, but international orders in general, of which the LIO is one manifestation.

Core Assumptions About Order

The framework that van Beek et al. (2025) adopt is predicated on eight theoretical assertions about states, war, and hierarchies that, combined, make it possible to both define international order and to make theoretically grounded predictions. Those interested in a deeper discussion of these assumptions should read the full description in van Beek et al. (2025). I provide only a brief sketch here.

First, for states and war:

- **Assumption 1:** States have varying power, and the most powerful are potential hierarchs (order leaders).
- **Assumption 2:** States have varying intrinsic and governance interests (some are democracies, and others autocracies, for example).
- **Assumption 3:** Disputes are more likely among countries with different interests.
- **Assumption 4:** Wars follow from bargaining failure over disputed issues.

For hierarchies:

- **Assumption 5:** Hierarchies reduce uncertainty about, and increase, an opponent's war cost (that is, orders involve information exchange and security guarantees).
- **Assumption 6:** States pay a tribute to join a hierarchy, which is set by the hierarch (which might include political reforms or alignment on foreign policy issues.).
- **Assumption 7:** The tribute hierarchs demand is inversely proportional to closeness of governance interests with a potential subordinate and the subordinate's intrinsic strategic value.
- **Assumption 8:** States strategically join a hierarchy or leave based on the trade-off between contracting to a hierarch and the risk of war.

These assumptions rest on a well-established literature, but they are incomplete. They conveniently ignore how order membership and the governance and foreign policy positions of subordinates influence each other, or might evolve over time. van Beek et al. (2025) explicitly admit that this is a limitation. For instance, countries joining an order may take steps to more closely align themselves

with the preferences of hierarchs to reduce the cost of tribute. Closer alignment may also be something the hierarch demands of its subordinates in exchange for security.

In the next section I describe and justify endogenizing governance and foreign policy ideal points to better capture the dynamic interaction between hierarchs and subordinates. These modifications offer a substantial theoretical innovation to the work done by van Beek et al. (2025), and provide new insights into the mechanisms of order formation and collapse.

Dynamic Endogenous Foreign Policy and Governance Alignment Within Orders

One of the most commendable characteristics of the model van Beek et al. (2025) put forward is its simplicity. Countries evaluate their utility under anarchy versus hierarchy, and their individual choice, while made in light of the capabilities and preferences of other countries, does not hinge directly on others' behavior (save for their own decisions about joining a hierarchy). The decision boils down to a binary trade-off: weighing the security advantages of contracting to a hierarch against the exogenous cost of paying tribute.

But as noted above, van Beek et al. (2025) treat both foreign policy and governance interests as exogenous. While they both affect dispute probability and the latter affects tribute costs, order leaders presumably have an interest in shaping the foreign policies and governance of the countries under their authority. This is consistent with well-known Cold War politics: UN voting alignment was a battleground between orders, and hierarchs actively promoted governance models among subordinates. I therefore revise Assumptions 6 and 7 to make tribute a function of closing foreign policy and governance distance over time:

- **Assumption 6 (Revised):** States pay a tribute to join a hierarchy, which takes the form of closing the distance between their own foreign policy and governance positions and those of the hierarch over time.
- **Assumption 7 (Revised):** The tribute hierarchs demand is inversely proportional to closeness of foreign policy and governance interests with a potential subordinate. As subordinates move closer to a hierarch's own position, the tribute cost declines as well.

These revisions have two important implications. The first is that countries that fall farther from a potential hierarch's foreign policy position (in addition to their governance interests) will pay more in tribute, all else equal. The second is that the choice to join an order changes the risk of a dispute arising between countries conditional on the order membership decisions made by others. The

reason is that countries now must adopt new foreign policy and governance positions in exchange for security. As van Beek et al. (2025) note in Assumption 3, diverging foreign policy and governance interests are a cause of disputes between countries. Joining an order changes the risk of disputes that could lead to war, and the extent of the change depends on how many, and which, other countries join an order as well, and if so, which order.

From a modeling perspective, the second implication does substantial violence to the parsimony of the original framework proposed by van Beek et al. (2025). When countries evaluate the trade-offs of joining an order, the decision of one now influences the trade-offs for others, not only with respect to bargaining if a dispute arises, but with respect to the probability of a dispute that triggers bargaining. If countries choose to join the same order, the risk of a dispute between them will be lower because their foreign policy positions will now align with their hierarchy's, and by extension, each other. But if one enters an order while another remains outside, or joins a competing order, their risk of a dispute may increase. The choice to align with an order is now far more complex.

Modeling these more complex dynamics with a computational model helps to make the implications of endogenizing order formation and governance and foreign policy interests clearer, so in the next section I provide an outline of a simulation I perform and summarize the results. The simulation is based on the one that van Beek et al. (2025) develop, but I make a few modifications to streamline the computational demands required to generate insights. Analysis with the updated model shows that orders can only take so much deviation in order leader governance and foreign policy preferences before they collapse entirely.

Simulating Order Formation

To assess how assumptions about war and order formation add up to clear predictions, van Beek et al. (2025) developed a formal model of the generative process of hierarchy formation. Unlike many other perspectives that focus on conflict in dyadic interactions among countries (Fearon 1995; Filson and Werner 2002; and Slantchev and Tarar 2011), van Beek et al. (2025) treat hierarchy formation as a multilateral process in their model, which means closed-form solutions are difficult to derive (Jung and Lake 2011). Simulation, therefore, offers advantages.

The model van Beek et al. (2025) develop is founded on canonical formalizations of the probability of disputes among states and the bargaining process that follows. It encodes all the

original assumptions mentioned above. Dispute initiation is simply a function of diverging foreign policy and governance ideal points (Diehl 1992; Hensel 2001), and bargaining is a straightforward take-it-or-leave-it setup where war is costly but systemic uncertainty prevents countries from knowing with certainty their opponent's war cost (Fey and Kenkel 2021). van Beek et al. (2025) further allow states to interact with each other simultaneously so that countries evaluate how joining a hierarchy affects their expected utility across their interactions with all other countries in the international system. The benefit countries receive from subordination is a reduction in their uncertainty about, and an increase in, their opponents' war cost. Essentially, subordinates benefit from access to information and security guarantees (Axelrod and Keohane 1985; and Keohane 1986). To get this benefit, though, subordinates must pay tribute to the hierarch. Tribute increases in proportion to the size of the international system, and declines the more aligned a hierarch and subordinates are on governance interests, or the more a subordinate is strategically valuable to the hierarch (Lake 1996, 2013).

