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Beyond Fukuyama's End of History: Globalisation Regress, Expectations, Norm Erosion, and the Re-legitimation of War

Summary: This article analyses post-Cold War expectations of stability by distinguishing between Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis and the progression of globalisation. While both contributed to assumptions of declining conflict, they failed to ensure a stable international order. Looking through *Collective Action Theory*, the study explains how cumulative shocks, economic crises, security threats, and institutional erosion, globally impacted levels of social tolerance. This chain of events normalised outcomes once seen as unlikely, including democratic backsliding, reduced civil liberties, and the growing acceptance of force worldwide. These developments are analysed as interconnected manifestations of changing collective expectations, rather than isolated trends. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is considered a sociological watershed, consolidating the hitherto dynamics. The article argues that contemporary instability does not mirror the failure of liberal democracy as a model, but the weakening of social conditions that previously made it more promising.
Keywords: End of History, Globalisation, *Collective Action Theory*, Norm Erosion, Democratic Backsliding

Introduction

The end of the Cold War signified an unprecedented change in the international system and created new expectations for the future of global politics. In the early 1990s, the collapse of bipolar rivalry was seen not only as a geopolitical change but as the beginning of a new stage determined by the easing of ideological conflicts, growing cooperation, and the consolidation of liberal democracy.

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One of the main interpretations of the concept was Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. His thesis stated that liberal democracy represented the very final stage of ideological evolution, and, consequently, the outbreak of large-scale armed conflicts would remain unlikely. Instead of making predictions, it offered a diagnosis for conditions in which convergence would gradually replace confrontation.[1]

At the same time, the 1990s saw rapid globalisation, a multidimensional process of economic integration, political cooperation, technological interconnection, and intensified cross-border interaction. It reflected a structural transformation, rather than a single policy or ideology. Progress in communication and transport technology reduced spatial barriers and increased interdependence, raising expectations of stability, prosperity, and cooperation, alongside the diffusion of governance and market norms.

Although often discussed together, Fukuyama›s thesis and globalisation should be treated as distinct starting points. The former expressed a normative expectation about political development, while the latter led to material and institutional change. Both occurred in the same period and made assumptions about a decreasing likelihood of conflict, yet neither explained the potential aftermath, nor did their coexistence ensure a stable order.

It is worth considering this gap through Mancur Olson›s Collective Action Theory, which explains how individual preferences affect collective outcomes, shaped by incentives, thresholds, coordination problems, and social norms.[2] It applies not only to how these outcomes arise, but also why they persist, even when they prove unfavourable.

In the post-Cold War context, this framework helps explain responses to uncertainty, economic disruption, and political stress. As institutional trust weakens and reference points destabilise, tolerance thresholds shift, altering what is seen as acceptable or legitimate. Outcomes once viewed as unlikely, such as sustained conflict, restrictions on freedoms, or democratic backsliding, may become normalised through adaptation, rather than explicit support. Importantly, these developments do not occur in isolation. The increasing acceptance of constraints on civil liberties, erosion of democratic safeguards, and growing willingness to tolerate coercion, including both external conflict and more force-oriented forms of domestic governance, can be understood as interconnected manifestations of a broader shift in collective expectations. This approach highlights how structural pressures interact with social perception to produce non-linear political trajectories. The article integrates these strands into a coherent framework.

Three decades after the end of the Cold War, global politics diverges from early expectations. Confidence has eroded, and conflict has become more visible and thinkable as a tool of statecraft. At the same time, changes in governance and social tolerance

1 Fukuyama F. 1992, 211–286.

2 Olson M. 1965, 5–42.

suggest that this shift extends beyond the external sphere, affecting how authority, constraint, and the use of force are perceived more generally. This shift reflects not a simple return to past patterns, but a change in how conflict is perceived and integrated into decision-making.

Global interconnectedness persists, yet expectations of liberal convergence, cooperation, and restraint have weakened as cumulative crises make coercion increasingly conceivable, despite the persistence of norms restricting its use. This uneven transformation of collective expectations can be understood as the emergence of a "post-post-Cold War" condition. The concept captures the weakening of assumptions associated with the preceding order, without implying its complete disappearance or a universally applicable date of transition.

