

July 2020

Author

Dr. Stéphanie Martel

Unpacking the “Crisis” of the “Rules-Based International Order”: Competing Hero Narratives and Indo-Pacific Alternatives



About the Author



Stéphanie Martel is an Assistant Professor of Political Studies -specializing in International Relations- at Queen's University, where she is also a Fellow at the Centre for International and Defence Policy. Before joining Queen's, Dr. Martel was a FRQSC post-doctoral fellow at the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia, and the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies (McGill). Dr. Martel travels regularly to East and Southeast Asia for research and to take part in policy dialogues on regional security alongside representatives of government, academia, and civil society.

Funding Acknowledgment

This Working Paper was funded by the Defence and Security Foresight Group which receives funding from the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program designed to facilitate collaboration and mobilize knowledge between the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and academia and other experts on defence and security issues. Through its Targeted Engagement Grants, collaborative networks, scholarships, and expert briefings, MINDS works and collaborates with key partners to strengthen the foundation of evidence-based defence policy making. These partnerships drive innovation by encouraging new analyses of emerging global events, opportunities, and crises, while supporting a stronger defence and security dialogue with Canadians.

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Abstract

There is a broad consensus today that the “rules-based international order” (RBIO) is facing an unprecedented crisis. This situation has led to a proliferation of calls to protect, improve, or reform the RBIO to ensure its resilience in an evolving global landscape. Underlying most of these calls is a view of the RBIO as a self-evident “thing” with a fixed, consensual meaning. In practice, however, not much is consensual about the RBIO apart from a general sense that it is “in crisis”. In addition to a dominant, liberal, US-led variant of the RBIO, several alternative views on the RBIO are now emerging from China, Russia, as well as the United States, and vying for recognition. This article argues that the “crisis” of the RBIO is best understood as a clash of narratives about what a legitimate order ought to look like, who gets to be situated within or outside of it, and who is in a position to claim the authority of making this distinction. There is a need for the RBIO to be “made strange” as an unavoidable step in setting the stage for reconciliation and the development of a new consensus on global order that would stand a better chance at gathering “enthusiastic consent” from a broad diversity of stakeholders. Perspectives from the Indo-Pacific outline a path for doing so.

Keywords

Rules-based international order; Indo-Pacific; narratives; contestation; consensus

Introduction¹

There is a broad consensus today among scholars and practitioners of international relations alike that the “rules-based international order” (RBIO) is facing an unprecedented crisis. State leaders and policymakers in the West have been lamenting that “the international order as we know it is in danger of being eroded” (Prime Minister’s Office— United Kingdom 2017), that it is “facing its greatest test” yet (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade— Australia), and that it is “under siege” (Global Affairs Canada 2017). Yet this consensus is also attracting unlikely champions, as some of those who are otherwise singled out among the sources of the crisis come out in support of the RBIO. U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo thus also deplores that the international order has been allowed to “corrode” (U.S. Department of State 2018), while Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov worries that the current world order is “being ruined” (Bolotsy 2018).

This situation has led to a proliferation of calls to protect, support, improve, adapt, defend, and/or reform the RBIO, often simultaneously, as a way to ensure its resilience in an evolving global landscape. Yet despite a widespread tendency to present the RBIO as a self-evident “thing” in need of protection, with a fixed, consensual meaning, this paper shows that there is actually not much that is consensual about the RBIO. Beyond a general sense that it is “in crisis”, there is little agreement on what constitutes this order, what the crisis is about, who is causing it, or who is in a position to solve it.

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2018 Canada-Japan Peace and Security Symposium in Tokyo, the 2020 Halifax International Security Forum’s Peace With Women Fellowship Conference in Toronto, and the WIIS-Canada 2020 Twitter conference. The author would like to thank Jennifer Mustapha and David Welch, in particular, for their comments on prior drafts.

In other words, the rules-based international order is a “floating signifier”—it is an ambiguous, unstable concept that takes on a variety of meanings for social actors, and while it is not devoid of meaning and does propell action in specific directions, the paths of action taken by social actors who rely on it are actually multiple. The current state of discussions around the “crisis” of the RBIO thus highlights a need for it to be “made strange” instead of taken for granted.

This paper approaches the crisis of the RBIO from an unusual angle. It argues that the crisis of the RBIO is best understood as a clash of narratives in which social actors assert competing claims of legitimate authority in determining what the rules are, how they should be upheld, and who the upholders and the violators are, as a way to enhance their status on the global stage. All of these narratives share a number of common features. First, they draw from a specific understanding of what a legitimate global order entails, what kind of rules it embodies—including how they ought to be interpreted and ordained—and where the boundaries of the RBIO lie. Second, most RBIO narrative come with their own representation of who the “heroes” and the “villains” are, although their identity varies from one narrative to the other. Third, all of these narratives systematically position the “speaking subject” on the right side of the RBIO story.

RBIO narratives can be broken down into two types—which, drawing from popular culture, I refer to as “Marvel” and “Manga” narratives. On the one hand, “Marvel” narratives rely on a Manichean dichotomy and engage in radical forms of “Othering”. On the other hand, “Manga” narratives turn inward to emphasize self-responsibility in both crisis and solution, feature less radical Others, and engage in the competition for legitimate authority in a more constructive way. They seem particularly prevalent in interventions on RBIO from so-called “Indo-Pacific” states, although there is good reason to believe that they have similar salience elsewhere in the Global South. There are important lessons to be drawn from both types for how states and their agents take positions on the crisis of the RBIO. These lessons have practical implications for how Canada engages the Indo-Pacific.