Based on my refinements to Assumption 6 and 7, I further encode into the model the assumption that the cost of tribute is proportional to the distance between a hierarch's and subordinate's governance *and* foreign policy interests. Further, if countries choose to contract their security to a hierarch, they must gradually transition their foreign policy and governance ideal points closer to the hierarch's in exchange for cheaper tribute over time. This further means that when subordinates interact with other countries in the international system, they do so with effective governance and foreign policy positions different from what they would be under anarchy.

I re-programmed the simulation based on the description outlined in van Beek et al. (2025), but with modifications to improve efficiency since the original simulation can be computationally expensive. These modifications boil down to the elimination of various sources of stochastic noise. In the original model such sources included the strategic importance of countries to a hierarch, and the onset of disputes and of war used to inform the utility of anarchy versus hierarchy. Instead, I hold strategic value constant, and use the probabilities of disputes and war, rather than revealed outcomes, to compute expected utilities. These choices reduce the number of iterations required to generate statistically robust inferences.

First, the probability of a dispute between country i and j is proportional to the euclidean distance in their governance and foreign policy interests: $d_{ij} = \sqrt{0.5(r_i - r_j)^2 + 0.5(s_i - s_j)^2}$.

The value $r \in [0,1]$ captures foreign policy positions, and the value $s \in [0,1]$ captures governance positions. For simplicity, I proceed as though both sets of interests are given equal weight, while van Beek et al. (2025) allow them to randomly vary. Keeping values on the unit interval, and making the weights equal to 0.5 ensures that the euclidean distance is restricted to the unit interval so that d_{ij} is directly proportional to the probability of a dispute.

Conditional on a dispute arising, countries i and j enter the bargaining process. If i initiates, it makes a demand $x \in [0,1]$ such that it maximizes: $u_{ij} = p_{war} \times (0.5 - k_i) + (1 - p_{war}) \times x$. The probability of war, p_{war} , is determined by: $p_{war} = \Phi[(x - k_j - 0.5)/\sigma]$. The value 0.5 is the probability of victory, which is treated as a constant, matching what van Beek et al. (2025) do in their own analysis. The value $k \in \mathbb{R}^+$ is the cost of war, and is allowed to vary by country. This choice simplifies the analysis by folding in the distribution of power with the cost of war while bracketing the probability of victory. The end result is the same as if the probability of victory was allowed to vary as well: powerful countries are those with low war costs, which implies they have an advantage in bargaining (just as a country would have with a higher probability of victory than its opponent).

The parameter $\sigma \in \mathbb{R}^+$ is a constant term that applies to the whole international system, and it captures systemic uncertainty about the cost of war for an opponent. $\Phi(\cdot)$ is the normal cumulative distribution function, which maps i 's demand, j 's cost of war, and systemic uncertainty to the probability that j rejects a negotiated settlement and, thus, the probability of war. The bigger the demand made by i , the higher the probability that j 's war payoff is greater than its payoff from a peaceful bargain.

Country i 's final expected utility from its interaction with country j is further given as: $U_{ij} = d_{ij}u_{ij} + (1 - d_{ij}) \times 0.5$. This formulation imposes that i 's expected utility from interacting with j is either its expected utility from bargaining if a dispute arises, or otherwise is equivalent to i and j sharing an issue equally.

The math of each dyadic interaction assumes anarchy as its baseline, but if a country chooses to contract to a hierarchy, it does so with the following adjustments: (1) i pays a tribute cost; (2) i adopts a new working set of foreign policy and governance positions; (3) systemic uncertainty, from i 's perspective, is reduced; and (4) j 's cost of war increases.

In the simulation, this means specifically that i pays the following tribute, which is subtracted from its overall utility from interactions with other countries: $T_{ih} = 0.5 \times N \times$

$\sqrt{0.5 \times (s_{ih} - s_h)^2 + 0.5 \times (r_{ih} - r_h)^2}$. This formulation imposes that the tribute cost increases with the number of countries in the international system, N , as well as the euclidean distance between the foreign policies and governance of i and the hierarchy h . These choices capture the intuition that the cost of providing security becomes more expensive for a hierarchy the larger the international system, while it is less costly for the hierarchy to offer security to countries closer to its own foreign policy and governance ideal points. Note, however, that country i 's own positions are modified to reflect a gradual march toward the hierarchy's positions (r_{ih} and s_{ih}). For convenience, assume i closes the distance by half: $r_{ih} = r_i - 0.5 \times (r_i - r_h)$; $s_{ih} = s_i - 0.5 \times (s_i - s_h)$.

These new working positions then inform the chance of a dispute arising between i and j , which will also vary depending on whether each country joins an order, and which order in particular each chooses.

If a dispute arises when i is under hierarchy, systemic uncertainty, and j 's war cost are now, respectively: $\sigma_h = \sigma \times 0.5j$; $k_{jh} = k_j \times 5$. These forms impose that order membership cuts systemic uncertainty in half (from i 's perspective) and increases j 's war cost five-fold. Further, if j is also under hierarchy, i 's own war cost would increase five-fold as well.

Under these conditions, country i evaluates its total utility across all dyadic interactions under a hierarchy's patronage, or under anarchy. If $\sum_{j=1}^{N-1} U_{ijjh} \geq \sum_{j=1}^{N-1} U_{ija}$, country i will choose to contract security to the hierarchy h . Otherwise, it will remain under a state of anarchy.

Finally, the updated model is dynamic, and in each new period, countries reevaluate their hierarchy choices based on the criteria above. Changes in ideal points are allowed to evolve from one period to the next with a degree of uncertainty, $\mu \sim U(0,1)$, to capture idiosyncratic domestic influences on country positions over time. To ensure positions remain on the unit interval, a subsequent period's new ideal point for i is computed as a weighted average of the previous period's and μ : $r_{it} = \omega r_{it-1} + (1 - \omega)\mu$; $s_{it} = \omega s_{it-1} + (1 - \omega)\mu$.