This raises a key question: why did post-Cold War optimism and expanding interconnectedness fail to prevent renewed instability? The answer lies not only in weakened globalisation or institutions, but in how societies interpret and respond to change. Structural conditions shape options, but outcomes depend on collective perception and acceptance. Expectations of peace and prosperity do not ensure stability. Instead, they are mediated by attitudes towards risk, legitimacy, and uncertainty.

Existing literature often treats these dimensions separately. Structural accounts, such as Mearsheimer[3] or Friedman,[4] emphasise power and integration, while others, including Rodrik[5] or Levitsky and Ziblatt,[6] focus on political and societal responses. Fewer studies examine how normative expectations, structural change, and collective interpretation interact over time.[7] Even influential works on international order tend to prioritise institutions or ideology over perception.[8]

This article complements existing research by integrating insights from international relations, political economy, and sociology. Its objectives are threefold: to clarify the relationship between post-Cold War expectations and globalisation, to show how sociological mechanisms mediate structural change, and finally, to illustrate how shifts in perception contribute to renewed conflict. In so doing, it treats developments in security, governance, and civil liberties not as separate trajectories, but as interconnected outcomes shaped by common underlying dynamics.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, theory-guided approach, selecting modern conflicts and crises for their relevance to changing expectations of security, cooperation and restraint, and their consequences beyond the immediate conflict zone. Historical examples are necessary to connect the theoretical argument with

3 Mearsheimer J.J. 2001.

4 Friedman T.L. 2005.

5 Rodrik D. 2011.

6 Levitsky S., Ziblatt D. 2018.

7 Ikenberry G.J. 2001.

8 Mearsheimer J.J. 2018.

concrete circumstances in which collective expectations of stability, cooperation and force are challenged. Therefore, the article offers an interpretive account of selected historical events related to the conflict-prone nature of international relations. Selection is purposive, guided by the international prominence of the events' and their significance for public debate and perceptions beyond the societies directly affected, rather than by a systematic ranking of crises. The examples encompass economic disruption, particularly the global financial crisis; military intervention and prolonged insecurity in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen; migration-related political tensions in Europe; the rise of populism in democratic countries; and challenges to territorial restraint, most prominently Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Theese distinctions organise the discussion, yet the central concern is the interdependence of perceptions generated by these events. Declining confidence in economic security or institutional competence may shape how subsequent political and military threats are interpreted. Thus, the cases illustrate how expectations shaped in one context can influence responses in another, without assuming uniform reactions across societies.

The aim is not to present a deterministic account, but to emphasise contingency and the role of social interpretation. The article explains how optimism and interconnectedness could coexist with, and give way to, instability without reducing this outcome to a single cause.

Historical Preconditions of Post-War Pacifism and Post-Cold War Optimism

The twentieth century saw unprecedented violence. The world wars extended destruction beyond battlefields to civilians, economies and societies, fundamentally altering perceptions of war. It came to be viewed less as a tool of statecraft and more as an existential threat. This shift emerged across societies affected by industrialised warfare.

After the wars, broad aversion to large-scale conflict developed. Although rivalry persisted, public tolerance declined. Governments could no longer treat war as routine, as its political, economic and social costs became decisive. The memory of mass casualties and collapse fostered pacifist attitudes that increasingly shaped political decision-making, not only through direct public pressure, but also by altering the wider expectations within which political actors operated across different regime types.[9]

This transformation was uneven. Many regions experienced decolonisation conflicts, proxy wars and external interventions. In developing or newly independent states, conflict persisted, shaped by Cold War dynamics and weak institutions. The key difference lay not in attitudes, but in institutional capacity to constrain

9 Porter B.D. 1994.

decision-makers. Where accountability and representation were weak, public preferences had limited influence. Conflict endured not through support, but through structural conditions and governance restraints that limited the translation of societal attitudes into policy outcomes.

Nevertheless, these attitudes had political effects. Even amid rivalry, authorities recognised that legitimacy required commitment to peace. Preventing another systemic collapse became central not only ethically, but for political survival, whether through direct electoral accountability, elite consensus, or the need to maintain social stability. Even though the competition continued, the period saw growing efforts to institutionalise cooperation and limit the risks of power politics.