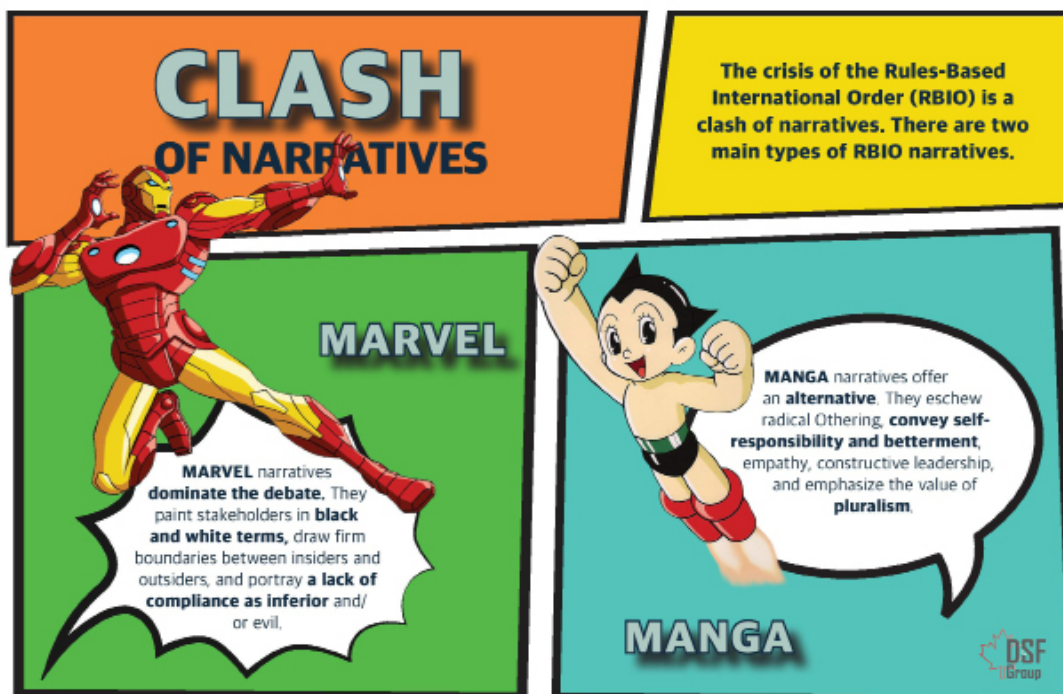


Figure 1: Clash of Narratives, MARVEL v. MANGA (RBIO narratives)

I posit that making the RBIO “strange” is a necessary move to enable the development of a genuine—if necessarily imperfect—consensus over the rules that allow international society to hang together. This is a difficult but unavoidable step in bringing about a more stable, effective, and legitimate global order for the 21st century, one that stands a chance of gathering “enthusiastic consent” from a broader set of stakeholders, and striking a better balance between order and justice at the global level. Gaining a better understanding of the social, normative, and discursive dimensions of the RBIO crisis is an important first step in this direction.

The RBIO as a Floating Signifier

The crisis of the RBIO is a powerful, but deeply contested story. While it is typically presented as self-evident, the meaning of the RBIO is a moving target, and the subject of continuous contestation and re-articulation as a result of competing attempts at stabilizing it. This power struggle involves competing claims of authority in defining what counts as a legitimate order, and it is done by engaging in the reproduction of a variety of RBIO narratives that co-exist on the global stage. Every RBIO narrative, however, is necessarily made up of three general claims:

- > There is something like a RBIO, the make-up of which is clearly identifiable;
- > This order is being threatened by a clearly identifiable set of challengers either situated at its margins or firmly outside its boundaries; and
- > The fact that it is in crisis is a “bad” thing, and the role of “good” actors in the international society is to actively strive to ensure its preservation.

While each of these elements is presented as self-evident in most commentaries on the RBIO, they are all questionable, and deserve to be “made strange”. While they are intertwined in practice, the remainder of this section unpacks each of the three claims (or “myths”²) individually. This section focuses mostly on “Marvel” narratives, but this type shares a number of similarities with the “Manga” type, discussed more extensively in Section 3.

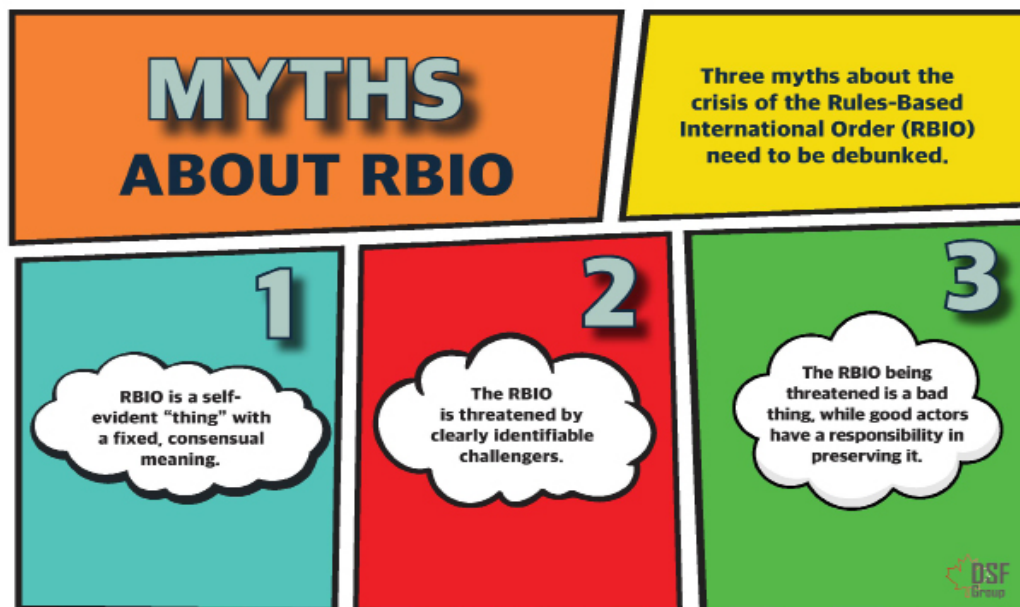


Figure 2: Myths about RBIO

² In this paper, I rely on a definition of “myth” as a legendary story, and not necessarily an unfounded or false notion. A myth, in this sense, tends to have blurry origins, no clearly identifiable single author, and contain a considerable amount of fiction (cf. Myth no. 1), while being presented as a true account of deeds, events, or phenomena. It typically involves monsters (cf. Myth no. 2) and heroes (cf. Myth no. 3). It also has contemporary significance.