In principle, ω might take any value on the unit interval. The smaller ω is, the larger the random variation in ideal points from one period to the next. The larger ω is, the more stability there is in country positions. In the simulation, $\omega = 0.95$ to keep random variation modest (which is typical for most countries in practice). In real world settings, a selection of countries periodically may show high volatility in positions, which is a factor worth exploring in future research.

Subordinate positions also continue to converge toward h 's by half the distance from the previous period to the next (subject to random variation introduced by μ). As a result, subordinates can expect the cost of tribute to decline over time as they more closely align with the hierarchy's interests. This serves to lock-in subordinates. In practice, hierarchs have many methods for discounting tribute (foreign aid, for example), though the exact means will differ across orders.

The technique for finding an equilibrium at a given point in time can be computationally intensive. Countries need to judge the value of membership conditional on the membership decisions made by other countries in a given period, so the evaluation stage needs to run through a series of rounds before optimal strategies are converged upon. An equilibrium is typically reached in 2 rounds, but more are sometimes required. In edge cases (0.1% of the time) cycles emerge. A steady equilibrium simply implies that all the countries in the system have no incentives to deviate from their hierarchy decision given what other countries have decided.

To assess the effect of governance and ideological distance between a hierarchy and subordinates, I ran a simulation that is much smaller than the one done by van Beek et al. (2025), but sufficient for confirming the directional effect of governance and ideology on order membership. For interested readers, the R code to replicate the simulation is included in the online appendix, and a sketch of each component is included there. I repeatedly simulated relatively small international systems of 20 countries, each with one potential order leader, identified as the country with the lowest cost of war. These countries were allowed to interact, and make their order membership choices across 10 successive time periods. Country-specific costs were drawn at random from a uniform distribution from 0.1 to 1. Starting ideological and governance preferences were drawn from uniform distributions from 0.4 to 0.6 for non-hierarchs, while the preferences of the hierarchy were manipulated directly to fall systematically farther from the center of mass of potential subordinate positions.

Two basic scenarios were considered to assess how the speed of deviations in hierarchy preferences affects order membership. In the first scenario, after 6 time periods where the hierarchy's own r and s values were held at 0.5 (subject to random noise from μ), the hierarchy's ideal points are triggered to begin moving, but gradually, at a pace 0.05 units per time period before stopping at a distance of 0.2 units from the starting position by period 10. For completeness, I ran this scenario three different ways: one where only r shifts, one where only s shifts, and one where both r and s shift simultaneously.

The second scenario began like the first, but after 6 periods, hierarchy positions were triggered to change more dramatically. Rather than moving by intervals of 0.05 from one period to the next until reaching a final distance of 0.2 from starting positions, hierarchy positions jumped to a distance of 0.2 in a single period, then remained at this new position. Again, for completeness, I ran this scenario where only r shifts, only s shifts, and both shift simultaneously.

Because the model still contains a stochastic component driven by random variation in country war costs, starting ideal points, and evolution in ideal points over time, I iterate these scenarios 20 rounds each to ensure the patterns that emerge are robust and not driven by one or a few unique combinations of parameters. Even with such a small simulation, the process is still quite computationally intensive, taking about 35 minutes to complete.

Figure 1 shows the results, which are unequivocal: orders are far more robust to gradual changes in hierarchy preferences than to abrupt changes. The figure reports order membership rates under a hierarchy across 10 points in time averaged across 20 different simulated international systems. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals are included as well. The figure is divided into six panels. The top row shows how membership rates vary when a gradual change in hierarchy ideal points occurs after the sixth time period, while the bottom row shows the same when an abrupt change in hierarchy ideal points occurs after the sixth time period. The first column shows how membership changes when only the hierarchy's foreign policy shifts, the second when its governance shifts, and the third when both shift simultaneously.