Global Integration

Within this context, global integration can be understood, not as an abstract ideology, but as a historically grounded answer to the failures of previous international orders. Cooperation increasingly adopted structured political, economic, social, and cultural forms, creating a set of interconnected processes collectively described as globalisation.[10]

Globalisation was neither linear nor uniformly beneficial. Its effects varied across regions, and often reinforced inequalities, particularly between more and less integrated economies. Yet, it established a shared structural environment, in which expectations of peace, cooperation, and convergence became both: intelligible and politically meaningful, in particular, in highly integrated societies.[11]

Politically, international and regional institutions aimed to manage disputes and reduce conflict. Organisations such as the League of Nations, and later the United Nations, sought to embed peace within institutional frameworks. Regional projects, particularly in Europe, stabilised relations by cohering states to shared legal and political systems.[12]

Economic integration strengthened interdependence via reduced trade barriers, expanded markets, and cross-border investment. It was expected to increase prosperity and raise the costs of conflict, reinforcing peaceful relations despite uneven outcomes.[13]

Social and cultural processes deepened these trends. Mobility, migration, and communication increased interaction, while cultural exchange through literature, media, education, and the arts facilitated the diffusion of norms and ideas across borders. This did not erase cultural differences, but it widened the range of experiences and

10 Scholte J.A. 2008, 1471–1502.

11 Rodrik D. 2011, 117–140.

12 Mazower M. 2012.

13 Keohane R.O., Nye J.S. 1977.

perspectives to which individuals were exposed, often bringing distant societies into everyday awareness. Greater exposure to distant crises, humanitarian challenges, and social struggles made global events more immediate and understandable, empowering a stronger sense of interdependence and shared vulnerability.

Technological change accelerated these dynamics. Progress in transport and communication technology reduced distance and enabled near real-time global interaction. The notion of a "global village", initially mentioned in the 1960s by Marshall McLuhan,[14] gradually moved from metaphor to social reality. Technology did not merely support globalisation. It fundamentally altered conditions under which political, economic, and social interactions took place. The concept became increasingly concrete, as different dimensions of globalisation reinforced one another.[15]

By the end of the Cold War, these processes converged in a period of strong optimism. The collapse of bipolar rivalry and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower lessened fears of large-scale conflict.

Confidence in integration was widespread. In Europe, the development of the European Union was seen as proof that cooperation could overcome historical conflict and institutionalise liberal governance beyond the nation-state, despite emerging challenges of legitimacy and representation.[16]

Beyond Europe, China's economic opening was widely interpreted as supporting convergence. Although the 1989 Tiananmen repression revealed limits to reform, it was often viewed as temporary. While China later achieved major economic transformation, this did not lead to full political liberalisation. Nonetheless, the prevailing belief remained that increased connectivity would promote more peaceful and stable forms of coexistence.

Fukuyama's Assumptions and the Limits of Post-Cold War Convergence

It was within this context that Francis Fukuyama articulated his interpretation of the post-Cold War moment. In the early 1990s, he argued that ideological conflict had reached its endpoint, with liberal democracy and market capitalism representing the most viable form of organisation. History was framed as an evolutionary process, in which alternative systems had been tested and found inadequate.[17]

His argument resonated because it reflected observable trends, such as expanding representative institutions, global market integration, and declining ideological

14 McLuhan M. 1962.

15 Held D. et al. 1999.

16 Fukuyama F. 2007.

17 Fukuyama F. 1992, 211–286.

confrontation. It did not claim conflict would disappear, but that large-scale wars driven by ideology had become less likely under deepening integration. Thus, Fukuyama's thesis synthesised developments already underway, capturing a widely shared belief that a new historical phase had emerged, grounded in lived experience, institutional change, and growing war aversion.

This interpretation drew on earlier traditions. Like Karl Marx, Fukuyama viewed history as directional, but arrived at a fundamentally different conclusion regarding its endpoint. While Marx anticipated the transcendence of capitalism through revolutionary transformation, Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy had proven adaptable enough to mitigate inequalities that Marx considered structurally irresolvable. In this sense, Fukuyama's thesis can be understood not as a rejection of teleological reasoning, but as its inversion, replacing revolutionary rupture with institutional adaptation as the mechanism of historical resolution.[18]

While inequality persists, global poverty declined and inequality trends became more complex, with empirical measures, such as the Gini coefficient, indicating diverging patterns between and within countries.[19] These developments challenge the idea of an inevitable and irreversible concentration of wealth, suggesting instead that capitalism possesses a degree of adaptive capacity absent from Marx's original formulation. From this perspective, Marx's diagnosis appears historically contingent, shaped by the conditions of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism rather than indicative of a universal structural trajectory.

