

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A post-Western World in the Making

The conceptual framework

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### Abstract

The capacity of the liberal West to achieve a normative consensus and shape the international order is decreasing. In this context, the West has become both contested and contestant. Internally, rising inequality, emerging populism and political polarisation have undermined the consensus on liberal values in Western democracies. Externally, the rise of China and the consolidation of increasingly autonomous forms of regional governance in South-East Asia, Africa, and Latin America have led scholars to question the resilience of Western hegemony, resulting in the emergence of a normatively, institutionally, and economically more plural international order. The special issue provides an original perspective on how the international order has been evolving, integrating non-Western interests and norms with Western and liberal features. The introduction offers key concepts and theoretical framework to provide the relevant context for readers to address the contributions included in the special issue.

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**Keywords:** Liberal International Order; Contestation; Pluralism; Post-Western; Global Governance

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### Introducing the Special Issue

The Liberal International Order (LIO) that emerged after the Cold War has been grounded on material and ideational factors. Both economically and militarily, the United States emerged from the bipolar confrontation as the unchallenged leader. This preponderance was reinforced by the fact that the majority of the other economic and military powers both in Europe and Asia were Washington's allies. This unbalance of power existed also in the ideological realm. The West had won what Melvin Leffler had described a struggle for "the soul of mankind" against Communism (Leffler, 2007, p.3). As Francis Fukuyama put it at the time, democracy and liberalism appeared as the only viable universalistic path to modernity and progress (Fukuyama, 2006).

This situation led policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic to believe that there was a significant opportunity to promote stability, prosperity and justice. To do so, the liberal order that had developed in the West during the Cold War era needed to be expanded, through a strategy of enlargement and inclusion able to embrace the entire globe (Ikenberry, 1998). Engagement, enlargement and socialization of powers re-emerging from the ashes of the Communist bloc would have ensured both the general stability of the system and the interest of Western actors (Kelley, 2004).

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Both the US and the EU rooted their strategies on explicit liberal assumptions: unfettered trade, inclusion in international institutions and deepening of international law and global governance, democratization and people to people exchanges were considered key transformative elements to turn former rivals into friends and partners. These approaches relied on a liberal optimism entrenched in a twofold assumption, namely that history was clearly pointing towards the direction of progress and peace and that democratization could lead governments of former rivals' powers to realize that their best interests rested in being active and willing members of a new global liberal order (Dunne & McDonald 2013).

This faith in the transformative power of the liberal order and its key normative elements deeply shaped both US and EU member states' foreign policies. The US promoted a strategy of engagement towards China in the hope that trade, membership in international institutions and people to people exchanges could socialize China to the point of turning it into a "responsible stakeholder" of the international order (Schell, 2020). Up to the early 2010s, Beijing's clear aversion towards Western democracy did not necessarily prevent hopes that economic growth could generate a gradual liberalization in the PRC. The US supported processes of democratization in East and South East Asia, and actively promoted the integration of the region in global finance and trade. The creation of the WTO in 1994 and the new activism of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank represented another important leg of the strategy of consolidation of US-led, market driven globalization (Wade, 2002; Thirkell-White, 2005; Kapur et al., 2011; Woods, 2014).

In Latin America the consolidation of the democratic forms of government and the ultimate demise of military backed dictatorships appeared to be another important element of the consolidation of the liberal order (Hagopian & Mainwaring, 2005). In the post-Soviet space, the Russian transition to democracy in the Yeltsin period (1991-1999), the prevention of nuclear proliferation, and the containment of ethnic conflicts at the periphery of the former Soviet empire could be considered a success for the post-Cold War Liberal International Order (Goldgeier & McFaul, 2003).

The European Union and its member state followed even more explicitly a liberal grammar. Firstly, doubling down on economic and political integration within Europe, permanently enmeshing Germany in a "ever closer union", creating a monetary community, and definitively embracing its post-modern and post-national identity (Sarotte, 2014). In the meanwhile, the EU expanded, including Central and Eastern Europe as well as Mediterranean countries (Gheciu, 2005). Even beyond its borders, the EU sought to exercise its "normative power", and strived to promote what the Germany government defined "*Wandel durch Handel*" (change through trade) (Manners, 2006). From this point of view, commercial integration, membership in regional and global international organizations, a policy of conditionality by the EU and its members were considered to be key elements to generate processes of modernization and liberalization. This approach inspired both the relations with the Middle East and North Africa, as well as other actors such as China, India, and main Latin American states (Bergmann, 2019).