Myth no. 1: There is something like a RBIO, the make-up of which is clearly identifiable

When the phrase “RBIO” is used in policy speech, not much effort is usually spent in defining what it means, and what “rules” it supposedly embodies. This is not simply because the RBIO needs no introduction, but because talking and acting as if the RBIO has a self-evident meaning is the first step in enacting a convincing narrative positioning the speaker on the right side of the story. The closest we get to a consensual definition of the RBIO is “a shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules that evolve over time” (United Nations Association of Australia 2015). It is doubtful that any state would disagree with such a broad, non-committal, and redundant definition. In other words, the RBIO is like motherhood and apple pie: it is actually quite hard to find anyone actively disparaging it. While there is a broad consensus on some of the core “universal” components of the RBIO, such as the United Nations (UN) system, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and international law, there is much less agreement on the rest of its make-up, or how these general principles ought to be upheld or interpreted in practice.

Of course, there are more precise definitions of the RBIO on the market. The most evident, mature, and explicit of these is commonly referred to as the “liberal” international and/or rules-based order³ and it conveys a much more restrictive—post-WW2, liberal, U.S.-led, and Western-centric—interpretation of the RBIO. This dominant, “liberal” version of RBIO, in addition to being rooted in Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, also gives central importance to multilateralism, international law, common security, freedom of navigation, as well as liberal principles of democracy, human rights, and open trade. It is embodied by multilateral institutions that were sponsored by the U.S. and its allies after WW2, including the UN, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union, and Bretton Woods institutions—the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This institutional architecture is complemented by other multilateral arrangements, security alliances, and regional organizations within and outside the West, that embrace and promote a similar set or subset of (neo-)liberal values.

This liberal version of the RBIO, however, is much less consensual than the broad definition discussed above, precisely because of its liberal character, but also its Euro-Centric/Western origins, and the process through which it spreads. While it remains dominant, some of its core components have been openly challenged since its inception, by communist states, decolonization struggles, pan-nationalistic ideologies, the Non-Aligned movement, or anti-globalization activism, among others. Indeed, while the challenge to the liberal international order is often framed as a new phenomenon, its prior coherence should not be overestimated. Any international order necessarily relies on patterns of inclusion and exclusion, is culturally diverse, and tends to change quite a lot over time, either incrementally or as a deliberate response to challenge (Reus-Smit 2018). As such, “the construction of the global liberal order [is much] more open, contested, and contingent than some accounts would suggest” (Hurrell 2013, p. 196).

Furthermore, some components of this liberal international order often clash with one another, and the extent to which they are compatible in specific situations varies. The difficult balancing act between the respect for sovereignty and the protection of human rights is on full display every time the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle is invoked. The competing demands of free trade and democracy are immediately salient whenever a new multilateral trade deal is negotiated.

³The two are interchangeable.

Tensions between the demands of multilateralism and the protection of national sovereignty have been at the very center of the European integration process long before Brexit, although they were certainly at an all-time high in this context. These considerations are remarkably absent from most discussions on the RBIO, but they go a long way in explaining the situation (or “crisis”) in which it finds itself today.

What complicates the RBIO picture even further is that alternative narratives are now emerging and being touted by a variety of actors otherwise branded as challengers. While these alternative versions often preserve some of the (Westphalian) elements that also underpin the dominant “liberal” variant, such as state sovereignty, they exclude (liberal) others, such as liberal democracy and the invisibility of human rights. They are certainly not as coherent or well-formed as the dominant liberal version, and are not necessarily meant to introduce substantial alternatives, but they are supported by counter-narratives about RBIO that deserve more serious attention because they have effects on policy. In these alternative narratives, principles such as international law, freedom of navigation, or open trade are being defined much more “liberally”—just not in the political sense of the term. More importantly, however, both the dominant liberal version of RBIO and its main alternatives similarly rely on the construction of radical “Others”.

Myth no. 2: The RBIO is threatened by clearly identifiable challengers

Like most powerful narratives, calls in defence of the RBIO often rely on a binary dichotomy, with upholders and defenders on one side, and challengers, violators, and usurpers on the other. In practice, setting up such clear boundaries is a political act, and the lines are blurrier than they seem.

There is a relatively strong consensus over the identity of some challengers to the liberal RBIO: Russia, North Korea, and Iran are almost always presented as outright violators in the West, and while China’s status is slightly more ambiguous and debated, it is becoming increasingly hard to find Western actors who do not see it as a threat. A variety of non-state actors are typically thrown in the mix, with favourite contenders being “Islamist terrorists” and “violent extremists”. All of these actors are portrayed as radical Others—they act as the main villains of the dominant RBIO story.

Chrystia Freeland’s statements during her tenure as Canada’s Foreign Minister well exemplify what I refer to as “Marvel” RBIO narratives. They cover a spectrum of more or less radical Others, and rely on a clear hierarchy. In her 2017 foreign policy address, she frames the crisis of the RBIO in Manichean terms, situating Canada firmly on the right side of history. After stating that the liberal values of the RBIO are “under attack from outside our walls” and alluding to a corrosion from within, most of her speech is devoted to singling out “rising powers” and “authoritarian regimes” as either suspected or proven perpetrators of the raid on the order and its rules. While Russia, North Korean and Syria are clearly situated in an unredeemable category, the jury was, at least at the time, still out in China’s case. Indeed, Beijing is positioned in this speech in the category of rising powers that do not “always play by the rules”. It is on the margins of the liberal order, but in a much more liminal position than the rest of the “villains”. This position is clearly unstable and a moving target, reflecting China’s own ambivalence regarding the liberal RBIO as well a clear shift in prevailing assumptions and public discourse in Canada about China, exacerbated under COVID-19, by reports of the plight of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and by the ongoing imprisonment of the “two Michaels” with no solution in sight.

In Freeland's remarks, Washington is also singled out as "putting its thumb on the scale in violation of the very rules it helped to write" (Global Affairs Canada 2017). Much like the hero gone rogue after his girlfriend is tragically killed, America needs its friends and allies to remind it of its goodness so that it can be brought back into the fold of the liberal community. Bially Mattern (2001) refers to such tactics as "pulling a narrative gun". Less radical, more elusive, but still clearly inferior Others also appear in Freeland's speech. The "Global South" and "Asia", in particular, are actors that need to be convinced of the value of the RBIO and integrated into the "old order that preceded their rise" (Global Affairs Canada 2017). Similarly paternalistic undertones abound in the policy speeches of leaders of other liberal democracies in the West (Prime Minister's Office— United Kingdom 2017; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade— Australia 2019).