This comparison raises a broader analytical question. If Marx's conclusions were shaped by the structural realities of his time, it becomes necessary to consider whether Fukuyama's own thesis was similarly conditioned by the specific circumstances of the late twentieth century. The plausibility of his argument in the early 1990s derived from observable trends, such as democratic expansion, economic integration, and declining tolerance for war, but these trends were not immune to reversal. Thus, despite their opposing conclusions, both Marx and Fukuyama may be seen as advancing historically grounded interpretations that risk overextending contingent developments into universal endpoints.

From the outset, these assumptions were contested. Jacques Derrida questioned the notion of historical closure, emphasising ongoing instability and unresolved contradictions.[20] Others doubted that political and economic liberalisation would progress together.[21]

18 Marx K. 1976.

19 *Gini Index*. 2025.

20 Derrida J. 1993.

21 Albert M. 1991.

Further critiques focused on the relationship between capitalism and democracy. Slavoj Žižek argued that market systems could persist without democratic accountability, while democracies might diverge from liberal economic models. The coexistence of economic integration with political authoritarianism challenged assumptions of convergence.[22]

Fukuyama later refined his position, shifting towards institutional analysis. In his later works, he identified effective state capacity, rule of law, and democratic accountability as key to a stable order, acknowledging risks of institutional decay and regression.[23] While maintaining that no superior alternative existed, he recognised the fragility of political systems.[24]

These debates do not refute his thesis but reveal its conditional nature. Convergence was grounded in real developments, yet depended on assumptions about institutional adaptability and social acceptance. The persistence of integration alongside instability suggests that structural progress alone cannot ensure peace or democratic consolidation.

From a *Collective Action Theory* perspective, the divergence between post-Cold War optimism and later developments cannot be explained solely by institutions or ideology. It requires analysing how societies adapt their perceptions and tolerance levels over time. These dynamics form the basis for the empirical analysis that follows.

Democracy, Freedom, and Changing Constraints on Political Action

Before analysing post-Cold War developments, it is necessary to distinguish the phenomena of democracy and freedom. Schumpeter,[25] Dahl,[26] and Przeworski[27] define democracy procedurally as a system of competitive elections enabling political rivalry and change of power. Freedom includes substantive civil liberties, such as expression, association, and the rule of law. Although often correlated, they are distinct.

In order to assess electoral mechanisms and civil liberties separately, the article uses the *Freedom House* database,[28] complemented by Polity[29] and V-Dem.[30] Longitudinal data show initial democratic growth followed by decline. The early 1990s

22 Žižek S. 2009, 131–150.

23 Fukuyama F. 1999, 252–284.

24 Fukuyama F. 2014.

25 Schumpeter J.A. 1943.

26 Dahl R.A. 1989.

27 Przeworski A., Alvarez M., Cheibub J.A., Limongi F. 2000.

28 *Freedom House*. 2024.

29 *The Polity Project*. 2021.

30 *V-Dem: Varieties of Democracy*. 2025.

saw a peak in countries considered Free or Partly Free, reflecting post-authoritarian transitions and liberalisation. However, since 2009, democratic backsliding has been predominant. The process was gradual, including weakened checks and balances, reduced media pluralism, and politicised institutions.

Patterns differ across regimes. In democracies, erosion often concentrates on executive overreach, while in hybrid systems, competition usually coexists with repression. Finally, in fully authoritarian regimes, crises reinforce centralisation. Despite of differences, a common implication is to be found. As accountability weakens, the range of contestable decisions narrows, expanding what becomes politically realistic. This includes not only changes in domestic governance, but also a reduced capacity or willingness to restrain coercive practices, both internally and externally. As institutional checks diminish and civil liberties are limited, the political and social price associated with the use of force decreases, making conflict, or conflict-like forms of governance, more likely to be tolerated or pursued.

From Post-Cold War Optimism to the Normalisation of Insecurity (2000–2026)

These shifts developed through cumulative shocks with transnational effects, gradually altering perceptions of stability, cooperation, and risk. The post-war economic framework, established at Bretton Woods, initially stabilised global finance and supported growth through regulated integration. The transformation in the aftermath of the fall of fixed exchange rates, deregulation, and increased capital mobility, though contributing to a greater interdependence, also led to systemic vulnerability.

