



Whither Liberal World Order?

By Zhouchen Mao, Camille Merlen and Zachary Paikin

1. Introduction

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent intervention in the Donbass, international *disorder* now allegedly characterizes the state of global affairs. Indeed, the events of 2014 are seen to mark the clearest departure yet from the post-Cold War order, with Moscow defying Western leadership in unambiguous fashion. The vote for Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of Eurosceptic parties on the continent further contributed to a sense that we are witnessing a crisis of liberal world order.

It is this international context that brought scholars from institutions across more than a dozen countries together at the University of Kent on 2-3 November 2017 to discuss the future of international order at a [workshop funded by the UPTAKE academic consortium](#), focused primarily on theoretical issues raised by recent developments and the extent to which China and Russia present a genuine challenge to the liberal order.

2. Liberal Order Imperilled

Although there appears to be a consensus on the notion that the contemporary liberal order is challenged, there is far less agreement as to the extent and the source of the peril or to the content and meaning of our supposedly liberal world order itself.

Mainstream narratives often note that differing conceptions of legitimacy are a driving force behind today's discord. According to this view, Russia and China are allegedly more protective of their sovereignty and aspire to consolidate a sphere of influence in their respective backyards. Accordingly, the rise of China and the reassertion of Russia on the world stage are viewed as direct threats, as they allegedly challenge key norms of the current order. Furthermore, both countries – although to varying degrees – have rejected the normative agenda of the West as well as its institutions of international governance. Instead, they now promote alternative values and create what they see as more inclusive and democratic international frameworks.

In this vein, the end of the Cold War has allowed Western states to construct a new set of principles to govern international affairs – at times competing with those of the post-war order. Thus, the promotion of universal human rights and of doctrines of intervention by liberal states produces a “cosmopolitan dystopia”, in the words of the University of Kent's Philip Cunliffe, that subverts key tenets of the post-war order. Resistance against this project by the likes of China and Russia ironically renders them the fiercest defenders of a liberal, equitable, rules-based world order. Similarly, it is not so much the West of Donald Trump but rather that of the liberal interventionists that has done the most damage to this order which has done so much to benefit Western countries.

The University of Tartu's Viacheslav Morozov put this in terms of competing historical memories, with the memory of the evils of Stalinism having been superimposed by the likes of Poland, Ukraine and the Baltics over the post-1945 focus on remembering the destruction of world war and the Holocaust. While this has allowed smaller states – emancipated now after living through decades of a Yalta order rooted in spheres of influence – to gain a voice, it may come at the cost of relative international stability as rival norms and legitimacies continue to butt heads.

However, much of the workshop's discussion centred on the very nature of what many call "liberal world order". The University of Tampere's Tuomas Forsberg noted that – contrary to conventional wisdom that characterizes liberal orders as being thick (i.e., possessing a strong degree of international consensus) and realist orders as being thin – realism or liberalism in fact guide the content of a given order.

The contemporary order being thought of as liberal has therefore come with consequences. Political forces within non-democratic states have been reduced to a simple binary – reformists and conservatives – and democracies have taken the approach of telling their non-democratic counterparts how they should structure their societies and behave on the world stage, thus depriving them of the ability to act as co-architects of international order on their own terms. And, as noted by the University of Birmingham's Kevork Oskanian in a thought inspired by Götze and Bourdieu, democratic states are endowed with a form of international social capital, with can prove attractive for some but can also serve as a source of frustration for states that are unable to democratize.

It is worth noting, however, that today's international political instability is not just the result of liberalism's characteristics and consequences, but also of the very way we choose to describe the contemporary order. As the University of Kent's Trine Flockhart aptly reminded participants, there is in fact no "liberal world order" that exists today. Rather, there is merely a *rules-based* world order, in addition to a liberal *international* order rooted in the West but not global in character.

Morozov expanded on this theme, outlining the ways in which the term "liberal world order" is most often used: Understood as a set of global institutions, liberal world order is relatively robust, to the extent that it has been established. But the notion that "liberal world order" is synonymous with global leadership by liberal democracies is flawed, seeing as such leadership existed for only a moment in time, to say nothing of the crisis that the liberal democratic state is currently undergoing. As for the idea that there is a global liberal economic order rooted in free trade and the like, it goes without saying that protectionism is no thing of the past, even before the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency.

If Western states believe that a liberal world order exists when in reality one does not, then it is no surprise that we find a degree of pushback from certain states situated outside the liberal *international* order's Western power base. And indeed, as Oskanian pointed out, the success of the liberal project in Europe is rooted in power, not in liberalism's teleology – a fact that has become increasingly obvious as Russia's economic and military resurgence has advanced.