Alternative "Marvel" narratives developed by those otherwise branded as challengers to the dominant liberal version of the international order employ similar forms of Othering. In a speech delivered at the Hudson Institute on his administration's China policy, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence draws a picture of Beijing as the true nemesis of America, calling out the hypocrisy of the Chinese leadership in diplomatic platforms, and denouncing China's "malign influence" in its sponsorship of "covert actors, front groups, and propaganda outlets" to sway the American public. The hierarchization of evils is on full display when Pence argues that "what the Russians are doing pales in comparison" to China's subversive actions on American soil (White House 2018). In his address on the margins of the 2018 NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Brussels, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo differentiates between enablers of the crisis, and those who profit from it, warning his audience that the international order had been "allowed to corrode" by bureaucrats and diplomats who have pursued multilateralism as "an end unto itself" to the detriment of the national interest. He then turns to addressing a series of "bad actors" as radical Others playing the West for a fool, and driven by a common ambition to "reshape the international order in [their] own illiberal image". Indeed, while the West "welcomed" these Others into the liberal order, this act of benevolence was paid back by bad actors "exploiting loopholes" and engaging in "Orwellian human rights violations" (China), refusing to embrace "Western values of freedom and international cooperation" (Russia), or failing to "join the community of nations" to instead collude with "terrorists and dictators" (Iran). Despite all of his allusions to liberalism as the cement of the community of "noble nations", Pompeo's vision of the RBIO includes only indirect references to democracy and human rights, which are either used as a way to demonize China or to emphasize the failure of a broad array of international institutions to meet their stated goals (U.S. Department of State 2018). Pompeo's recent depiction of China's motivations in the South China Sea –to establish a "maritime empire" (Hansler 2020)– follows a similar trend.

Claims that the other side is engaging in "propaganda" are common in RBIO narratives of the "Marvel" type. They are especially prevalent in Russian interventions on the crisis of the RBIO that single out Western actors, particularly the United States and other NATO countries, as the villains. This is very apparent in Sergey Lavrov's interventions, which are full of allusions to the RBIO as a "propaganda lever" (TASS 2019) that serves to reproduce the West as a defender of the international order when it is actually usurping it:

[T]he West is less frequently recalling international law and more often and importunately dwelling upon the "rules-based order". The aim of such a concept is obvious—to revise the norms of international law which no longer suit the West, to substitute it for the "rules" adjusted to its self-serving schemes [...] and to proclaim the West and only the West as an indisputable source of legitimacy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2019b).

In this Russian narrative, Western actors are using “verbal gymnastics” (Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom 2018) to advance the RBIO as a new discursive construct meant to “trample upon” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2020b) international law and keep “unwanted states” (TASS 2019) out of the club of a “select few” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2019b) who get to tweak the rules under the guise of preserving a false liberal status quo. By emphasizing a need to defend the RBIO, what Western actors are actually doing is introducing a flexible, narrow, and Western-centric interpretation of the rules that allow them to promote “neocolonial” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2020c) and imperialist “hidden agendas” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2019b) through “blackmail” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2020a), “crude armed force” and “illegal sanctions” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia 2020c). In this narrative, the root of the crisis lies in “the unwillingness of the countries which declared themselves winners in the Cold War to reckon with the legitimate interests of all other states”. Denial of the “objective course of history” towards “the development of a polycentric world” leads the West to impede progress by attempts to “recover their privileged positions” through the imposition of new standards of behavior that suit its interests (Ibid 2019b).

A less inflammatory—at least pre-2020—but equally Manichean depiction of the crisis of the international order has been advanced by the Chinese leadership. The target of this crisis narrative is unsurprisingly, first and foremost, the United States. Washington stands accused of engaging in an “outdated” (Sonnad 2015) form of “zero-sum game thinking” (Morin 2018) that increases the prospects of both sides falling into “Thucydides’ Trap” (Hong 2019). Such a “Cold War mentality” (Sonnad 2015; Morin 2018) is fed by “certain domestic forces” within the U.S. that have been “continually blackening China’s name”, fostering “antagonistic feeling[s]”, and causing harm to their bilateral relationship (Morin 2018).

These allusions to domestic “bad actors” are common across RBIO narratives. Indeed, most interventions on the crisis of RBIO that fit the dominant liberal script recognize the crisis as the product of a combination of internal and external challenges. Internal challenges are those arising from within the liberal international order itself, as a result of its flaws, but more significantly, the ability of foreign actors to exploit them to their own advantage. This is apparent in Freeland’s speech when she alludes to those who “have begun to doubt” (Global Affairs Canada 2017) the value of liberal principles underpinning the RBIO. The responsibility for this internal challenge, however, is quickly retransferred outside, with bad states and foreign actors framed as the ones fanning the flames of internal discontent through disinformation and subversion of liberal institutions. Internal and external sources of the crisis are thus pieced together into a coherent threat narrative that constructs the challenge to the RBIO as a multi-headed but single hydra, and from which Canada and other liberal democracies emerge pure and blameless by contrast.

To sum up, the degree of consensus over the identity of the challengers is much weaker than most interventions in its defence make it to be. Yet there are still important commonalities in how each of these “Marvel” narratives on the crisis of RBIO depict the “bad actors” in their story. First, while they make room for non-state actors, the primary villains remain foreign states. Other actors tend to appear a bit more randomly, usually in passing. They matter insofar as they pose a threat that is more elusive, unknown, and therefore uniquely scary, but they remain secondary characters in the RBIO story, and are often depicted as agents of foreign states.

Second, these states are consistently characterized as revisionist, reactionary, or a combination of both. In all these narratives, including the Russian and Chinese versions, the order that “bad actors” put forward is not rules-based, but might-based; a Hobbesian order that would make the international community worse off. While some of these narratives are more conservative than others, they all introduce some representation of a status quo ante that needs to be protected, even as they advocate for reform. Doing so, speaking agents reposition the main subject of their narratives, i.e. the state they represent, on the right side of the RBIO story as a way to assert a position of legitimate authority on the global stage—a process to which I turn next.