The LIO was also characterized by a particular interpretation of the legitimacy of the use of force. The West reshaped the boundaries of war as a legitimate practice of the international order, rooting into a liberal vision centred, at least in theory, around international law, human rights, and the role of international organizations. This trajectory started with the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s in the Balkans and culminated with the theorization of the principle of "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P), later used to legitimize the intervention in Libya in 2011 (Pejcinovic, 2013).

Despite this assessed and prolonged period of emergence and stability of the liberal internal order, starting from the mid-2000s, its equilibrium has been increasingly challenged by different actors. Contestation over its legitimacy has come both from non-

Western states and regional organisations and, more recently, from the same Western countries that have underpinned such order. This has led to significant changes that suggest a transition towards a post-Western international order. So far, International Relations literature has concentrated more on the possible consequences of this shift rather than on the processes of contestation on the main pillars of the LIO. This special issue intends to address the identified gap of the state of the art by investigating the growing resistance against liberal norms and values and the emergence of political and institutional alternatives, surfacing both from non-Western actors – contestation from the outside – and Western ones – contestation from within. It is especially this focus on both internal and external dimensions of the processes of contestation to represent the most innovative aspect of the proposed issue.

The special issue contributions thus seek to offer an original perspective on how the international order has been evolving, integrating non-Western interests and norms with Western and liberal features. Catapano and Araujo (2022), for instance, investigate how initiatives implemented in the global financial system fit into Beijing's larger strategy of contestation towards the existing Western-led financial system. The authors do so by looking at the case of Argentina, which offers crucial insights both on China's approach and the perspective of the countries in the Global South and thus at the margins of the international order. Mingardi and Nanni (2022) also focus at the contestation of the Liberal order from a less conventional perspective, namely by how dissatisfied European actors leverage their partnership with China to contest EU norms. From the outside, 16+1 is in fact perceived as China's attempt to 'divide and conquer' EU states. Through their analysis the authors find that the 16+1 has raised concern among EU policy-makers, despite scarce economic results, because it has been used as a discursive leverage by both China and Eastern European countries against the EU.

The third contribution, on the contrary, relies on the case of the US hostility towards the International Criminal Court as offering a valid ground to observe the contestation-from-within phenomenon (Ducci & Lucenti, 2022). By drawing on the constructivist literature on norm contestation, this article seeks to understand on what grounds the Trump administration has discursively contested the ICC and the principle of non-impunity. This case study exemplifies what we term a "contestation from within", hence, originating from one of the leaders of the international order, namely the US.

Lastly, the fourth contribution to the special issue furtherly expands the point of view through which to understand and analyse the making and contestation of the Liberal International Order to a more theoretical level. Martini (2022) draws from previous works inquiring into the discursive otherization of "international terrorism" (Herschinger, 2013; Ditych, 2014; Martini, 2021). These works have inquired into the discursive formation of "international terrorism" (Herschinger, 2013) and linked it to the emergence of a global *dispositif* put in place by the international community (Ditych, 2014). Building on these works, the article explores this construction as a result of the power relations structuring the LIO – and its outsiders. To do this, the article will first analyze these three *raisons* as levels on which the violence that is constructed as "international terrorism". Or, in other words, it will focus on the three LIO's levels where the struggle for legitimacy and power is carried out – i.e., the state *raison* (2.1), the system *raison* (2.2), and the civilization *raison* (2.3). It will then LIO (2.4) as a constellation of power which shapes the global *dispositif* of international terrorism. Lastly, it analyses the role of the *dispositif* in the (re)production of these global relations of power.

### Assessing the sources and impact of contestation

Today's Liberal International Order appears into a deep state of turmoil (Boyle, 2016; Emmott, 2017; Luce, 2017). As John Ikenberry argued, it is important to distinguish two different types of crises: A "Polanyi crisis" (Polanyi, 1957) and an "E.H. Carr crisis" (Carr, 1951).