This became evident during the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, a critical shock with lasting political consequences. The collapse of major financial institutions and subsequent interventions exposed systemic fragility. Economic hardship, unemployment, and public bailouts undermined trust in institutions and highlighted perceived inequalities, particularly the socialisation of losses alongside privatised gains.

The crisis weakened confidence in governance and expert authority. Failures of regulation and forecasting challenged assumptions of technocratic control, while narratives of systemic unfairness gained traction. This erosion of trust extended beyond economics, reshaping perceptions of risk, stability, and vulnerability.[31]

Security developments reinforced this trend. The attacks of 11 September 2001 exposed new vulnerabilities and challenged assumptions about declining large-scale violence. Subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq reintroduced war as a central instrument of policy, contributing to its gradual normalisation.[32]

31 Rodrik D. 2011, 156–165.

32 Benjamin D., Simon S. 2002.

The Arab Spring further destabilised regions. While initially seen as democratic mobilisation, the uprisings exposed underlying institutional fragilities and power vacuums, and in several cases, led to prolonged conflict and state fragmentation, particularly in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The absence of predefined political frameworks, combined with the intervention of regional and global actors, limited prospects for democratic consolidation and instead contributed to sustained instability.

In affected societies, protracted turmoil shifted priorities towards order over democratic aspirations, increasing tolerance for coercive governance. This shift reflected not ideological preference, but adaptive responses to insecurity as fragmented authority and persistent violence altered perceptions of what forms of governance were viable.[33]

These dynamics were not regionally confined. Migration flows, particularly during the 2015 crisis, intensified political tensions in Europe. Although driven largely by socioeconomic factors, migration became associated in public discourse with security risks, amplifying polarisation. Political actors reframed migration as a question of sovereignty, transforming it into a focal point for broader anxieties. Because a substantial proportion of migrants originated from Muslim-majority countries, segments of public discourse increasingly associated migration flows with the threat of radical Islamist terrorism, an interpretation amplified by certain media outlets and political actors.[34]

Similar patterns appeared elsewhere. Across different contexts, complex challenges were simplified through attribution to identifiable groups, enabling the mobilisation of exclusionary agendas. In the United States, this was reflected in the politicisation of migration mostly from Latin America, while in Russia, restrictive measures toward Central Asian migrants intensified following the Crocus City Hall attack, illustrating comparable dynamics across both democratic and non-democratic settings. Despite institutional differences, these processes converged in expanding acceptance of securitised and confrontational politics.

At the same time, renewed violence emerged globally, often following periods of relative stability in regions previously considered contained or dormant. This included conflicts in Sudan and parts of the Sahel, renewed escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and intensifying violence in Myanmar, alongside border clashes, such as those between India and Pakistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Cambodia and Thailand, after years of relative calm, as well as increasing militarisation. Even where not constituting full-scale war, these developments blurred distinctions between peace and conflict, reinforcing the perception that force remained a viable instrument.

Taken together, these developments indicate gradual transformation, rather than abrupt rupture. Economic disruption, institutional erosion, and visible conflict interacted to lower tolerance thresholds. Each crisis, framed as exceptional, normalised the next.

33 Al-Marashi I. 2018, 147–164.

34 de Haas H. 2018, 1145–1166.

This cumulative process reshaped attitudes towards force, governance, and inequality. Its significance lies not only in events themselves, but in the shifting tolerance that accompanied them. Understanding this requires analysing how collective perceptions evolve and coordinate over time.[35] Hence, the social shifts mark the gradual emergence of the post-post-Cold War state, as continued interconnectedness becomes largely detached from shared expectations of cooperation, as well as restraint.

Collective Action, Regime Type, and Shifting Levels of Acceptance

Collective Action Theory explains how societies respond to simultaneous political, economic, and security shocks. Individuals act not only on their own preferences, but on expectations about others and perceived legitimacy. Therefore, political order and tolerance are not fixed, but reflect evolving thresholds formed by coordination.[36]

This helps explain why societies accept outcomes once seen as unacceptable. If individuals believe others will also comply, dissent becomes costly and compliance rational. Over time, what is considered normal or legitimate is redefined. This does not require ideological support. Compliance may stem from uncertainty, resignation, or lack of alternatives. Crucially, this process manifests across multiple domains, including the acceptance of constraints on civil liberties, the erosion of democratic safeguards, and the growing willingness to tolerate coercion and potential conflict.

