



# Contestation and Transformation. Final Thoughts on the Liberal International Order

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## ABSTRACT

The liberal international order, the inseparable mix of US geopolitical power and ideational project of organising international relations along normative frameworks such as internationalism, institutionalism and democracy, is reeling under the pressure of profound systemic changes such as greater interconnectedness and multipolarity. Predictions abound that increasing great power competition, most visibly at play in geographical areas of contested orders, will eventually tear it down. However, even if major actors – the US included – display a selective, irregular and often instrumental commitment to the liberal order, they are still repositioning themselves in that order and not outside of it. In addition, conflict is not the default outcome of order contestation, as hybrid forms of governance are possible even in troubled regions. No doubt, the world of tomorrow will be less American-shaped and less liberal, but transformation is a more plausible future than collapse for the liberal order.

## KEYWORDS

Liberal international order; multipolarity; global governance; regional governance

The Introduction to this Special Issue opined that underlying the diverse and animated debate among scholars and practitioners over the nature and shape of tomorrow's world is a widespread expectation that it will be less liberal and less American-shaped. The articles collected in the issue largely vindicate that basic assumption.

Giovanni Grevi summarises the point well when he questions the lingering validity of the equation between modernisation and Westernisation. Grevi sees 'modernisation' as implying economic and technological progress, a reductionist notion of what is 'modern' that would have appalled many European and American intellectuals of the past century. Yet Grevi is on solid empirical ground when he implies that the wealth and power that come from a vibrant economy and technological innovation are now separable from democracy, pluralism and secularism. Francis Fukuyama's bold claim that liberal democracy is the ultimate polity has not stood the test of time – although it might still retain appeal as a normative proposition. The world is less liberal and therefore less 'Western'.

The end of history Fukuyama predicted when the collapse of the Soviet bloc bestowed upon the West an unexpected geopolitical triumph has proven short-lived. In fact, it has lasted no more than the very brief period in history in which one liberal democracy, the

United States, exerted unrivalled power around the world. As American power is again being resisted and challenged internationally, so is the liberal ideology that has underpinned its project of organising international relations around its security, economic and normative interests. The world is less American and therefore less liberal.

The articles collected in this issue have gone beyond just validating the above. That American/Western material and ideational power is in relative decline was after all the assumption from which they started off. The question they engage with, directly and indirectly, is the meaning and implications of that adverb, 'less': how much less liberal and less American-shaped is the world becoming, and what does that mean exactly?

The introductory note compared predictions of what tomorrow's world will look like to acts of divination, and the contributors to this Special Issue have wisely abstained from indulging in the exercise. Their analyses nonetheless enlighten our understanding of systemic and agency-related dynamics that are increasingly shaping global politics, thereby providing critical frames of reference for imagining the future. To look into that future, it is necessary to delve a bit more extensively into the process of repositioning of each global player considered in this Special Issue. This involves determining each player's existing position in the liberal international order, assessing the nature and scope of its commitment to that order, and tracing its foreign policy back to the view(s) of order its domestic constituents espouse.

## Global repositioning

A common trait emerges from the articles examining the evolving role in global politics of what the Introduction dubbed "global actors": their relationship with the structures and norms of the liberal international order is not linear, but irregular, selective, conditional, or instrumental.<sup>1</sup> Elements of lingering commitment to that order co-exist with claims to reform or re-organise it. In a way, all global players are in some way renegotiating their 'terms' of membership in the liberal project. The articles focus on the actors and therefore have a clear bias towards agency, yet authors recognise that the process of global repositioning of these players reflects deep systemic changes in terms of interconnectedness and distribution of resources.

