



Nationalism Vs. Globalization: Emerging Tensions in World Politics

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Abstract: The dialectical tension between nationalism and globalization represents one of the most consequential political dynamics of the twenty-first century. As economic interdependence has deepened through trade liberalization, digital connectivity, and transnational governance, countervailing forces of national identity, sovereignty, and protectionism have surged across both the developed and developing world. This paper examines the theoretical underpinnings of both nationalism and globalization, analyzes empirical case studies from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, and investigates the structural, economic, and cultural drivers that sustain this tension. Drawing on constructivist, realist, and liberal institutionalist frameworks, the study argues that the nationalism-globalization dialectic is not a zero-sum confrontation but rather a dynamic, contested negotiation over the terms of political community, economic distribution, and cultural recognition in an increasingly interconnected world. The paper further contends that unaddressed inequalities, democratic deficits, and identity anxieties generated by hyperglobalization have created fertile ground for nationalist resurgence, with profound implications for multilateral institutions, international trade, and global governance. The study concludes by proposing a "rooted cosmopolitanism" framework as a normative and practical pathway for reconciling legitimate national concerns with the imperatives of global cooperation.

Keywords: Nationalism, Globalization, Political Economy, Identity Politics, Sovereignty, Multilateralism, Rooted Cosmopolitanism, Hyperglobalization



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1. Introduction

Few binaries have come to dominate contemporary political discourse as powerfully as that of nationalism versus globalization. Once heralded as a largely settled matter in the liberal triumphalism following the Cold War, the relationship between the nation-state and the global order has reemerged as intensely contested terrain. The financial crisis of 2008, the migration crises of 2015-2016, the Brexit referendum of 2016, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise of Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist project in India have all signaled a global reconfiguration of political allegiances and a reassertion of national sovereignty against the pressures of transnational integration.

Scholars have long debated the relationship between national identity and global economic integration. Liberalists such as Keohane and Nye argued that economic interdependence would erode the centrality of the nation-state and produce a more cooperative, institutionally governed international order (Keohane and Nye 4). Realists, conversely, maintained that states remain the fundamental units of international politics and that national interest continues to drive state behavior even within institutions of global governance (Waltz 102). Constructivists, meanwhile,

emphasized that identities are socially constructed and that the meanings attached to national belonging and global citizenship are continually renegotiated through political discourse and practice (Wendt 391).

What the twenty-first century has made apparent is that none of these frameworks is wholly adequate on its own. The resurgence of nationalism does not simply represent a return to a pre-globalization baseline; it is, in significant part, a product of globalization itself — of the distributional inequalities, cultural dislocations, and sovereignty deficits it has produced. At the same time, globalization has not simply been erased by the return of nationalism; it persists, deeply embedded in supply chains, financial systems, digital networks, and institutional architectures that no single state can easily dismantle.

This paper proceeds in six further sections. Section 2 provides a theoretical overview of nationalism and globalization as conceptual frameworks. Section 3 examines the historical evolution of their relationship. Section 4 analyzes contemporary case studies. Section 5 identifies the structural drivers of the current tensions. Section 6 proposes analytical and normative frameworks for understanding and managing these tensions. Section 7 concludes with reflections on the future trajectory of world politics.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Nationalism and Globalization

Nationalism, as a modern political phenomenon, is most usefully understood through the lens of modernist theory. Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an "imagined community" — a socially constructed collective identity sustained by shared narratives, symbolic rituals, and mass communication — remains foundational (Anderson 6). Ernst Gellner's account of nationalism as a product of industrial modernity, in which cultural homogeneity became a functional requirement of economic and political organization, complements Anderson's cultural approach with a structural one (Gellner 48). Eric Hobsbawm further developed the concept of "invented traditions" to explain how national identities are actively constructed by political elites to serve contemporary needs rather than simply reflecting ancient organic communities (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1).

These foundational accounts share a common insight: nationalism is not a natural, primordial phenomenon but a modern political construction that serves specific social and political functions. It provides individuals with a sense of belonging, a framework for collective action, and a basis for claims to self-determination and sovereign statehood. It also, as its critics note, generates exclusionary logics that marginalize minorities, justify territorial aggression, and impede international cooperation.