Myth no. 3: The RBIO being threatened is a bad thing, while good actors have a special responsibility in preserving it

To reiterate, “Marvel” narratives on the RBIO draw a clear line between defenders and violators. The identification of a radical Other(s) is what makes it possible for speaking agents to reposition the state (or the broader international community) they speak for as a hero on a mission to save the day. In (constructivist) International Relations (IR) Theory speak, the identities of heroes (Selves) and villains (Others) are “co-constituted”—identity is relational. Claims that Germany (or France) is the “new leader of the free world” (Patrick 2018; Hundal 2017; Benner 2016), that Canada is an “essential country” (Global Affairs Canada 2017), or that “the fate of the world order rests on Tokyo’s shoulders” (Hornung 2018) abound in commentaries on the crisis of the RBIO, but they would not be possible without the existence of a wrong and the identification of a wrongdoer(s).

Chrystia Freeland’s interventions on the RBIO are a good example of how the construction of the heroic Self plays out in the dominant liberal variant. In her 2017 foreign policy speech (Global Affairs Canada 2017), Canada is portrayed as having a special duty to strengthen the RBIO and “set a standard” for the rest of the world. In her remarks when receiving Foreign Policy’s Diplomat of the Year Award (Foreign Policy 2018), she spoke of Canada and its like-minded partners on the “city on a hill” as having a moral responsibility to “fight back”, “double down”, and “plant our flag” on the RBIO as a way to unite the world’s democratic and progressive forces.

Yet promoters of the dominant liberal version of the RBIO do not have a monopoly on claims to heroism. Showing striking similarities with the Canadian narrative, Pompeo (U.S. Department of State 2018) argues that the Trump administration is “rallying the noble nations of the world to build a new liberal order that prevents war and achieves greater prosperity for all”. This enterprise will “require actual, not pretend, restoration of the liberal order among nations. It will require an assertive America and leadership from ... democracies around the world.” By positioning a series of “bad” subjects as a foreign danger to an international order premised on the moral superiority of the West, with Washington as its natural lead, and then by dismissing the dominant liberal narrative on RBIO as unauthentic attempts at reform, America is no longer a hero gone rogue but repositioned as a core member of the “Avengers”.⁴

Similarly, the condemnation of the phrase “RBIO” by Russian actors is used as a stepping stone for presenting Russia as the defender of a more legitimate, democratic,⁵ polycentric, and “post-West” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia, 2020b) world order based on the “consensus of civilizations, mutual respect and international law”.

⁴ This is a reference to Marvel’s The Avengers, a series of films based on the Marvel Comics superhero team of the same name. Captain America is a core member of the group.

⁵ Not a liberal form of democracy, but in the sense of equal participation.

Russia, alongside China and to some extent India, are presented as “leaders of the resistance” (Barabanov et al. 2017) against Western attempts to introduce new rules of the game –e.g. the responsibility to protect– and usurp existing principles, such as sovereignty and international law. Interestingly, the Russian government’s narrative on RBIO presents Russia as both an upholder of a true status quo and the harbinger of a new order. This tension is also present, albeit more subtly, in statements from Washington and Beijing.

In a direct rebuke to the common depiction of China as a revisionist state in RBIO narratives emanating from the West, the Chinese leadership presents Beijing as an upholder of core elements of the RBIO, particularly open trade and multilateralism, while also making room for reform. In this narrative, China describes itself as a “defender, builder, and contributor” of the rules-based international order (in Tang 2018). Xi Jinping has claimed on numerous occasions that China “merely seeks to reform and perfect the existing international system, and this does not mean fashioning a new order but only moving toward a more just direction” (Ibid). In this narrative, China promotes a truly “international” law and an international system that is “more just” because it provides an “equal and democratic participation in the making of international rules” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC 2014; Tang 2018). Many would dismiss these statements as “alternative Truth” propaganda. Yet those who have systematically tested the claim that China is a revisionist state in blatant violation of its international obligations have convincingly demonstrated that once components of the RBIO are disaggregated, Beijing is much less of a rogue than most of the Western foreign policy punditry would make it to be, from the World Trade Organization (WTO) to the South China Sea (Johnston 2019; Welch et al. 2019). Of course, there is not much room for this degree of nuance in the performance of RBIO narratives. Yet policymakers and so-called experts should be reminded that conflating Global Times editorials and with actual policy is ill-advised, counter-productive, and detrimental to the stability of the liberal order. “Wolf Warrior” grandstanding by some Chinese diplomats on Twitter is also controversial among Chinese elites, who do not think as one when it comes to China’s position on the world stage.

In sum, state leaders and policymakers who engage in the debate over the crisis of RBIO from all sides are equally inclined to declare support for the international order, even if this support is often conditional on reform. In the typical RBIO story, the Self-identity of the heroic state is necessarily constructed as an upholder of the rules, while the revisionist rival is depicted as a radical, evil Other. There is no room in these narratives for actors reinforcing some elements of the RBIO while weakening others. Not much attention is directed at assessing whether the challenge is actually a threat to the rule, or merely its dominant interpretation. The distinction between heroes and villains is not so clear cut in practice, however. Compliance and violation are often in the eyes of the beholder and distinguishing between them is a political act. Some are in a better position to draw the line between heroes and villains than others, and not because they are objectively “better” but as a result of power dynamics that are not merely material, but to a great extent symbolic—and discursive.

Finally, a state is not a “black box”. States that are branded as revisionists are actually symbolic aggregations of a variety of views on the RBIO. Yet these nuances are lost in the depictions of über-strategic, all powerful Leviathans that abound in conversations about Others in the fight for the RBIO. By clinging to neat representations of the crisis being played out along mostly Western/non-Western battle lines, with the Enlightened on one side and the barbarians on the other, most RBIO narratives end up having adverse effects.

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Indeed, these narratives 1. reproduce the misleading idea that liberal values are Western values, 2. marginalize alternative voices from civil society sectors of the Global South by playing down their agency in promoting values that reach across cultural divides between states, when they do not silence them altogether, and 3. shift attention away from systemic root causes of internal contestation that thus remain mostly unaddressed.