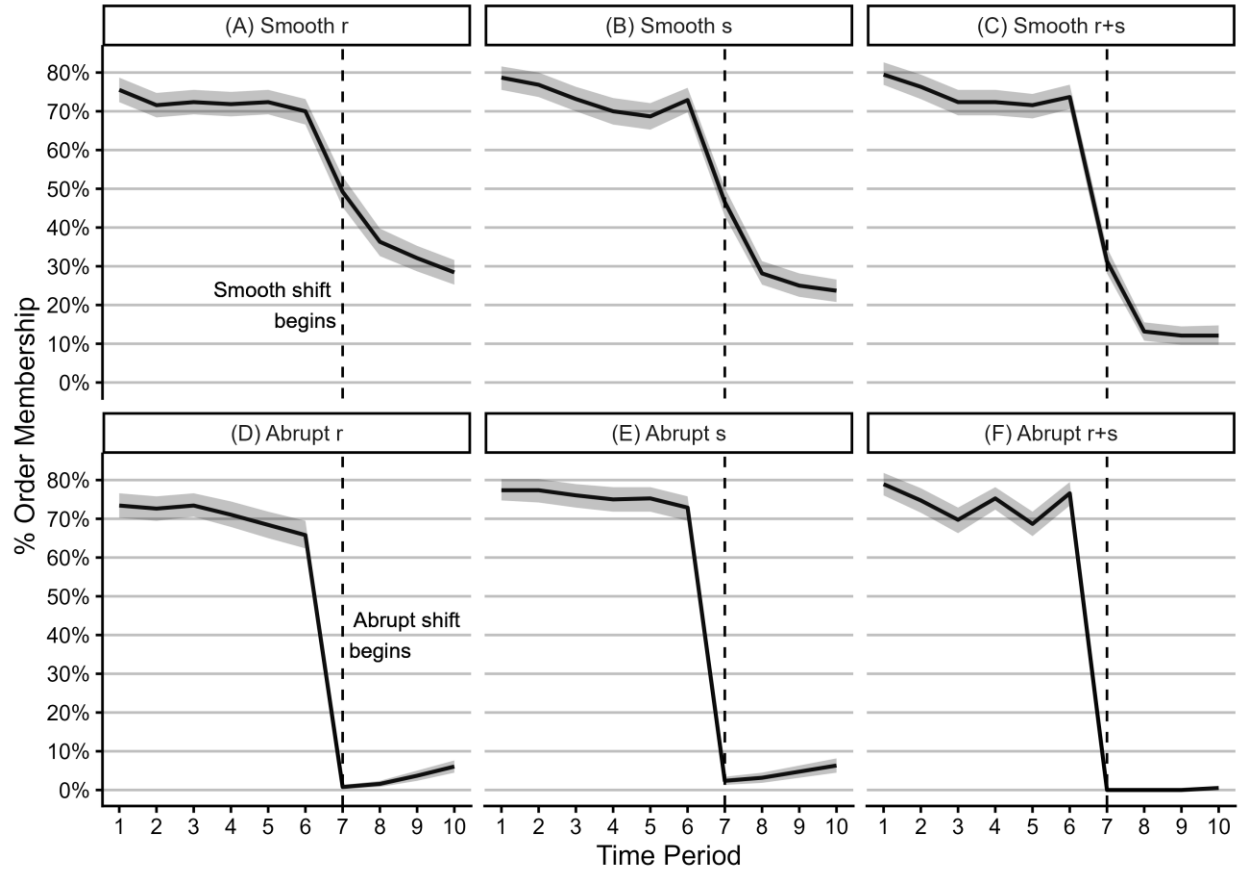


Figure 1: Rate of international order membership for simulated international systems of 20 states and 1 potential leader (hierarchy).

Order survival depends on the speed and magnitude of shifts in a hierarchy's preferences. When change is gradual, an order shrinks, but does not vanish entirely. The systemic membership rate drops from about 70% to a little less than 25-30% when only one dimension of the hierarchy's preferences shifts gradually, and to about 12% when both shift simultaneously. However, when a hierarchy's preferences move abruptly, collapse in membership is immediate. Membership declines from over 70% to 0%, regardless of whether only one dimension of the hierarchy's preferences shifts or both. This dramatic difference emerges even though the final end state (a difference of 0.2 units from a hierarchy's initial ideal points) is the same as the gradual scenario. Note, however, that when the abrupt shift happens only for one dimension, the order has a modest rebound as some countries naturally drift close enough the hierarchy's new position to make rejoining the order cost effective. However, such a rebound fails to materialize when the abrupt shift in hierarchy positions occurs for both foreign policy and governance interests simultaneously.

Consistent with the mechanisms captured by the model, the countries that remain under hierarchy are those that can adapt their own foreign policies and governance to align with the shifting preferences of the hierarchy. Figures 1A and 2A in the online appendix show how the average order member across all simulations adapts.

Two mechanisms drive these findings. The first is that when hierarchies move away too far, too quickly, many countries cannot afford to make the leap. The second is that staying with the hierarchy as it moves farther away would force countries to adhere to interests that also fall farther from the center of mass of other countries that remain outside of the order, or leave the order due to the higher cost of tribute. Even though staying with a hierarchy means countries can maintain an edge in bargaining should disputes arise, the choice to stay with the hierarchy also means the risk of disputes, and thus war, increases the farther away from other countries the hierarchy falls. To mitigate this problem, countries within the order would have to collectively agree that the start-up costs of aligning with a distant hierarchy are worth bearing. If a critical number cannot bear that cost, joining a distant hierarchy becomes unprofitable even for the countries that could otherwise bear the cost. Remaining under hierarchy becomes a collective action problem, in addition to a cost-benefit calculation.

These new insights go beyond those provided by van Beek et al. (2025), and are helpful for guiding the empirical analysis that follows. But the present model still has important blind spots. If so inclined, a hierarchy could plausibly reduce the rate at which subordinates are required to converge on its new foreign policy and governance ideal points, effectively offering a discount in exchange for continued subordination. Orders could also potentially rally around a new hierarchy to succeed the old one whose preferences are now too out of step with subordinates. Other scenarios can be imagined as well, which go beyond the scope of this simulation.

These limitations do not change the main implication, however: hierarchies compel subordinates to converge toward their own interests, but when order leaders break away from their subordinates' ideological and governance preferences too far, too quickly, their order is at risk of falling apart unless other contingencies are in place. The next sections apply these insights to the empirical record, which is well explained by the theoretical model.

Data and Methods

For the empirical analysis, I draw on three primary data sources which I use to create a country-year dataset covering the Cold War and post-Cold-War periods. International order membership comes from Braumoeller (2019), whose dataset identifies countries participating in the US-led Liberal International Order (LIO) and the Soviet-led Communist International Order (CIO) across the Cold War and post-Cold-War periods.⁴ Foreign policy alignment is measured using UNGA ideal points developed by Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017), which are estimated from voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly and scaled to standard deviation units to reflect latent foreign policy preferences. Governance preferences are measured using the polyarchy index from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (Coppedge et al. 2026), which is a continuous 0-to-1 indicator of the degree to which a political system approximates liberal democracy.

To ensure that the data are relevant as of 2025, I extrapolated LIO order membership based on values valid as of 2014 reported by Braumoeller (2019). This approach assumes that LIO order membership was unchanged between 2014 and 2025, which is a sound judgment. Criteria used to identify LIO memberships as of 2014 include NATO allies, neutral liberal democratic countries, and European Union memberships. The countries that fell on any of these lists have not changed since 2014, though some have joined or left at least one of the lists without dropping out of the relevant criteria entirely. I further used the latest UNGA values available at the Harvard Dataverse page for Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017), and version 16 of V-Dem’s polyarchy index, both of which provide coverage up to, and including, 2025.⁵

For each country-year observation, I calculated the absolute distance between a country’s UNGA ideal point and that of the relevant order leader: the United States for the LIO and the Soviet Union (Russia after 1991) for the CIO. I do the same for the absolute distance between V-Dem polyarchy scores. These distance measures serve as the primary outcomes in two

⁴ The original code to generate order membership data can be found on the Harvard Dataverse page for Braumoeller (2019):

<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/Q90FOB>.

⁵ The relevant ideal point data can be directly downloaded from here:

<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?fileId=13642025&version=38.0>. Version 16 of the V-Dem was accessed from the `{vdemdata}` R package (Maerz et al. 2026).

complementary analyses: a descriptive cross-sectional comparison and a time-series forecasting analysis.

For the descriptive analysis, I compute average distances from order leaders, separately for countries within the relevant order, countries in a competing order, and countries outside any order. Cluster-robust confidence intervals are computed by clustering on country to account for repeated observations over time. This descriptive analysis is meant to provide confirmatory evidence that alignment on foreign policy and governance are important features of international order.