The first is generated by "growing turmoil and instability resulting from the rapid mobilization and spread of global capitalism, market society and complex interdependence, all of which has overrun the political foundations that supported its birth and early development" (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 10). As captured by Brank Milanovic's "elephant curve", the spread of capitalism and financial globalization have generated a substantial amount of economic growth, concentrated especially in emerging markets of Asia and Middle East and in a lesser extent Latin America and Africa. However, economic and financial globalization has also been associated with rising inequality, lack of social mobility, social marginalization and political polarization, especially in Western countries (Ravallion, 2015; Milanovic, 2018). The European and American middle classes, once the political and social backbone of the liberal order, found themselves at the receiving end of most of the negative externalities of global capitalism, from delocalization and enhanced competition to erosion of labour rights to lack of meaningful expectations of social mobility and economic amelioration (Pressman, 2007; Flaherty & Rogowski, 2021). The Polanyi crisis has clearly manifested itself in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis and the Euro-crisis. However, before reaching the centre of the international economic order, the disruptive consequences of financial economic liberalization and the application of neo-liberal economic receipts had generated a succession of disruptive crises in the peripheries who involved South East Asia (1997-98), Mexico (1994), Argentina (2001), Brazil (1999) and Russia (1998).

The Polanyi crisis has contributed to the emergence of populism in Europe and in the US. The revolt of the Western middle class against the global order has been both cultural and economic. On the one hand the populist appeal to the need of economic protection against global competition. On the other hand, right-wing populists sought to merge economic grievances with cultural fears, articulating a xenophobic political discourse that blamed cultural, national, ethnic and racial "others" for the problems affecting their constituents (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mishra, 2017). The wave of populism that led to the election of leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro or Orban, and the empowerment of others such as Salvini and Le Pen, or events as Brexit, significantly contributed to erode the attractiveness of the Western liberalism in the eyes of developing countries outside the West. This paved the way for non-democratic models to be perceived as viable attempts of "exporting democracy" via military means, as Western democracies cannot present themselves as "shining cities upon the hill", to echo Ronald Reagan's beloved expression. On the contrary, the legitimacy of liberalism as the only universalist ideology to provide the necessary keys to processes of modernization is increasingly challenged.

The second type of crisis currently experienced by the contemporary Liberal International Order is defined as E.H. Carr crisis, namely the re-emergence of great power competition, fuelled by the presence of security dilemmas, territorial disputes and revisionist approaches to the established international order (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 10).<sup>1</sup> Recently, the material and

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<sup>1</sup> John Ikenberry in its 2018 article on International Affairs attributed much more relevance to the Polanyi rather than to the Carr crisis. "The troubles facing liberal internationalism are not driven by a return of geopolitical conflict, although conflicts with China and Russia are real and dangerous. In fact, the Liberal International Order has succeeded all too well. It has helped usher in a world that has outgrown its political moorings."

normative foundations of the liberal order have been challenged by several rising or returning powers. China and Russia are the most evident challengers to the LIO.

China is the only rising power able in the longer term to challenge the US economic and military might. Beijing rise has been associated with a rapid expansion of its military capabilities and a more frequent use of coercion using both the threat of use of force and economic means. Beijing attempts to enforce its claims in the South China Sea, economic coercion towards South Korea, Australia and several South East Asian states are only few examples of the revisionist aspects of China's rise (Le Thu, 2019). Nevertheless, China's rise has not had only destabilizing consequences for Asia and for the world. It has also generated tremendous opportunities for economic growth, especially at the regional level, since Beijing has turned into the economic and commercial centre of gravity for the region. But not only. The case of Beijing ascent and proposition of an alternative financial system appears to find interest and support from countries that have so far been virtually excluded from the traditional financial system gravitating towards liberal actors. For instance, this emerges from the attitudes shown by Global South and Argentina in particular, who perceives the Chinese alternative as an opportunity to pave its own way back into the international financial system. (Catapano & Araujo, 2022). Moreover, China has articulated its own proposals for the future of the order both at the regional and at the global level (Dian 2021). Beijing's alternative vision is rooted in a primacy of sovereignty and non-interference over human rights, a significant role of the state in the economic realm, a selective multilateralism, merged with high levels of trade and economic integration. In terms of status China sees itself as main great power and "norms maker" in Asia and a peer to the US at the global level (Foot & Walter, 2010).

The emergence of the E.H. Carr crisis, and increase of overtly revisionist practices highlights the necessity to explore the limits of the liberal order as it has developed in the three decades after the Cold War.

Firstly, was the Liberal International Order ever global? In which extent non-Western states felt represented by the post-Cold War project? In which extent was the order representative of the plurality of interests and norms present at the global level? In which extent the process of socialization and inclusion in the LIO generated new grievances, humiliations, and new normative and political hierarchies? These questions are crucial to understand the main topics the special issue will deal with, all associated to the proposals by non-Western states in the realm of global governance.