Alternatives

RBIO narratives, especially of the “Marvel” kind, generally lack nuance. Yet some engaging in these narratives still allow for (limited) reflexivity. The notion that the RBIO is flawed and should be reformed is increasingly acknowledged in official speech. Yet such recognition typically takes the form of what psychologists refer to as an “ineffective apology” (Molinsky 2016): speaking subjects recognize that others might feel that the RBIO is flawed, acknowledge that their version of the RBIO is “not perfect, by any means” (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia 2018) but then move to doubling down on how it is extensively better than alternatives that engage in “whataboutism” and introduce a “false moral equivalency” (Foreign Policy 2018) between the flaws of the (heroic) liberal order and the evilness of its challengers.

A more significant development in the battle of RBIO narratives is the rise of a clearer alternative to the “Marvel” type. I refer to narratives of this kind as “Manga” because—in addition to being particularly prevalent in Asia—they introduce a distinct kind of (anti-)hero with many of the typical positive characteristics of the lead (male) character of Japanese comics: empathy, emotional vulnerability, loyalty, constructive leadership, and an unwavering commitment to self-betterment.

This type of narrative is based on the notion that “good” actors in international society are the ones taking personal responsibility in the pursuit of progress, demonstrate understanding for a variety of perspectives and positions on RBIO without engaging in relativism, express a strong commitment to bringing about a more genuine consensus on global rules, and are supportive of the creation of a more pluralist world order. “Manga” narratives also have a number of limitations: they remain state-centric, status quo-oriented, and are equally vulnerable to tensions between rhetoric and policy implementation.

They also serve a very similar purpose to their “Marvel” equivalents, as a means through which speaking subjects situate themselves on the good side of a RBIO story to claim a position of legitimate authority in shaping its future development, with effects on reputation, status, as well as the pursuit of material interests and a secure sense of Self. Yet by being more conciliatory and less Manichean, “Manga” narratives of RBIO also hold more potential in creating the conditions for a more constructive dialogue to emerge at the global level on the rules on which international society ought to be based, as well as the scope and nature of its current normative core.

Below, I focus on two such RBIO narratives, from Japan and Singapore, that fit these characteristics.

In recent foreign policy speeches, Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzō does not single out any particular state as a radical Other, but focuses instead on an "inward-looking tendency" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2018b) spreading across the world as the root of the crisis. His speeches do convey liberal undertones, with references to free trade, democracy, freedom, and human rights as values that undergird the international order, but this order is described as being based on what is shared across humankind and the United Nations. These interventions serve to engage Japan's responsibility in "lend[ing] a necessary helping hand" and taking on a greater role than before in maintaining the international order (Ibid 2018a). According to Abe, "[s]hould Japan, the country that reaped the greatest benefits of all under this system, ever fail to support [...] that system, who else should we wait for to rise in support of it? Japan's responsibility is tremendous indeed" (Ibid 2018a). Japan and its people thus pledge to be "acting as flag bearers to the UN spirit" (Ibid 2018a). While a direct causal link is hard to trace, the adoption of a more constructive tone in Abe's interventions on RBIO has been accompanied by promising developments in the country's relationship with China, despite persistent tensions in the East China Sea. Japan's push for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" has been much more inclusive than the American variant, and as a result has been better positioned to gather the support of like-minded states, including Canada (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2018c). This narrative strikes the right tone for a more productive conversation about the future of the RBIO.

In his keynote speech at the last Shangri-La Dialogue, Lee Hsien Loong focused his remarks on the great power rivalry between the United States and China, sharing how it makes Singapore and others "anxious". Drawing from the long history of Southeast Asia being caught in the middle, he took the U.S. and China to task, in a way much akin to a benevolent parent scolding unruly children. In his speech, Lee speaks of how the two big powers "need to work together, and with other countries too, to bring the global system up to date, and to not upend [it]." He adopts an empathetic tone as he discusses each side's position, conveying understanding for how they view the Other, but lamenting the fact that "attitudes on both sides have been hardening". Instead, the big powers "must understand each other's point of view"—as Singapore so clearly does. Lee positions himself and his country as a mediator in this story; as an honest broker who does not take sides but also does not remain passively neutral. Despite being a "small state" with little power to influence the big ones, Singapore, with the help of others, can help "stem the growing hostility" and "maximise the chances that countries will have the wisdom and courage to make the right choices". The solution Lee suggests is one where multilateralism is prominently featured, with a strong role for ASEAN specifically in providing a neutral, consensus-based platform for dialogue on RBIO. Acknowledging the limitations of the ASEAN model, but focusing on the peaceful outcome it has fostered for the region, with its specific history, Lee relies on a common argument in ASEAN circles that the institution's material weakness, but strong commitments to neutrality, actually put it in the perfect position to keep everyone honest (Channel News Asia 2019).

The contrast between "Manga" narratives on RBIO and their "Marvel" counterparts is striking in both form and substance. There are Others in both Japanese and Singaporean interventions in the debate, but they are not radical ones. Instead, they are the ones to extend a hand to, to enter in dialogue with, and to attract the support of in the joint enterprise of building a stable and more just international order.

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Furthermore, these narratives have a different main character—the anti-hero they introduce is one that is humble, apologizes a lot, is loyal to a fault to their friends, and sees the good in those who might temporarily treat them as a nemesis. They are clearly one of the good guys, but their quest is primarily one of self-betterment, although there is always room in this endeavour for healthy competition. Anti-heroes Our Anti-heroes from the Indo-Pacific are certainly not perfect—many of them, we tend to forget, are authoritarian states that do not allow much political dissent, while others have a fair share of historical skeletons in their closet they still need to atone for in their own journey towards “truth and reconciliation”. Yet a key characteristic that differentiates their narratives from those common among Western liberal states is that they refrain from taking too much of an overt moral high ground without having to compromise on fundamentals. There are lessons to be drawn, including by Canada, from such Indo-Pacific perspectives on RBIO. To be clear, “Manga”-type RBIO narratives are not necessarily advancing a radically different, counter-hegemonic alternative to the dominant version of the RBIO in substance. There is a common normative core that the Canadian, Japanese, and Singaporean narratives of RBIO, for instance, share, though the latter does not include liberal democracy.