3. *Russia*

If the liberal order is in crisis, it is perhaps in the first place Russia that stands accused of having wilfully brought about this unfortunate state of affairs. Indeed, Russia's aspiration since Vladimir Putin's ascent to power to return to the centre stage of international politics has increasingly been viewed as a challenge to this order, as increasing revenues from natural resources seemed to give Moscow a considerable dose of self-assurance. After being written off as a hopelessly declining power for much of the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia has indeed returned to the limelight, much to the concern of many Western chancelleries.

The nature of the Russian challenge to the current order is multifaceted, supposedly targeting at least three aspects of which liberal world order is generally said to comprise. First, when compared with its stance in the 1990s, Russia has become sceptical of the normative agenda of promoting the universality of human rights and liberal democracy. At the very least, it claims the right to give its own content and meaning to concepts such as democracy, arguing that these cannot simply be transposed from one (Western) context to another. Criticizing Western – and in particular US – attempts at democracy promotion, Putin has stressed that “[democracy] must be a product of internal domestic development in a society”.¹

Second, Moscow has claimed for itself what for all intents and purposes amounts to a sphere of influence in much of the post-Soviet region, with the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict and the ongoing crisis in Ukraine since 2004 serving as dramatic examples of the importance Moscow accords to maintaining its status as the regional hegemon. This has seemingly taken place at the expense of key norms of international society such as sovereignty and national self-determination. To be sure, there is doubt as to whether this is an actual departure from the established practices of the post-war (and earlier) order(s), and indeed the behaviour of other great powers.

Third, Russia has gradually ceased to recognize the political leadership of the West, seen by many as a guarantor of liberal world order. This has been most vividly on display with the annexation of Crimea, the conflict in the Donbass, and Russia's assertiveness in the Middle East. Indeed, it is said to view Western states as “declining and decreasingly relevant powers that are morally bankrupt at home and pursue reckless international policies abroad” – mirroring Western views of Russia.² Moscow has likewise criticized existing global governance structures, dominated by Western states, as being increasingly unrepresentative. In an apparently more direct affront to the West, Russia has started to meddle in its states' domestic politics, being accused of spreading fake news, engineering elections, and supporting populist or far-right political movements in Europe and the US.³

On the other hand, Russia continues to support key norms and institutions of the liberal order. This includes not just its traditional defence of the UN and its key norms such as sovereignty and non-intervention, but also the World Trade Organisation, the rules of which, Moscow claims, have been violated by Western-imposed sanctions. On a regional level, it continues to adhere to the Council of Europe and its normative agenda of human rights promoted through the European Court of Human Rights, despite overt tensions between Moscow and Strasbourg. Russia can thus be seen as challenging the liberal order only in part.

¹ “Bush and Putin in democracy row”, *The Guardian*, 9 May 2005.

² Andrew Monaghan, *The New Politics of Russia. Interpreting Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 2.

³ To what extent these allegations are proven or are part of self-serving narratives by Western politicians remains the subject of intense debate: Jackson Lears, “What We Don't Talk about When We Talk about Russian Hacking”, *London Review of Books*, 4 January 2018.

Although Russia can hardly be characterized as a “rising” power, its recent trajectory does point to a key IR debate: How can underrepresented powers be accommodated within an existing order? On the one hand, Moscow argues that no satisfying answer to this question was found after 1989/1991, as the Western institutions of the Cold War (such as NATO) were retained and even expanded eastward. Russia’s defiance, in this view, is merely a symptom of the unsettled issue of according Russia a place in contemporary world order.⁴

On the other hand, Western officials – particularly from the ‘New East’ (e.g., Poland and the Baltic states) and the US – assert that Russian brinkmanship stems from its inability to come to terms with its imperial past, leading to a sense of entitlement vis-à-vis most of its neighbours, which it regards as less than fully sovereign. This is compounded by its failure since the creation of the Russian Federation to transform itself into a viable liberal democracy that would allegedly result in it behaving more amenable and, from a Western perspective, reasonably on the international stage. As noted by the University of Birmingham’s Derek Averre, there lies a tension in the fact that Russia’s current international posture is both a source of pride for the country’s population and ostensibly a source of conflict on the world stage. This tension does not appear to be abating.

4. *China*

There has been much debate concerning the impact of China’s re-emergence on the liberal order. At last year’s Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the most anticipated annual security summit in Asia, while reaffirming his country’s commitment to the Asia-Pacific region, US Secretary of Defence James Mattis stressed the importance of international law in protecting the rights and interests of all states. Then-Japanese Defence Minister Tomomi Inada shared a similar concern, claiming no states will benefit from “forcefully altering the rules of current international order”, implicitly referring to China’s increasingly assertive behaviour and aggressive foreign policy.