Globalization, similarly, is a contested and multidimensional concept. In its most common usage, it refers to the intensification of transnational flows of goods, services, capital, people, and information that have characterized the post-1945 and especially post-1989 era. Economic globalization encompasses trade liberalization, foreign direct investment, global value chains, and the financialization of the international economy. Cultural globalization refers to the diffusion of ideas, cultural products, and normative frameworks across national boundaries, often dominated by Western and especially American cultural industries. Political globalization describes the proliferation of international institutions, transnational governance mechanisms, and global civil society organizations.

The dominant liberal framework presents globalization as essentially benign and progressive: a process that generates aggregate wealth, diffuses democratic norms, and creates the institutional infrastructure for managing global collective action problems such as climate change and nuclear proliferation (Ikenberry 23). The critical tradition, drawing on neo-Marxist and world-systems theory, challenges this account by emphasizing globalization's role in reproducing and deepening global inequalities, disciplining labor, dismantling welfare states, and serving the interests of transnational capital over ordinary citizens (Rodrik 18). Post-colonial scholars have added a further dimension, arguing that globalization continues patterns of Western dominance and cultural imperialism that long predate the current era (Mignolo 154).

The tension between nationalism and globalization thus reflects deeper normative disagreements about the proper organization of political life: the relative weight of national self-determination versus international obligation; of cultural particularity versus universal human rights; of democratic accountability versus technocratic governance. These are not merely technical policy questions but fundamental contests over political identity and community.

3. Historical Evolution: From Post-War Consensus to Global Fragmentation

The post-World War II international order was constructed on a carefully negotiated compromise between national sovereignty and international economic integration. The Bretton Woods system established in 1944 created a framework of managed trade and fixed exchange rates that enabled economic recovery and growth while permitting governments to maintain robust welfare states and pursue full employment policies. This was what John Gerard Ruggie called "embedded liberalism": an international economic order in which liberal multilateralism was "embedded" in domestic social compromises that buffered citizens from the most disruptive effects of international markets (Ruggie 382).

The collapse of Bretton Woods in 1971, the oil shocks of the 1970s, and the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s marked a decisive shift. The Washington Consensus, promoted by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United States Treasury, prescribed trade liberalization, financial deregulation, privatization, and the dismantling of capital controls as the path to development and prosperity. This "hyperglobalization" — Dani Rodrik's term for a model of economic integration that subordinated domestic policy autonomy to the demands of global markets — progressively eroded the embedded liberal compromise (Rodrik 71).

The 1990s were the decade of globalization's apparent triumph. The Soviet collapse, the expansion of the European Union, the establishment of the World Trade Organization, the rise of China as a manufacturing powerhouse, and the digital revolution all seemed to confirm the liberal prediction that an integrated global economy would produce prosperity, democracy, and peace. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis captured the mood of triumphant liberalism that characterized the decade (Fukuyama 3).

Yet even at the height of globalist confidence, counter-currents were visible. The 1999 Seattle protests against the WTO demonstrated that globalization's distributional consequences were generating popular resistance. The Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, which devastated economies across East and Southeast Asia while demonstrating the power of financial markets over national governments, shook faith in the Washington Consensus. And in the shadows of liberal optimism, ethnic nationalism was reasserting itself with devastating violence in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

The 2008 global financial crisis proved to be the decisive turning point. The collapse of financial markets originating in the United States spread rapidly through globally integrated financial systems, producing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Governments were forced to bail out private financial institutions at enormous public expense while implementing austerity measures that compressed living standards across Europe and beyond. The crisis produced a political backlash that fused economic grievance with identity politics in ways that proved enormously powerful. The result was the populist wave that has defined the politics of the 2010s and beyond.

4. Contemporary Case Studies: Nationalism in the Age of Globalization

The Brexit vote of June 2016 remains one of the most consequential expressions of the nationalism-globalization tension in recent history. The Leave campaign's slogan — "Take Back Control" — crystallized popular anxieties about sovereignty, immigration, and economic insecurity that four decades of European integration had generated or amplified. Geographers of the Brexit vote found striking correlations between support for Leave and regions that had experienced deindustrialization, declining public services, and high levels of EU migration (Goodwin and Heath 324). The vote was, in significant part, a revolt of the "left behind" against

an economic model that had enriched metropolitan elites while hollowing out provincial working-class communities.