In the post-Cold War period, shocks were framed as temporary exceptions requiring extraordinary measures. From a *Collective Action* perspective, repetition is the key. When such measures recur, they become normalised. Restrictions, militarisation, and reduced expectations of cooperation shift from deviations to adaptations, lowering the levels of resistance. As a result, limitations on freedoms, institutional weakening, and the use of coercive instruments increasingly appear as pragmatic responses, rather than exceptional measures.[37]

This process reflects coordination dynamics, rather than consensus. Individuals adjust behaviour based on expectations of others, while crisis framing reduces perceived agency. A self-reinforcing cycle emerges. Lower expectations justify stricter policies, which further reduce expectations. In this way, reduced civil liberties and weakened democratic constraints reinforce one another, while simultaneously lowering resistance to the broader use of force. As tolerance narrows domestically, it expands externally, increasing acceptance of enforced actions.

35 Finkel D. 2024, 1–9.

36 Olson M. 1965, 5–42.

37 Agamben G. 2003.

These mechanisms operate differently across regimes. In democracies, governments respond to shifts in public tolerance. Increased acceptance of insecurity or exclusion may lead to expanded executive power and reduced oversight, often within formal legality. Foreign policy also adjusts to perceived voter tolerance.

In non-democratic systems, tolerance reduces the price of repression and enlarges acceptable state action. At the same time, uncoordinated dissatisfaction may stabilise regimes by failing to mobilise. Thus, similar dynamics can produce different outcomes depending on institutional context, without blaming natural resilience or passivity. However, the final effect lies in expanding the range of actions that can be undertaken across all regime types with limited resistance, including forced measures directed both: internally and externally.[38]

Longitudinal indicators, such as *Freedom House*, show a sustained global decline in political rights and civil liberties. This pattern reflects cumulative tolerance shifts, rather than isolated failures. These include incremental restrictions, perceived as necessary, accumulate over time. Such developments illustrate how reduced freedoms and weakened institutional constraints form part of a broader reconfiguration of acceptable governance.

Globalisation amplifies these very dynamics by accelerating the transfer of crises and narratives. Information spreads rapidly across borders, often without context, creating asymmetries in perception. The increased use of social media radicalises opinions. At the same time, the observed drop in interdependence reduces incentives for cooperation. If others are expected to act unilaterally, coordination appears irrational. Consequently, the tolerance for exclusion and unilateralism increases.

Under such conditions, force becomes a politically conceivable response without the need for explicit justification. Importantly, this applies not only to interstate conflict, but also to the normalisation of coercive practices within states, causing a wider change in the acceptance of force as a governing instrument.

Shifting tolerance does not determine outcomes but alters opportunity structures. As acceptance of exceptional measures and simplified narratives grows, space opens for actors who align with prevailing expectations. Their success depends less on persuasion than on articulating already normalised sentiments.

This marks the transition from perception to mobilisation. Changes in tolerance contribute to political outcomes, shaping both domestic governance and expectations of international conduct, including the permissibility of force. In summary, these developments demonstrate that reduced civil liberties, weakened democratic constraints, and the increasing acceptance of coercion are not independent trends, but interconnected manifestations of a wider shift in collective expectations.[39]

38 Acemoglu D., Robinson J.A. 2012.

39 Moffitt B. 2016, 22–45.

Populism as a Collective Outcome of Post-Globalisation Disillusionment

As shown, the post-Cold War period involved a gradual shift in tolerance towards insecurity, institutional fragility, and exclusion. These changes arose less from ideological mobilisation than from cumulative crises that altered expectations about what political systems could deliver. Populist movements emerged as actors articulating sentiments that had already become socially acceptable.

While often seen as drivers of democratic erosion, populism is better understood as a consequence of prior transformations in collective expectations. Following the 'thin-centred ideology' approach, it constructs a moral divide between "the people" and "the elite", opposing institutional constraints and liberal norms. However, the key mechanism lies in *Collective Action Theory*.[40] Diverse economic, security-related, and symbolic shocks translate into mobilisation through shared perceptions. In democratic systems, this is reinforced when institutional trust declines.[41]

Populist success depends less on coherent programmes than on coordination. Individuals support such actors not necessarily out of agreement, but because they believe others share their dissatisfaction. Once this belief spreads, resistance weakens, even among sceptics.