Foresight Considerations: Major Trends and Alternative Scenarios

Four major trends are likely to inform further developments in the clash of RBIO narratives.

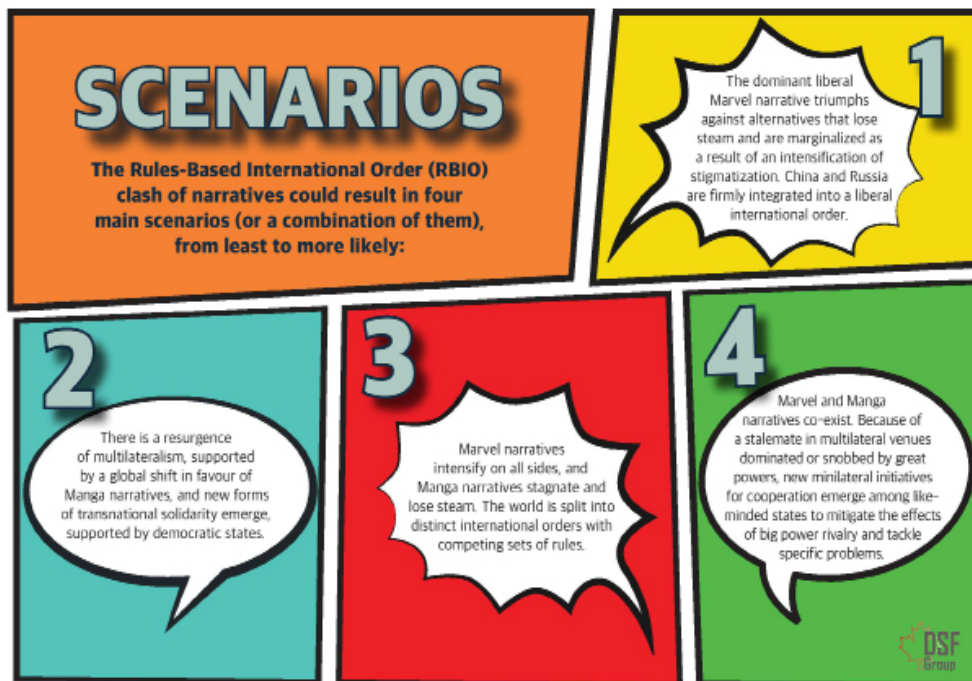


Figure 3: RBIO clash of narratives scenarios (developments)

First, the development of alternative “Manga” narratives by international/regional institutions, middle and small powers in the Indo-Pacific, seems likely to continue. This is partly because this type of narrative on RBIO draws from well-established practices that have structured previous interventions on regional security in the region and extend beyond the cases discussed above. This is well exemplified by the recent adoption of ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific Outlook, which acts as the institution’s own “Manga”-type response to the debate on the RBIO as it relates to the region.

Second, there might be some positive adjustments made to RBIO narratives emanating from liberal state leaders and policymakers in the West. The inaugural foreign policy speech by Canada’s newly appointed Foreign Minister, François-Philippe Champagne, at the Montreal Council on Foreign Relations (Global Affairs Canada 2020) sets a refreshing tone, including on bilateral relations with China, that should continue to inform the government’s interventions on RBIO. Canadian policymakers can draw important lessons from their Indo-Pacific counterparts in this enterprise, but also from its own experience at (failed) attempts at reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, or in tackling systemic challenges experienced by women, minority groups, and vulnerable sectors of society. Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism as a key component of its Self-identity, and to a progressive and feminist foreign policy, also make it uniquely positioned to push for a pluralist international order that makes room for diverse perspectives without negating the importance of promoting certain core principles. Unfortunately, recent developments in the domestic debate on China in Canada, but also Australia and elsewhere, make this scenario look increasingly unlikely, although it is not too late to adjust course. This would require tailoring our approach to China according to specific issue-areas and domains of international order, decoupling our interests from those of the U.S. to the extent possible, fighting confirmation bias, and paying serious attention to China’s domestic politics.

Third, if no significant adjustments are made that allow Western countries to address domestic sources of inequality, disinformation, and intolerance through effective policies that account meaningfully for systemic root causes, we should expect an intensification of radical expressions of dissent against the inherent flaws of the dominant liberal version of the RBIO, and further scapegoating of minority groups. Required adjustments in policy must be accompanied by appropriate public communication strategies, including on the public diplomacy front. This will seem counter-intuitive to many, but I would suggest that liberal democracies, and their governments, would be better able to insulate themselves from authoritarian and/or populist arguments that point to a disconnection with the reality of non-elite and marginal segments of society, or claims that their engagement abroad are an expression of “double standard” and “white supremacy” (Guardian 2019), by taking the substance of the critiques a bit more seriously, irrespective of the “true motives” of the critics. Legitimate concerns for “whataboutism” and the spread of propaganda by the “other side” do not, as Hurrell (2013, p. 199) remind us, “undermine the importance of moral issues being raised” in the ethical contestation that surrounds the crisis of the RBIO.

Fourth, the intensification of processes of Othering in the public diplomacy of major powers—the United States, China, and Russia—shows no signs of abating, if the blame game around the origin of COVID-19 is any indication. We should expect this trend to intensify in the near-term. On the one hand, the Trump administration, and the President in particular, has brought American public diplomacy to unprecedented levels of toxicity.

On the other hand, the rise of a new generation of hawkish Chinese diplomats and the further crystallisation of a bi-partisan consensus in the U.S. that China is a threat to the interests of America/“the world” (Hansler 2020) does not bode well either for the further evolution of major power dynamics on the global stage. Yet this situation also presents other “dialogue partners” of ASEAN engaged in the shaping of a renewed regional and international order with some opportunities to make the best out of a bad situation. Canada should learn from its regional partners who have been navigating such treacherous waters for much longer, and strive to meet the demand.

Taken together, these trends lead to the identification of four alternative scenarios in the near- to medium-term. These scenarios are best understood as ideal types, meaning it is likely that some of their components are combined in practice. They are ordered from the least to the more likely. Drawing from existing categorizations in IR (Bull 2002; Ling 2014), I refer to them as 1. Kantian, 2. Daoist, 3. Hobbesian, and 4. Grotian.