Yet the Brexit case also illustrates the limits and contradictions of nationalist responses to globalization. The United Kingdom's departure from the EU has not restored the industrial communities that voted overwhelmingly for Leave, nor has it delivered the sovereignty dividend promised by its advocates. Instead, it has created new regulatory barriers to trade with the UK's largest market, produced significant costs for business, and generated ongoing political tensions over the status of Northern Ireland. The Brexit experience suggests that nationalism can successfully mobilize popular energy against globalization but is poorly equipped to deliver the economic and political outcomes its supporters seek.

The United States under Donald Trump offered a parallel example of nationalist counter-mobilization. Trump's "America First" agenda combined trade protectionism — including tariffs on Chinese goods and renegotiation of NAFTA — with immigration restriction, skepticism of multilateral institutions including NATO and the WTO, and a rhetorical assault on global elites and the liberal international order. The political sociology of Trump support closely paralleled that of Brexit: disproportionate among white working-class voters in deindustrializing regions who felt that globalization had impoverished them economically and marginalized them culturally (Inglehart and Norris 443).

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party has pursued a version of nationalist politics that combines economic nationalism and protectionism with Hindu cultural nationalism. The concept of "Hindutva" — Hindu cultural supremacy — has been mobilized to redefine Indian national identity in ways that exclude Muslim citizens and other minorities, while the government has pursued "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) policies designed to reduce dependency on global supply chains and promote domestic manufacturing (Vaishnav 43). India's nationalist turn is complicated by its simultaneous engagement with globalization through digital industries and its strategic calculations in a US-China rivalry that is itself partly structured by competing nationalist projects.

China presents perhaps the most complex case, as a state that has pursued aggressive economic integration with global markets while simultaneously practicing authoritarian nationalism domestically and increasingly assertive nationalist foreign policy. President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation combines economic ambition with a narrative of restoring China's historical greatness and rectifying its "century of humiliation" at the hands of Western imperialists (Wang 1). China's Belt and Road Initiative simultaneously represents a form of Chinese economic globalization — projecting Chinese investment, infrastructure, and influence across Eurasia and Africa — and an assertion of Chinese national power and a challenge to American-led international order.

These cases reveal both the diversity of nationalist projects in the contemporary world and their shared structural drivers: economic inequality generated by globalization, cultural anxiety in the face of demographic and normative change, and democratic deficits created by the transfer of decision-making power from elected national governments to technocratic international institutions.

5. Structural Drivers of the Tension

The resurgence of nationalism is not merely a contingent political phenomenon but reflects structural features of contemporary globalization. Three structural drivers deserve particular attention: economic inequality and distributional grievance, cultural threat perception, and democratic legitimacy deficits.

The economic driver is perhaps most extensively documented. The conventional wisdom of trade economics held that while trade liberalization produces aggregate gains, it also produces losers who require redistribution and retraining. What was underestimated, as economists David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson demonstrated in their landmark study of the "China shock," was

the magnitude, geographic concentration, and political salience of the losses (Autor et al. 2012). Communities devastated by import competition from China did not adjust smoothly as trade theory predicted; instead, they experienced persistent unemployment, declining wages, deteriorating public services, and elevated rates of social pathology including drug addiction and suicide. The political consequences were predictable: high levels of support for protectionist politicians.

Equally important has been the trajectory of within-country inequality since the 1980s. Branko Milanovic's "elephant chart" of global income growth famously showed that while the global middle class (concentrated in Asia, especially China) experienced substantial income growth over the period 1988-2008, the lower-middle and working classes of advanced industrial countries experienced stagnation (Milanovic 11). This is the distributional structure that has produced the "globalization backlash": not absolute impoverishment, but the felt injustice of stagnation while others prosper, compounded by the sense that political elites are indifferent or complicit.

The cultural driver is equally important but more contested analytically. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have argued that the populist-nationalist wave reflects a "cultural backlash" by traditionalist, authoritarian-leaning voters against the progressive cultural changes of the past four decades: feminism, multiculturalism, LGBT rights, and cosmopolitan values (Inglehart and Norris 443). On this account, economic grievance is real but insufficient to explain the nationalist surge; equally important is the felt displacement of traditional cultural hierarchies and identities by progressive cosmopolitanism.