The case of China is once again very illustrative. On the one hand, China's rise largely depended on its integration with the world economy, on trade with Western markets and on importation of technology and practices. This process of integration not only favoured the country's rapid economic development but also facilitated the end of its self-isolation and the return to the centre of the region in economic and political terms (Huang, 2017). Despite this, China in the last three decades has developed a political narrative that paints its political relation with the West in increasingly competitive and Hobbesian terms. Nationalism and grievances associated to the memories of the century of humiliation have assumed an increasingly relevant space in the country's political discourse, especially under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The liberal and democratic features of the order as promoted by the West, such as emphasis on human rights and political freedoms are perceived as parts of a larger plot to contain China's rise and to undermine the power of the Chinese Communist Party (Dian, 2017). However, this emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference is not limited to China. ASEAN and most of its member states assume a similar position, considering the preservation of national self-determination as a key objective of the Association itself (Ba, 2020).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the extent of the Russian grievances towards the post-IIWW international order. In Europe and in the United States the expansion of NATO and the EU were perceived as legitimate solutions to put an end to five decades of unnatural and coercive division of the continent, ensuring its security, peace and prosperity. Moscow saw the post-Cold War settlement as a major geopolitical confrontation that fundamentally undermined its great power status and put at risk its own security. As underlined by Isabella Weber, Russia's experience with the "shock therapy" is another crucial element to consider (Weber, 2021). The sudden and radical liberalization of what remained of the Soviet economy in the early 1990s created a deeply unequal and corrupt economic system, that did not have anything in common with the functioning capitalist system it was meant to originate. This undermined the social and economic foundations of the Russian democracy, laying the preconditions for the formation and consolidation of a hybrid regime led by Vladimir Putin (Malinova, 2021). The Russian leader then actively exploited national grievances, the memories of the "decade of humiliation" of the 1990s (Wang, 2014) and the partial and uneven integration in the Liberal International Order to articulate a revisionist position on the post-Cold War order and to turn the Russian political system into a *de facto* autocracy. These tendencies manifested themselves with the invasion of Ukraine. Launching a full-scale invasion of a neighbouring sovereign country, Putin has accelerated both Russia's isolation from the West and the transition towards a much more openly authoritarian domestic political system, further undermining the rule of law and freedom of expression.

At the time of writing, it is hard to foresee a negotiated solution of the conflict. What appears clear is that, barring an implosion of the regime, Russia is likely to face a long period of international isolation from the West and from much of the rest of the international community. Overall, today Russia does not seem able to provide any alternative legitimate proposal to the international order and global governance. On the contrary, it appears as a revisionist country ready to resort to a full-scale invasion to exert control over a liberal democracy that has attempted to distance itself from its sphere of influence.

The emergence of the great power competition between the US and China and the war in Ukraine can be considered symptoms of more structural trends: a contestation of both the material and the normative foundations of the liberal order. This means that countries such as China and Russia have increasingly rejected aspects associated to the military and institutional arrangements as well as ideation elements of the liberal order.

In the security realm, China perceives the US-led network of alliances in East Asia and the US military presence in the region as threats. Similarly, Russia perceives the expansion of NATO as an existential threat to its security. In the institutional and diplomatic realm, the degree of contestation is less evident and less urgent, but still relevant. It had manifested itself with China's search of an influence in international organizations such as the UN, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund or with the creation of the so-called new type of international institutions as the Asia Infrastructure and Investments Bank (Dian & Menegazzi, 2018).

Looking only at the material dimension, this debate could possibly be reduced to a discussion on whether it is necessary to recognize a legitimate sphere of influence for non-Western great powers and where to draw a line to their ambitions of political and military influence, through a balanced and steady exercise of extended deterrence (Jackson, 2020).

Including the normative dimension and considering the possibility of an increasingly marked ideological polarization of the international order between democracies and non-democracies greatly complicate the picture. The events in Ukraine, but also China's approach to Hong Kong and Taiwan, lead to think that the regimes in Beijing and Moscow are ontologically threatened by an international order rooted into liberal principles of

democracy, human rights, and political freedom (Mitzen, 2006). As a consequence, they perceive the capacity of the people of Ukraine and Taiwan respectively to freely choose the domestic and international orientation of their countries as a threat to their security. In this case the fracture between Russia and China and the rest of the international order seems to be much deeper than a mere matter of recognizing their “great power rights” to sphere of influence.

These questions are important to understand how and to which extent processes of normative and material contestation of the liberal order can lead to forms of post Western global and regional governance. The flourishing of forms of global and regional governance such as those analysed in this special issue point to an evolution towards a “thin and wide” rather than a “thick and limited” form of order (Ikenberry, 1998), in which most countries agree on some key normative elements and “agree to disagree” on others. This means that the relative decline of the material and normative influence of the West can be translated into the emergence of multiple forms of cooperation at the regional and global level rooted on alternative principles and managed by one or more non-Western great powers.