For the time-series analysis, I model the mean annual distance between an order leader and its subordinates as a non-stationary autoregressive (AR) process with the goal of estimating whether moments of order collapse (or suspected strain) coincide with anomalous breaks in foreign policy and governance alignment. For each outcome and international order, I take a data-driven approach to identifying the best model among a selection of alternatives. I consider variations that allow from 1 to 3 period lags, drift or no drift, and a time trend or no time trend. For model selection, I used Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) normalized by data size as recommended by Cohen and Berchenko (2021). This was essential for comparing AIC between models with alternative numbers of lags (each lag leads to the loss of one additional data point at the beginning of the time-series).

I estimated models for average CIO distance from the USSR/Russia using data from the start of the order's formation up to 1989. I estimated models for average LIO distance from the US with data from the post-CIO-collapse period beginning in 1992 up to 2024 to avoid any potential biases in estimating post-Cold-War trends from Cold War observations. Each model is then used to generate out-of-sample forecasts for the (suspected) collapse period and the years immediately following. I simulate 95% confidence intervals for forecasts using random draws from model residuals. Observed distances that fall outside these confidence intervals during the proposed collapse period I interpret as evidence of a statistically meaningful break from prior trends, consistent with collapse.

For the LIO, the proposed moment of collapse is 2025, following the inauguration of Donald Trump to a second presidential term. For the CIO, the proposed moment of collapse is 1990, the year after the Berlin Wall fell. In both cases, the out-of-sample forecast extends three years beyond the moment of proposed collapse.

The reasons for strain and collapse for the CIO and LIO are not identical, but each case provides helpful evidence for testing the usefulness of the theoretical model. The CIO collapsed, not because the Soviet Union departed too quickly from the effective positions of its subordinates, but

because the Soviet Union itself collapsed. This is not a scenario I considered in the theoretical analysis, but the effect this would have on foreign policy and governance alignment between the former hierarch and its subordinates is intuitive: subordinates no longer have an incentive to converge toward the preferences of the former Soviet Union (Russia). If the theoretical argument about the role of foreign policy and governance alignment in order formation is to be trusted, the Soviet Union's collapse should coincide with significant breaks in alignment.

LIO collapse, at this moment, is not known with certainty, so this case cannot, on its own, verify that the LIO has collapsed. Instead, the goal is to make inferences about the current status of the LIO in light of the theoretical analysis. If the speed of US departure from its pre-2025 foreign policy and governance positions is sufficiently abrupt and large, this implies LIO contraction or even collapse is on the horizon.

Analysis

I begin with the descriptive analysis of ideal point and governance distances between countries and order leaders by order membership to demonstrate the validity of using these metrics to assess the status of international order. I then turn to the results from the time-series analysis to demonstrate that moments of order collapse coincide with unexpected breaks in ideal point and governance proximity. Finally, I conclude with a brief look at the trends disaggregated to the country level to assess who moved away from whom at moments of stress/collapse.

Descriptive Evidence of Alignment within Orders

The first main descriptive finding is that ideology and governance preferences with order leaders systematically differ within, between, and beyond the boundaries of international order, consistent with the theoretical model. Figure 2 reports the average UNGA ideal point and V-Dem polyarchy score distances between countries in the world and the two competing order leaders during the Cold War. On average, countries within the US-led LIO and the Soviet-led CIO have more closely aligned ideological and governance interests with their respective order leaders. Conversely, CIO members are quite distant from the US on both metrics, as are LIO members with respect to the USSR. Countries outside order entirely are more distant from order leaders than those within an order, but not as distant as countries in competing orders. These findings, at minimum, are consistent with the argument that foreign policy and governance alignment are intimately tied to international order.