Critics of the cultural backlash thesis argue that it naturalizes racism and cultural chauvinism by treating them as understandable responses to progressive change. But the cultural dimension is undeniable: immigration — especially from culturally distant countries — has been a consistent trigger for nationalist mobilization, and the fears it activates are not purely economic. The perception that national culture, language, and identity are under threat from uncontrolled mass migration is a powerful mobilizing force even where the actual threat is minimal.

The third structural driver — democratic legitimacy deficits — is perhaps the most politically consequential. The transfer of decision-making power to international institutions such as the EU, the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank has created what scholars have called a "democratic deficit": governance structures that are technically accountable to member states but practically insulated from direct democratic accountability (Dahl 341). When the EU imposes austerity on Greece, the WTO rules against national industrial policy, or the IMF conditions loans on welfare state retrenchment, the decisions are made by technocrats and national elites, not by the citizens who bear the consequences. The nationalist demand to "take back control" is, in significant part, a legitimate democratic demand for accountable governance, even when it is channeled through exclusionary and illiberal political movements.

6. Analytical and Normative Frameworks for Managing the Tension

Several analytical frameworks have been developed to make sense of the nationalism-globalization tension. Dani Rodrik's "political trilemma of the world economy" offers perhaps the most elegant formulation: a state cannot simultaneously maintain hyperglobalization, national sovereignty, and democratic governance; it can have at most two of the three (Rodrik 200). The embedded liberalism of the post-war era sacrificed some degree of economic integration to maintain national sovereignty and democratic accountability. Hyperglobalization sacrificed national sovereignty and, ultimately, democratic legitimacy to maximize economic integration. The nationalist backlash represents a reassertion of sovereignty and democracy at the expense of globalization.

Rodrik's trilemma suggests that the choice is not between nationalism and globalization as such, but between different models of integration that weight these values differently. A more sustainable form of globalization would preserve greater space for national democratic choice

over economic policy — what Rodrik calls "thin" rather than "thick" globalization — rather than treating every divergence from global market norms as an impermissible barrier to trade.

Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis offered a different but influential framework, arguing that post-Cold War conflicts would be structured primarily by civilizational and cultural identities rather than ideological or economic interests (Huntington 22). While Huntington's framework has been criticized for its essentialism and its neglect of within-civilization conflicts, it captured something important about the cultural dimensions of the nationalism-globalization tension that purely economic accounts miss. Identity is not reducible to interest, and cultural recognition is a distinct political good that cannot be delivered by economic redistribution alone.

The normative framework of "rooted cosmopolitanism," developed by philosophers including Kwame Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum, offers a more constructive direction (Appiah xv). Rather than treating national identity and cosmopolitan solidarity as mutually exclusive, rooted cosmopolitanism argues that particular loyalties — to family, community, and nation — are compatible with, and indeed supportive of, broader commitments to universal human dignity and global justice. On this account, nationalism is not inherently incompatible with globalization; rather, healthy national communities, confident in their identities and supported by effective social contracts, are better able to engage constructively with global obligations than insecure, economically devastated communities that feel their very existence is threatened.

This framework has concrete policy implications. Economically, it implies active industrial policy, robust redistribution, and genuine sharing of the gains from trade — not as concessions to nationalism but as preconditions for sustainable globalization. Culturally, it implies policies of recognition and respect for national and subnational identities within a framework of universal human rights — managed immigration policies that are transparent, fair, and democratically legitimate, rather than either unlimited flows or xenophobic exclusion. Institutionally, it implies reform of international governance to enhance democratic accountability — not the abolition of multilateral institutions but their democratization and reorientation toward the interests of citizens rather than capital.

Amartya Sen's capability approach offers a further normative resource for navigating the nationalism-globalization tension. Sen argues that the ultimate measure of development is not GDP or export volumes but the substantive freedoms — capabilities — that individuals possess to lead lives of genuine dignity and self-determination (Sen 87). Both hyperglobalization, when it immiserates workers and communities, and extreme nationalism, when it suppresses minorities and restricts human freedoms, fail by this standard. A sustainable global order must be evaluated in terms of whether it expands human capabilities across all populations, not whether it maximizes aggregate economic output or asserts cultural homogeneity.