Similarly to Acharya’s vision of a “multiplex world”, these positions imply that under the same big tent constituted by global, non-hegemonic and inclusive institutions such as the UN and its agencies, a decentralized and plural structure of global governance can emerge (Acharya, 2017).

The vision of a multiplex world is surely fascinating and appealing, but premises on several optimistic assumptions. Firstly, this scenario assumes that a transition to a post-Western, post-hegemonic and plural world order would be peaceful. The absence of a hegemonic stabilizer would be compensated by the enduring stabilizing effects of economic interdependence, people-to-people exchanges and international institutions (Gilpin 1981; Ikenberry 2014). Secondly, it assumes that powers that today are contesting the existing international order would be satisfied with the new “post-Western” version. This would mean that they could consider the progresses they will make in the decades to come in terms of political, economic and ideological influence to be considered sufficient by their leaders, who will not, to use an expression typical of the Chinese diplomatic jargon, “seek hegemony”. This entails they would tone significantly down their nationalism and their emphasis on historical grievances. At the moment, this seems particularly optimistic since their grievances are integral part of their legitimacy and their political narrative.

Similar positions have been articulated among others by Kupchan (2012), Flockhart (2016) and Buzan (2011). All these scholars argue that the future of the global order will be characterized by a deep pluralism in terms of distribution of power, but also admit the process of contestation and competition for power and influence might undermine the stability of a post-Western order.

Beyond the necessary questions on the stability of a post-Western international order, the crisis of the current order, the limits of its capacity to include and socialize, and the emergence of non-liberal proposals open up several normative dilemmas.

The main proponents of alternative visions reject the centrality of individual rights and propose state sovereignty as the key political foundation of the international order. As a consequence of this, they tend to substitute equality among people with equality among states. This represents an effort to contest an implicit but very relevant element of hierarchy in the international system, which attributed a different type of legitimacy to liberal regimes (Mattern & Zarakol 2016; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol 2021).

### Concluding remarks

The dilemma generated by the tensions between the abovementioned positions is clear: are proposals for the future of global governance coming from non-democratic powers

legitimate and acceptable? Can democratic states participate to forms of global governance rooted in the primacy of sovereignty and non-interference? Can democratic states willingly participate to forms of cooperation that assume that liberal democracy is just another type of political regime? Does a critical understanding of the process of expansion of the liberal order after the Cold War entail necessarily forms of political and moral equivalence between liberalism and non-liberalism?<sup>2</sup>

The rise of non-Western visions of the international order has also been associated with a wider return of the state over the market. At the domestic level this has led to the development of various forms of state capitalist economic model, in which market mechanisms live side by side with the state control over key sectors of the economy, spanning from banking and finance to telecommunication and new technologies, but also more traditional sectors as steel, transports, shipping and raw materials (Naughton & Tsai, 2015; Eaton, 2016; Kurlantzick, 2016). State capitalism has been wedded to forms of protectionism and more broadly attempts to strategically used trade and investments to further the states' influence over their economic partners (Nye, 2020; Drezner et al., 2021).

The destabilization of the present Liberal International Order is catalysed by forms of contestations arising from within, namely countries that have fully participated in its underpinning. Ducci and Lucenti (2022) extensively present how the US, for instance, and more in particular the Trump's administration, has furtherly contributed in contesting the international normative framework by questioning the International Criminal Court's non-impunity principle.

Many of the alternative and non-Western proposals are, implicitly or explicitly, based on the contestation of political and economic hierarchies existing in the liberal order. More importantly, it emerged that such alternative and post-liberal systems are in high demand not only from those proposing it (i.e., China) but also from smaller and more limitedly influential actors (Catapano & Araujo, 2022; Mingardi & Nanni, 2022). Therefore, the objective is to produce an alternative order in which developing countries can reach a parity of status and role with the rest of the international community. However, non-Western proposals might lead to constitute new forms of hierarchy in the economic and political realm. China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union constitute a tangible realization of such alternative proposals. Far from seeking to produce a world of equality among states, these proposals present very significant elements of hierarchy and inequality.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of critical re-reading of the formation of the liberal order and its expansion are brought by Suzuki (2009), Zarakol (2010), Buzan and Lawson (2015) and Persaud and Sajed (2018).

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