Avg. distance from order leader with 84% cluster-robust CIs

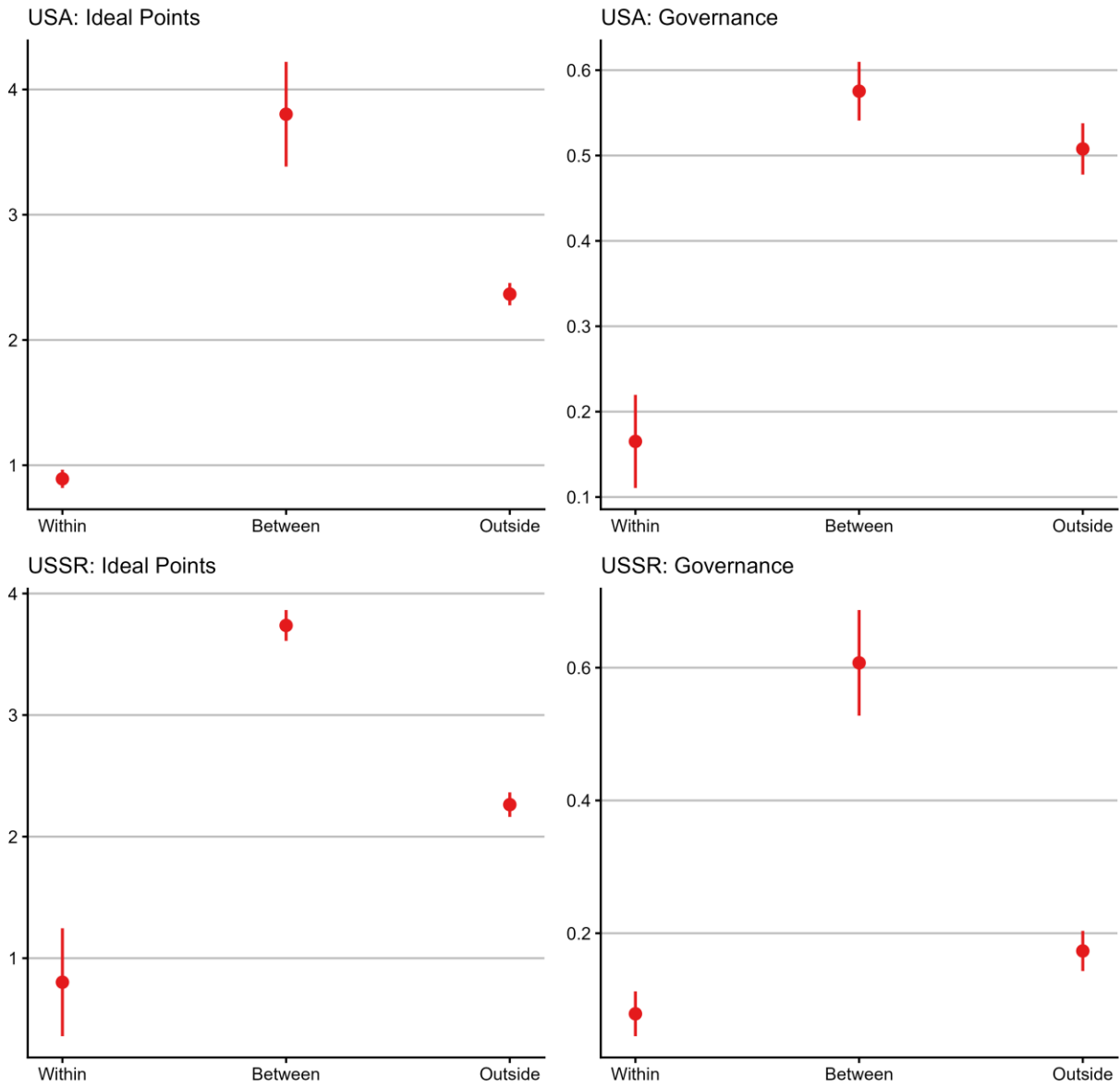


Figure 2: The average distance between countries and order leaders during the Cold War. Robust 84% CIs clustered by country are shown.

The basic pattern holds for the LIO after the Cold War. Figure 3 shows average distances between countries and the US from 1992 to 2025 based on membership in the LIO. After the Cold War, countries in the LIO maintained closer ideology and governance preferences with the US than countries outside the LIO by several orders of magnitude. These results, along with those in the previous figure, further support the theoretical model, showing that subordinates, indeed, are more

willing to join orders with an order leader that has similar ideological and governance preferences to their own.

Avg. distance from USA post-1991 with cluster-robust 84% CIs

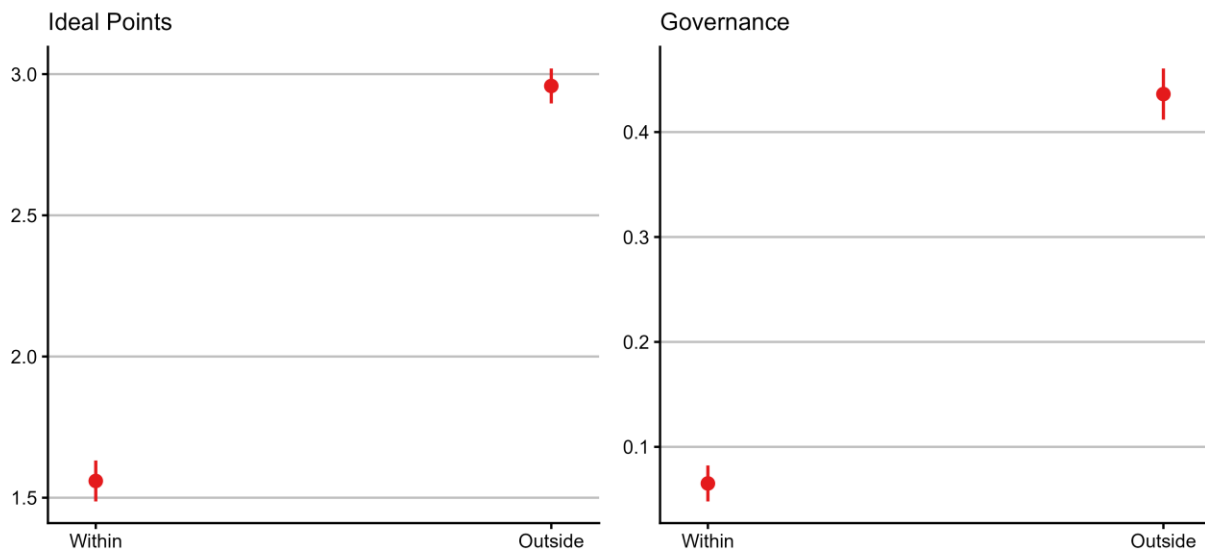


Figure 3: The average distance between countries and the US in the post-Cold-War period from 1992 to 2025.

Robust 84% CIs clustered by country are shown.

Evidence That Breaks in Alignment Coincide with Collapse

If it is true that countries within orders are more closely aligned with an order leader's ideology and governance preferences, then it should also be the case that breaks in alignment coincide with order collapse. The results from the time-series analysis support this view.

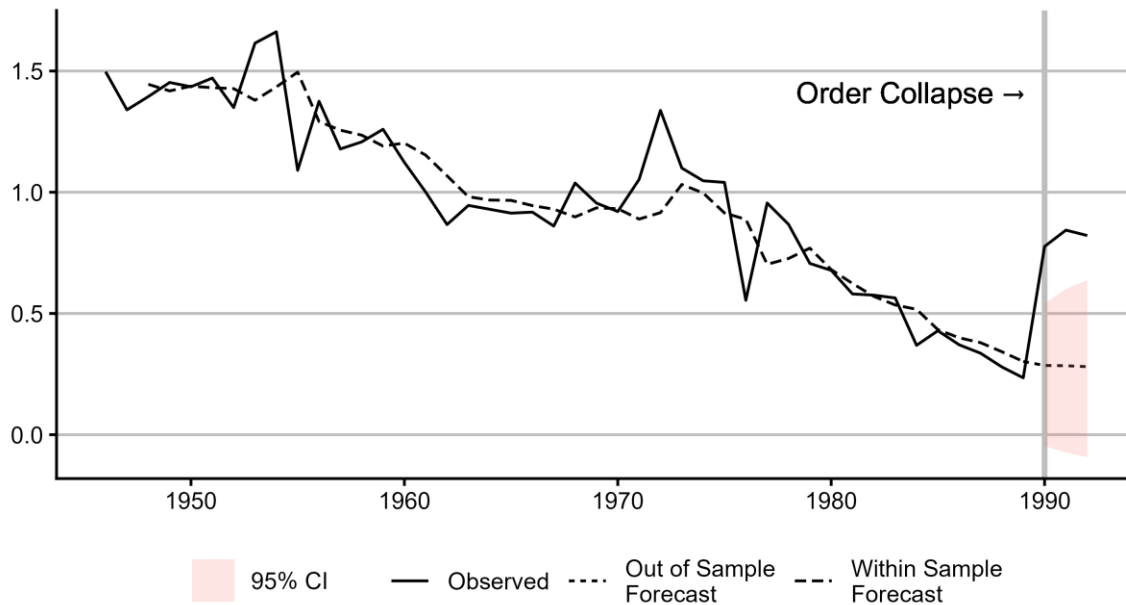
The first set of results show how this played out for the CIO with respect to UNGA ideal points. This is an important case to consider, despite the fact that the reason for the CIO's collapse is not the shifting preferences of the order leader, but the inability of the order leader to continue to function as a hierarchy. If the Soviet Union's own collapse coincides with a sudden break in its ability to keep its subordinates aligned with its interests, this supports the argument that order hierarchies simultaneously attract subordinates closer to their own preferences, while subordinates have incentives to converge their effective preferences toward their hierarchy's.