In Europe, populism was often aligned with Euroscepticism. Supranational institutions, especially the EU, became focal points for discontent. Unlike national governments, the EU relied on technocratic reasoning, rather than emotionally resonant narratives, which reduces the ability to mobilise support under stress. Populist actors exploited this asymmetry.

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU illustrates these dynamics. The referendum reflected declining tolerance for supranational governance, rather than a reaction to specific policies. Even though direct exposure to Eurozone or migration pressures was limited, wider European crises, mostly financial instability and migration flows, damaged the perceived credibility of integration. Amplified domestically, these developments fostered a generalised perception of dysfunction.

In this context, the referendum functioned as a coordination mechanism. Diverse grievances converged into a binary choice, where agreement on leaving outweighed disagreement on alternatives. Once this threshold was reached, the complexity of withdrawal became secondary.

A similar pattern appeared in the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Populist mobilisation translated diffuse dissatisfaction, economic disruption, prolonged conflict, and perceived elite detachment, into electoral coordination. "America First" rhetoric

40 Mudde C., Rovira Kaltwasser C. 2017, 1–13.

41 Hawley K. 2012, 94–114.

signalled reduced willingness to prioritise external commitments, resonating with voters seeking clearer boundaries between domestic and global responsibilities.

Although often described as neo-isolationist, U.S. policy remained engaged but more selective and less predictable. Withdrawals from international agreements, trade measures, and pressure on alliances reflected reduced reliance on multilateral frameworks. This did not amount to disengagement, but to a shift toward transactional, contingent interaction.[42]

From this perspective, Trump's presidency is better seen as a manifestation of altered expectations than their cause. As tolerance for deviation from cooperative norms increased, the costs of unilateralism declined. His second presidency continued this pattern, reinforcing selective engagement and strategic ambiguity.

This was evident in key contexts: conditional support in Ukraine, interest-driven positioning in the Middle East, and transactional approaches to allies. Actions, such as the strike on Iran, conducted without prior coordination, reinforced perceptions of volatility and reduced predictability. Global engagement persisted, but was reframed as leader-driven, rather than institutionally mediated.

Therefore, neo-isolationism did not entail withdrawal, but a reconfiguration of participation, including scepticism toward institutions, preference for bilateralism, and instrumental use of interdependence. Populist narratives enabled this change by reconciling activeness with claims of sovereignty and control.

These developments resonated in a broader environment of declining trust and fatigue with international commitments. The weakening of cooperative norms reduced constraints not only domestically but globally, encouraging similar behaviour among other actors.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine as a Systemic Rupture

The preceding analysis shows how shifting expectations reshaped domestic and international behaviour. Their systemic implications became fully visible with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The invasion represents a qualitative rupture in the post-Cold War order, particularly in Europe. Unlike earlier conflicts, it involved large-scale conventional force aimed at territorial revision, directly challenging the norm of territorial inviolability. This norm relied less on enforcement than on shared expectations of restraint. Therefore, its breach affects the logic of interstate behaviour beyond the battlefield.[43]

42 McConnell M. 2025, 127.

43 Kurkov A. 2022.

The return of sustained interstate war marks a shift in what is considered feasible and acceptable. Yet the continued use of terms such as "Special Military Operation" indicates that war remains normatively problematic, suggesting not a disappearance of post-Cold War norms but their selective circumvention. The invasion is not treated as an isolated cause, but as a sociological watershed consolidating prior trends, such as increasing tolerance towards force, exclusion, and unilateralism. Its significance lies in its precedent-setting effect. Violations of established norms, combined with limited enforcement, recalibrate expectations of what states may attempt and societies may tolerate across regime types.

Therefore, the mentioned rupture caused by the invasion crystallises the earlier-defined post-post-Cold War condition, in which established norms remain formally recognised, but their capacity to sustain common expectations of restraint is continuously contested.

Collective Action Theory helps explain how such a breakdown occurred without widespread ideological support for war. The invasion emerged within a context of cumulative tolerance shifts shaped by repeated crises. Over time, societies adapted to exceptional measures justified by security, economic instability, and uncertainty. Each episode, framed as temporary, normalised departures from constraints.