In the *Kantian* scenario, the dominant (“Marvel”) liberal narrative triumphs against alternatives that lose steam and are marginalized as a result of an intensification of stigmatization. America is brought back into the fold of the liberal community of countries after the Democrat Party emerges victorious in the 2020 presidential election. China and Russia develop new narratives to justify shifts in policy that lead to their integration into a liberal international order that appears slightly reformed but mostly operates as usual. These developments bring about a renewal of multilateralism, leading to growing satisfaction in the status quo on the part of rising powers and domestic actors. Indeed, a decrease of pressure on national economies due to the implementation of new trade agreements leads to a relaxation of subversive operations, and new policies against disinformation and violent extremism prove successful.

In the *Daoist* (see also: Ling 2014) scenario, we also witness a resurgence of multilateralism, but it is accompanied by a significant shift in favour of “Manga” narratives by states across regions. Partly as a result of this shift, and given the development of new forms of transnational people-to-people solidarity, great powers themselves adopt a less radical “Marvel” rhetoric.

There is a continuous, collective shaming of public statements that revert to radical Othering by the international community. Western liberal democracies develop sound policy to fight inequality and intolerance, support progressive governance initiatives from civil society actors, allocate more international aid and development resources towards actors and institutions involved in bottom-up processes of conflict mediation at the community level. New institutional platforms emerge between like-minded states that make room for civil society participation, and serve as means for discussing common rules, sharing legitimate concerns, and providing reassurances, while existing ones are reinforced, thus contributing the global community’s ability to tackle common “wicked” challenges like climate change. Trade agreements are more transparent, which contributes to closing the democratic deficit. Populist tensions remain, but they have been mitigated and redirected towards productive and transnational forms of collective action.

The *Hobbesian* scenario, in turn, sees an intensification of “Marvel” narratives on all sides, while “Manga” narratives remain outliers—they are predominantly carried out by marginal actors in international society, key champions like Japan shift to a more Manichean rhetoric, and early signs of a shift to “Manga” narratives in some Western countries⁶ remain stillborn. Major powers’ reliance on blaming the Other, which have continued to intensify, spillover into new sources of friction in which states increasingly adopt zero-sum policy responses. The world is split into distinct international orders with competing sets of rules and institutions. There is growing internal dissent and a continued increase in acts of violence rooted in racism and misogyny. States double down on their narratives and adopt counter-productive policies. Ill-intentioned actors (state and non-state) become increasingly proficient in navigating grey areas beyond the purview of international orders, with further strain on the rules, international stability, democratic institutions, and our collective ability to tackle global problems.

The Grotian scenario remains the most likely for now, but will require active commitment to mitigating the adverse effects of major power rivalry and the new strains on global and national economies created by COVID-19. It involves a more balanced co-existence of “Marvel” and “Manga” narratives on RBIO. While big powers intensify their use of radical Othering in foreign and defence policy, this trend is mitigated by a strong contingent of small and middle powers developing constructive alternatives collaboratively and targeted initiatives. Because of a stalemate in multilateral spaces dominated by great powers, and the increasingly competitive relationship between overlapping but increasingly exclusive regional orders, these small and middle powers make necessary adjustments to their foreign policy, but leave some room for the development of new forms of multilateral (and mini-lateral) solidarity among like-minded actors that engage each other on a more ad hoc, flexible, and problem-driven basis to mitigate the effects of major power competition and tackle specific problems—violent extremism, climate change, etc.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the crisis of the RBIO involves a clash of narratives. These narratives act as means through which actors claim legitimate authority on the global stage. They can be broken down into two main types, which I refer to as “Marvel” and “Manga”. “Marvel” narratives dominate the debate, rely on radical forms of Othering, and have counter-productive effects. “Manga” narratives, such as those emerging from Japan and Singapore, are less Manichean, encourage empathy, and act as a more constructive basis for a fruitful renegotiation of a consensus on shared components of the RBIO.

Making the RBIO “strange” is a necessary, but preliminary, move in bringing about this new consensus, which would hold more potential for gathering “enthusiastic consent” from a broader diversity of stakeholders. Paying more attention to Indo-Pacific perspectives on the RBIO is an important first step in this endeavour. Those who have played a key role in the development and maintenance of a liberal international order, and have benefitted the most from it, must actively work on addressing its flaws and biases through more than a “nonapology”. Yet solving the crisis of the RBIO will also require rejecting “binary distinctions, easy dichotomies, and [...] teleologies” (Hurrell 2013, p. 196), and moving away from state-centric understandings of global governance.

⁶The aforementioned speech by Minister Champagne is a good example of such early signs.

More attention also needs to be paid to the promotion of other “liberal” values, such as tolerance, social justice, and human emancipation, that have not been given enough attention in the current debate on RBIO, but reach across unhelpful divides between West v. non-West, Global North v. Global South, etc.

A fair assessment of the current “challenge” to the RBIO compels participants to the clash of narratives to acknowledge a hard truth: there is currently no neutral standpoint from which to assess what version of the RBIO is the most legitimate in a normative sense. No RBIO narrative will ever command unanimous consent, and the limited consensus we end up with will necessarily be a function of power—material, normative, and discursive. Attempts to deny the play of power in shaping the rules, including in their current form, should therefore be met with a good dose of scepticism.

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A key insight of this paper is that discourse matters for the practice of global politics. Discourse is more than mere rhetoric. Whatever their beliefs, motives, or hidden intentions, partaking in the (re) production of RBIO narratives has effects. Indeed, discourse frames the realm of possible action in relation to the RBIO, by opening possibilities and foreclosing other avenues. It signals intentionality, informs expectations on the part of those we engage, and can make or break one’s reputation and status on the global stage and at home.

Finally, the crisis of the RBIO is not a Marvel movie—it is not a matter of black or white: the good guys often turn out to be corrupt, and the villains have origin stories that can lead us to empathize with them to our surprise. Being attuned to shades of grey and hidden power dynamics while exercising reflexivity is not a sign of weakness. It does not mean giving in to moral relativism, or creating new opportunities for malignant forces to exploit our *naïveté*. In fact, it might actually allow for insulating political institutions from authoritarian propaganda and “alternative truth” claims, and lead to more pragmatic and effective policy in the long run.

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