Figure 4 reports the observed and forecast mean ideal point distance between the USSR (Russia post-collapse) and CIO subordinates up to and immediately following the collapse of the CIO. Forecast values prior to collapse are within-sample predictions. Those after are out-of-sample predictions along with simulated 95% CIs. During much of the Cold War, CIO subordinates were

steadily converging with the UNGA ideal point of the USSR. But after 1990 the trend suddenly and unexpectedly reversed, far beyond the range of values consistent with the forecast. UNGA ideal points are scaled to standard deviation units. The magnitude of the difference in 1990 between observed and predicted values is more than half a standard deviation.

Collapse → break in ideological alignment with order leader

Mean Ideal Point Distance between USSR and Subordinates, 1946-1992



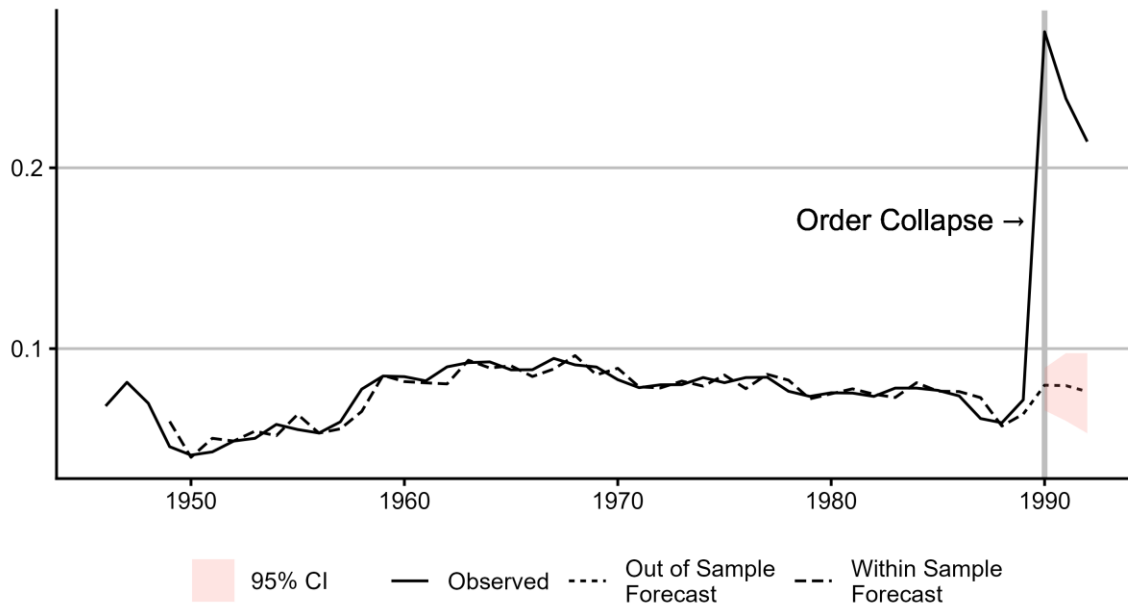
Forecast based on best fitting model: AR(2) with drift and a time trend

Figure 4: The observed and forecast UNGA ideal point distance between the USSR and CIO subordinates up to and immediately following collapse.

A similar pattern can be observed for V-Dem polyarchy scores. Figure 5 shows results from a time-series analysis like the one shown in Figure 4, but this time using average V-Dem polyarchy score distance from the USSR (Russia post-collapse) as the outcome. The time of CIO collapse coincides with a dramatic worsening in governance alignment that far exceeds forecast values. In relative terms, the break in governance alignment for the CIO was far worse at the moment of collapse than for foreign policy alignment, which may suggest that governance was more central to CIO cohesion than foreign policy alignment. In 1990 the average polyarchy score distance increased from less than 0.1 units to well over 0.25. That is a substantial deviation on polyarchy's 0-1 scale.

Collapse → break in governance alignment with order leader

Mean Governance Distance between USSR and Subordinates, 1946-1992



Forecast based on best fitting model: AR(3) with drift and no time trend

Figure 5: The observed and forecast *V-Dem* polyarchy score distance between the USSR and CIO subordinates up to and immediately following collapse.

Outcomes for the LIO in 2025 provide evidence of breaks that parallel those observed for the CIO during its collapse in the early 1990s. The results for UNGA ideal points are shown in Figure 6. In 2025, the year that many observers suspect marks the time of LIO collapse, there is a major worsening in the ideological distance between the US and LIO subordinates that extends beyond the range of forecast values. The difference is more than one standard deviation, which is twice the magnitude of the break observed for the CIO in 1990.

Collapse → break in ideological alignment with order leader

Mean Ideal Point Distance between USA and Subordinates, 1992-2025



Forecast based on best fitting model: AR(1) with drift and a time trend

Figure 6: The observed and forecast UNGA ideal point distance between the US and LIO subordinates up to and immediately following the moment of proposed collapse.