7. Implications for Multilateralism and Global Governance

The resurgence of nationalism has produced profound challenges for multilateral institutions and the liberal international order. The United Nations system, the WTO, the World Health Organization, and the Paris climate agreement have all come under strain from nationalist governments that question their authority, withhold funding, or withdraw membership. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically illustrated both the necessity of international cooperation in managing global health threats and the obstacles that nationalist rivalry places in the way of such cooperation, as vaccine nationalism produced stark inequities in global vaccine distribution (Bollyky and Bown 165).

The US-China rivalry represents perhaps the most consequential manifestation of great-power nationalism in the contemporary era. As both states pursue nationalist economic policies — US industrial policy targeting semiconductors and electric vehicles, Chinese state capitalism and technology self-sufficiency — the integrated global supply chains that have sustained decades of economic growth are being deliberately restructured along geopolitical lines. "Friend-shoring,"

"reshoring," and "decoupling" have become the vocabulary of a new economic nationalism that threatens to fragment the global economy into rival blocs.

The climate crisis represents the starkest illustration of the stakes involved in the nationalism-globalization tension. Climate change is a quintessentially global collective action problem that cannot be solved by any single state and requires sustained international cooperation across decades. Yet nationalist politics consistently generate short-term electoral incentives to prioritize domestic economic interests over global environmental obligations. The history of climate negotiations from Kyoto to Paris is in significant part a history of the tension between national interest and global necessity — a tension that the planet can no longer afford to leave unresolved.

There is, however, reason for cautious optimism. The history of international relations demonstrates that states can and do cooperate even when nationalism is powerful, particularly when shared interests are sufficiently clear and when institutional architectures create the right incentive structures. The European Union, for all its current difficulties, remains a remarkable achievement of sustained multinational cooperation that has delivered peace and prosperity for its members across seven decades. The multilateral trading system, despite its current challenges, continues to underpin trillions of dollars of global trade annually. The Paris climate agreement, despite its non-binding character, has produced genuine policy commitments from the vast majority of states.

The challenge is to redesign these institutions and the broader international order to address the legitimate grievances that have fueled the nationalist backlash — economic inequality, cultural insecurity, democratic deficits — while preserving the capacity for international cooperation that global challenges require. This is not a technical challenge but a fundamentally political one: it requires political leadership capable of making the case for international cooperation to citizens who have experienced globalization primarily as a source of loss rather than gain.

8. Conclusion

The tension between nationalism and globalization is among the defining political contests of the twenty-first century, with consequences that will shape the trajectory of world politics for decades to come. This paper has argued that this tension is not a simple binary between open and closed, cosmopolitan and parochial, progressive and reactionary. It is, rather, a complex negotiation over the terms of political community, economic organization, and cultural identity in a world irreversibly shaped by global integration.

The resurgence of nationalism reflects real failures of the hyperglobalization model: its generation of inequality and precarity, its erosion of democratic accountability, its indifference to cultural concerns. These failures will not be resolved by dismissing nationalist grievances as mere prejudice or by doubling down on the policies that generated them. At the same time, nationalist responses to globalization face their own fundamental limitations: they cannot restore the industrial past, they generate exclusionary and sometimes violent politics, and they are incapable of addressing global challenges that require sustained international cooperation.

The way forward lies in what this paper has called rooted cosmopolitanism: a reformed globalization that takes seriously the distributional, democratic, and cultural dimensions of integration; that preserves robust space for national democratic choice; and that invests seriously in the capabilities and communities that hyperglobalization has damaged. This is a demanding political program, requiring both international institutional reform and domestic political courage. But it is the only program adequate to the twin imperatives of the current moment: addressing the legitimate sources of nationalist discontent while maintaining the international cooperation that global challenges demand.

The history of the twentieth century offers both warnings and inspiration. The nationalist excesses of the first half of that century produced catastrophic wars and genocides. The institutionalized cooperation of the second half produced unprecedented peace and prosperity. The question facing the twenty-first century is whether the world's political leaders and citizens can construct a new

synthesis a form of globalization genuinely compatible with national democracy and cultural dignity before the fragmentation of the international order produces consequences that cannot be undone.

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