Economic and financial interconnectedness, the influence of multinational corporations, and digital technology and automation have all reduced the room for manoeuvre of governments. As Samir Saran soberly notes, the disruptive potential of climate change, artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, big data and the 'internet of things' is immense. Automation continues to threaten low-skilled jobs all around the world. Internet platforms such as Uber constrain the ability of government to regulate and guarantee public goods like transport. Income inequality has risen everywhere, with wealth concentration at its historical peak or close to it. The revolution in information and communications technologies has enabled political polarisation driven by identity-informed politics of exclusion. Most worryingly, the variation in the distribution of resources away from the US towards a plurality of actors – a process accelerated by the great recession of 2008–09 – is a tectonic shift that is turning the

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<sup>1</sup>It is worth recalling that the generous, or at least premature, depiction in the Introduction of most of the players as "global" was not referring to their ability to project power globally but, more modestly, to their extra-regional geopolitical outlook.

management of challenges associated with interconnectedness into a function of power competition.

In principle, all major players recognise the need to address the aforementioned challenges cooperatively. However, their primary focus is less on the challenges themselves than on making sure that governance arrangements protect their security and economic potential – and secure their influence. Consequently, they tend to accord preference to the elements of the liberal order that they perceive as directly serving their policy goals and to promote alternative governance mechanisms whenever the existing order is deemed to be biased against them. An additional complicating factor is that engaging in geopolitical competition, a consequence of greater emphasis on nationalist themes, has become politically expedient. In the cases of China and Russia, the process of national repositioning in the global context is inextricably linked to calculations related to the survival and continued rule of the illiberal regimes in power. The retrenchment into narrow-minded, nationalist-leaning worldviews observable in so many places reveals, but also feeds, a general dissatisfaction with the existing order – critically, including the order's original founder and guarantor, the United States.

The *America* that emerges from John Peterson's analysis is a *tormented liberal champion*. To be sure, that the US has always had a troubled relationship with the normative-institutional framework, to the creation of which it contributed the most and which is largely an emanation of its power, is no big news. US leaders have traditionally interpreted the role of guarantor of the liberal international order as encompassing a right to derogate from liberal rules and practices whenever it is required by the national interest or what they perceive as such. The difference today is that the proposition that the liberal order may no longer be an emanation of US power, but in fact a constraint on it, has regained full legitimacy.

A growing number of American citizens are sceptical about the US' global engagement having ultimately benefitted their lives or their country's fortunes. Some, probably a few, see the liberal international order's structures as having impeded the consolidation of an enduring US hegemony when US power was unrivalled, as in the 1990s and early 2000s – an idea that informed much of the foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration, particularly during the president's first term. Many others are suspicious of the alleged advantages of global engagement and would like the US simply to tend to its own business. For people like President Donald Trump, this process invariably entails revisiting a number of "bad deals" – free trade agreements, defence alliances, climate arrangements – that have allegedly harmed the US because they have let other countries free ride on America's military or financial commitments. While the scepticism is widespread, even dominant on the right side of the political spectrum, doubts also abound in the progressive camp, especially among leftwing working class voters and the educated young. Unquestionably, liberal internationalism as the ideological superstructure of a US-centred international system has less appeal for Americans today than it has ever had since the end of World War II (WWII).

Even the foreign policy elites, among whom there was long a bipartisan consensus that global engagement was indeed in America's long-term interest, are now torn between diverging opinions. Liberal internationalists want to use the US' lingering strength to co-opt the rising powers to act as responsible stakeholders in maintaining global stability and the key institutions, regimes and practices of the liberal order, a proposition that former President Barack Obama elevated to a sort of doctrine. On the other hand, the nationalists accept multipolarity and advocate the full normalisation of US foreign policy, whereby the country

should abandon any pretence of leading the world and instead use its military and economic edge to pursue aggressively 'better deals' than the ones it is now supposedly involved in.

These are evidently oversimplifications of a more varied debate, yet they lay bare the extent of the differences in perspectives from which American foreign policymakers draw their assumptions. The debate does not even unfold along political lines as supporters of both positions can be found among Republicans and Democrats or, more specifically, as elements of the internationalist and nationalist agendas co-exist, often not entirely coherently, in the same administration. The result is an uncertain and at times confusing foreign policy in which observers struggle to see any clear direction.