A similar pattern occurs in average V-Dem polyarchy score distances, as shown in Figure 7. The 2025 break is statistically different from the 2025 forecast, but the magnitude is much smaller than that observed for the CIO in 1990. The 2025 forecast distance is about 0.087, but the actual distance is about 0.112. The main factor driving this break is a substantial demoting of the US's polyarchy score by V-Dem in 2025. If the US score continues to worsen in the coming years, the break between the US and LIO members may worsen. But if it remains steady, the difference could return to the pre-2025 trend. Note that the polyarchy score distance from the mid-2000s to 2024 had been slowly growing, without major changes to the United States' score. This finding offers empirical support for Cooley and Nexon (2020), who argue that LIO alignment on governance (i.e., liberal democracy) has eroded steadily for decades. 2025, however, was a statistically significant shock, which may lead some to worry that the LIO is no longer just weakening, but disintegrating entirely.

Collapse → break in governance alignment with order leader

Mean Governance Distance between USA and Subordinates, 1980-2025



Forecast based on best fitting model: AR(1) with drift and a time trend

Figure 7: The observed and forecast V-Dem polyarchy score distance between the US and LIO subordinates up to and immediately following the moment of proposed collapse.

Who Broke From Whom?

One limitation with the aggregate time-series is that average distance can worsen either because the hierarch moved away from its subordinates, or because subordinates moved away from the hierarch. These are distinct mechanisms with different policy implications. It is worth checking who broke away from whom in the case of the CIO and the LIO. Figures 3A-6A in the online appendix show observed UNGA ideal points and V-Dem polyarchy scores for countries in the world, with either CIO or LIO subordinates highlighted, along with their respective hierarchs, over time.

The story for the CIO is that cohesive governance preferences and foreign policy ideology simply disintegrated. This is consistent with the reason for the CIO's collapse. The USSR didn't suddenly change its policies too far, too quickly. It ceased to exist. As a result, its former subordinates no longer had incentives to converge toward the former Soviet Union's (Russia's) preferences. As a result, ideal points and democracy scores scattered.

The story is different with the US and the LIO. The LIO collapse (if it is indeed happening) corresponds with an unmistakable break in US preferences from its subordinates, similar to the

scenarios considered in the theoretical simulation. It is too early to tell if these breaks are sufficiently large to lead to complete order collapse, or just a modest contraction in order size. But they do offer empirical support for concerns about the status of the LIO.

Conclusion

This paper asked what role foreign policy and governance interests play in the formation of international order, and whether it is possible to use these factors to monitor order health and identify moments of stress and collapse. The answer is yes on both counts. Grounding the analysis in a computational network model of order formation inspired by van Beek et al. (2025), I make the argument that two metrics provide theoretically principled indicators of order health: ideological distance and governance distance between an order leader and its subordinates. The model captures the endogenous roots of order formation and ideological and governance alignment, and simulations confirm that order membership declines the farther a potential leader falls from other countries on these two dimensions, especially when the order leader breaks from its previous positions too far, too quickly. This provides a theoretical justification for treating significant breaks in alignment as evidence of order stress or collapse.

Applying these metrics to the collapse of the Soviet-led Communist International Order and the contemporary US-led Liberal International Order, I find empirical patterns consistent with theoretical predictions. A descriptive analysis confirms that closer ideological and governance interests between order leaders and subordinates is a feature of international orders in practice. A time-series analysis shows that moments of collapse or stress coincide with significant divergence in ideal points and governance. For the CIO, the break is sharp and unambiguous on both measures and occurs at the time of CIO collapse. A similar pattern appears for the LIO in 2025 when many observers believe the order began undergoing acute stress under the second Trump Administration. The results imply an order under strain, although they do not definitively prove that the LIO has collapsed.

These findings have both scholarly and policy implications. First, the results demonstrate that quantitative, longitudinal data can be used to monitor the health of international order in something close to real-time. The word “close” is key, since the present analysis relies on metrics that require some time to gather and, at best, lag by one calendar year. Quantitative assessment remains retrospective, but the methods proposed here are replicable as new data become available,

making them potentially useful tools for ongoing monitoring. In addition, real-time qualitative assessments of country alignment and governance preferences by experts are certainly possible. The empirical results in this study suggest that votes in the UN (particularly for salient issues) and events in the US that signal democratic erosion are the right places to look for developing informed assessments about the LIO's status.

For policymakers and observers watching the LIO, the results offer qualified validation of existing concerns. The 2025 readings on both ideal points and democracy scores are the largest breaks in the post-Cold-War record. Whether they are sufficient to constitute order collapse, or merely a significant but surmountable shift, cannot be determined from the data alone. The theoretical model identifies that when breaks are large enough and fast enough, subordinates cannot bear the tribute cost of realignment, but the empirical data does not permit direct measurement of the relevant threshold. The data suggests reason for concern, but forecasting order collapse with absolute certainty simply is not possible.

For international relations scholars, this study offers novel theoretical insights that build directly on, and extend, a formal computational model of international order formation, originally proposed by van Beek et al. (2025). The online appendix contains the code and relevant descriptions necessary for replicating the model and adapting it to consider a wide range of scenarios beyond the scope of this study. This model, like the one that inspired it, need not be the last word on order formation. Accessible, replicable code, is an important contribution on its own that can support continued study of order formation and collapse.

This study does have some limitations. UNGA ideal points and the V-Dem polyarchy index are well-validated but partial proxies; additional governance dimensions (rule of law, executive constraint) or ways of capturing foreign policy agreement could enrich future analyses. Further, the theoretical model suggests an intricate causal relationship between foreign policy and governance, on the one hand, and order formation and collapse, on the other. But causation cannot be established directly from the empirical record. More sophisticated forecasting, such as Bayesian structural time-series or state-space models, could improve predictive precision, but even the most technically sophisticated methods cannot rule out alternative theoretical explanations or omitted variable bias.

Even so, by the criteria for judging a theoretical model's "goodness of fit," the one presented here performs well (Clarke and Primo 2012). It goes beyond the findings of van Beek et al. (2025) by explaining additional regularities in international order: namely, why foreign policy and governance alignment are features of international orders, and why order collapse would coincide

with breaks in subordinate alignment with hierarchies along these dimensions. The theoretical model and empirical analysis presented here provide much needed scaffolding for understanding one of the defining geopolitical challenges of the present moment.

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