But do projects like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in addition to China’s growing assertive behaviour, undermine the contemporary world order? This question is certainly premature since it will be a long time, if ever, that China manages to replace or restructure the order that has prevailed since the end of World War II. However, many inside and outside of China recognize that the current system is ill equipped to face today’s challenges, and that China will have an important voice in re-engineering the system. This then begs the question of what China’s objectives and expectations are.

In seeking to answer this question, we must explore China’s worldview, which, in turn, is profoundly informed by China’s narrative of its history and its leadership’s understanding of its “rightful place” in the region and the world. Rather than aligning themselves with Western standards, China’s political system and society continue to display significant idiosyncrasies. By explicitly rejecting the Western model of political and social development, Xi Jinping has stressed Beijing’s distinct road map under the rhetoric of the “Chinese Dream” and national rejuvenation.

⁴ For an academic example of such an argument, see Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

It is common to claim that China is “rising”. The Chinese see this fortune as a return to their country’s “rightful place” after the “century of humiliation”. To simplify a complicated history, China has usually viewed itself as being at the centre of the world. It was the beginning and the end of ancient Silk Road trade routes, the ancestor of modern-day Belt and Road Initiative. It functioned under the tributary system of *Tianxia*, or *All Under Heaven*, which was the underpinning of traditional Chinese foreign relations that shaped much of East Asian affairs until the outbreak of the Opium Wars in 1839.

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that there is at times sharp disagreement between China and the West. However, one should not immediately leap to the conclusion that China is a revisionist power seeking to topple the prevailing liberal order. China has benefitted exponentially from this order since the beginning of its Open Door Policy in the late 1970s, and the Chinese leadership is reluctant to alter the status quo too significantly, as it wants to continue reaping the rewards of globalization without bearing the costs that global leadership would entail. More importantly, China does not have the capacity to undermine the liberal order in any substantial fashion, given pressing domestic issues such as environmental degradation, corruption and market reforms.

Although China does not want to topple the liberal order, it would also be naïve to say that Beijing does not want to see changes. After witnessing unprecedented economic growth over the past three decades, China has stressed its role in regional and international organizations, insisting “its right to be heard” (*huayu quan* 话语权). The consequences of this are certainly up for debate: Some have argued that China’s active participation in international organizations has weakened universally accepted rules and norms, while others have praised the cultural pluralism that this will bring to international relations.

5. Conclusion

The most commonly identified causes of today’s international instability tend to be those that are most clearly visible. Populism is on the rise in the West. Leading global actors, including the European Union and China, are preoccupied with domestic reforms. Russia’s post-Maidan status as a global pariah has made it difficult to resolve conflicts ranging from Ukraine to Syria to North Korea in a positive-sum fashion. China’s rise adds another layer of uncertainty to how global affairs will be organized in the years and indeed decades ahead.

However, the sources of tension may be more conceptual in nature. As Cunliffe noted during the workshop, it is interesting that Russia and China are criticized just as much for being too conservative and “Westphalian” – too attached to their UN Security Council privileges and a supposedly fading, non-universalist order – as they are for their actions. The year 1991 brought to the forefront the ideas of universal democracy, conditional sovereignty and a new international hierarchy – notions which Moscow and Beijing reject partly if not entirely. The University of Kent’s Richard Sakwa, for his part, claims that Russia and China’s contemporary conceptions of world order should not be interpreted as a rejection of today’s international society in its entirety, seeing as Moscow and Beijing remain staunch defenders of what the English School would call its “secondary” institutions (i.e., formal institutional architecture, including the UN), claiming that these belong to all of humanity and are not the preserve of the West.

What we are witnessing, according to Cunliffe, is a form of “inverted” or “reverse” revisionism: The victors of the Cold War are undermining the institutions that they themselves created – both longstanding primary institutions (e.g., sovereignty) and more recently established secondary ones (e.g., the UN Security Council) – and from which they have historically benefitted the most. The international society that originated centuries ago in Western Europe has thus been rejected – at least in part – by its founders, while the states it ultimately grew to encompass remain among its staunchest defenders.

This is what makes today’s global situation unique: Unlike during the Cold War when the normative contestation between the two blocs was manifest, today all sides believe they are adhering to and defending the same order while claiming that their rivals are the true revisionists. This is a source not only of tension, but indeed of confusion and uncertainty. Add to this political debate rapid changes in technology, social norms and the way the global economy is structured, and the outcome of today’s global contestation becomes anything but clear.

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