Within this environment, the Russian leadership was able to anticipate and strategically exploit limited coordination of resistance, domestically as well as, in part, internationally. *Collective Action Theory* dynamics lowered acquiescence thresholds, but these conditions were not merely incidental. They were rather actively reinforced through continuous political messaging, control of information, and the framing of external threats. Individuals did not necessarily support war but perceived resistance as ineffective or isolated. Hence, acceptance did not require endorsement, only the expectation that others would follow the same course. Under such conditions, compliance becomes the default equilibrium.

The invasion illustrates how force can re-enter political practice without a corresponding change in declared values. It also expands the perceived range of possible actions, making escalation elsewhere more conceivable.

Conclusion

The consequences of the invasion extend beyond Europe. The accumulation of crises has contributed both: to the conditions enabling the invasion and to a broader easing of constraints on force. Increased militarisation, cross-border tensions, and revived disputes reflect this shift. Each instance of norm erosion further lowers the perceived cost of deviation, while parallel developments in governance, including restrictions on civil liberties and the weakening of democratic safeguards, reinforce this broader change in acceptable political action.

The key implication is not the emergence of a new ideological rival but the erosion of shared restraints. Fukuyama's argument assumed that certain conflicts had become irrational within prevailing norms. In this sense, his thesis appears only partially borne out. While liberal democracy has not been decisively displaced, the expectation of its uncontested and stabilising dominance has not materialised. The scale of the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates more clearly than any other events that his assumption no longer holds in practice, not because alternative models have prevailed, but because the social conditions that sustained restraint have weakened. What has changed is not institutional superiority, but the altered perception of what means remain acceptable.

Thus, the current world stage can be described as post-post-Cold War. Globalisation and interconnectedness persist but no longer provide common expectations of cooperation and restraint. This condition reflects an uneven transformation in perceptions of what is possible and acceptable, without implying a universally applicable date of transition or the complete disappearance of the preceding order. Acquiescence under perceived necessity mirrors adaptive resignation, rather than ideological change, accompanied by a greater tolerance for more coercive and less constrained forms of governance. Societies lower their expectations, redefining stability in minimal terms.

From a *Collective Action Theory* perspective, the true risk lies in half-hearted escalation. If collective outcomes are sustained by acceptance, rather than belief, conflict may proceed without widely shared aims or committed public support. Thus, the danger need not depend on enthusiasm for war but may also arise from the perception that alternatives no longer exist. Such perceptions can develop as repeated crises lower expectations of recovery, simultaneously broadening acceptance of measures previously regarded as undesirable. Their normalisation may be reflected in several seemingly unrelated developments.

European hopes for democratisation during the Arab Spring increasingly competed with priorities of stabilisation and migration control. Similarly, the British government's 2025 reset with the EU sought improvements while excluding a return to the single market or customs union.[44] Meanwhile, support for restoring conscription in Sweden rose from 35% in 2010 to 62% in 2016,[45] and in 2025, Poland and the Baltic states invoked the Russian threat when recommending withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention prohibiting anti-personnel mines.[46] Germany's extension of internal border controls in 2024, justified partly by efforts to curb irregular migration, likewise illustrates political acceptance of restrictions on border-free travel. Growing disenchantment with the United States also reached traditionally pro-American societies.

44 Starmer K. 2025.

45 Salonius-Pasternak C. 2018, 7.

46 *Statement*. 2025.

For instance, favourable views in Poland fell by at least 20 percentage points between 2024 and 2025.[47] Taken together, these events suggest how diminished confidence in established arrangements can accompany reduced ambitions and greater acceptance of restrictive or coercive responses. Partial relief may become the measure of success, while restoring earlier conditions appears largely remote. Hence, the re-legitimation of force, both externally and in more coercive forms of domestic governance, does not indicate a return to past ideological conflicts, but a change in how societies interpret necessity, constraint, and feasibility.

Reversal remains possible as tolerance thresholds are not fixed. However, it requires restoring shared expectations that once made force politically costly. This would involve not only institutional repair, but the re-establishment of confidence in collective resistance to coercion, whether in the form of war, weakened democracy, or reduced civil liberties. Without this, the post-Cold War assumption of war's obsolescence may give way to a more permissive equilibrium, in which conflict is not desired, but no longer actively resisted.

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47 Wike R. et al. 2025.

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