If the US were a mid-size country, such oscillations would be of minimal practical consequence. Yet, as recalled in the Introduction, the United States is still very much a systemic power despite its weaker hold on global supremacy. This means that it is still capable of moving the system of international relations (rather than simply moving *in* the system) by way of the sheer magnitude of its power, hard and soft alike. The conclusion is that the stabilisation of global politics and the nature of the underlying settlement among global players is conditional on the American foreign policy establishment finding an enduring consensus on what role the US should play in the world. Absent this, the other pieces of the global puzzle are unlikely to fall into place.

Those regions that have traditionally relied on the partnership with Washington to orientate their foreign policy, most notably *Europe*, have consequently been forced to review their options to safeguard whatever security and economic benefits they have gained from US commitments to the liberal order's norms and structures. Such an inherently defensive nature of Europe's global repositioning is a dominant theme in Michael Smith and Richard Youngs' analysis. In their eyes, Europe has turned into an *unsure*, 'selective' liberal advocate.

For historical and geopolitical reasons, Europe's commitment to internationalism has traditionally been very much connected to its Atlanticism. After all, the Europeans turned the page on centuries of almost uninterrupted warfare only after the US security umbrella turned them all into loyal allies and supporters of the liberal order. Undoubtedly, that support has been internalised over the years, particularly thanks to the radical experimentation in regional integration the Europeans embarked on when they first established common, and partly supranational, institutions. The fact remains though that America's dwindling commitment to the liberal order poses a new set of challenges for the Europeans, who do not possess the same political and military resources as the Americans do to back liberal institutions and promote liberal practices. In addition, Europe has also experienced a return of nationalism, with populist forces increasingly questioning such key principles of Europe's post-WWII liberalism as open markets and borders, as well as pooled sovereignty. The combination of limited resources and a shrinking base of popular support are the external and internal background, respectively, of the increasingly selective defence of the liberal international order Smith and Youngs ascribe to contemporary Europe.

They see evidence of this across a wide spectrum of policy areas. Long a champion of an open and free trade system, the EU has increasingly opted for bilateral arrangements. A peculiarity of the latter is that, under the heading of 'free trade', the EU has in fact injected a degree of 'soft mercantilism' into its trade and economic relations. The Union has made use of regulatory standards and sectoral exclusions to diminish imports, anti-dumping measures to protect against aggressive external competition, and limits on foreign investments in 'strategic' sectors to preserve key assets. The politicisation of trade – no longer a

purely technocratic matter but an issue subject to political considerations – is part of the explanation for the EU's toying with soft forms of protectionism. But strategic calculations, such as concerns about fair competition practices or the influence that external powers (China and, in the energy field, Russia) may gain through investments, matter as well. In short, the Europeans rely on their main asset – the size of the common market – to play a power game through the political use of rules and regulations.

Hints of Europe's evolving global power game are increasingly visible in the pursuit of 'triangulations' in areas other than trade and economic regulations, whereby Europe shifts its alignment with this or that global player depending on the issue at hand. NATO and a strong partnership with the US is still very much the preferred choice to ensure Europe's defence and keep a revanchist Russia at bay. A quasi-antagonist in Europe, Russia is nonetheless seen by several European governments as an inescapable interlocutor when it comes to fighting jihadi extremism, eventually stabilising the Middle East or, more concretely, defending the nuclear deal with Iran, which Europe sees as critical to the stability of the Gulf and the endurance of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Following President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Accord on climate change, Europe has found a willing partner for the fight against global warming in China. Yet, Europe sides with the US in denying China the status of full market economy. Had the talks over a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership been finalised, the relationship with the US would have given the EU an almost unassailable advantage over China and other rising economies in the regulatory field.

Overall, Europe's global repositioning is about generating patterns of selective cooperation – where possible, enshrined in formal rules and regimes – on issues of critical importance. Nevertheless, the notion that spreading liberal values and norms, including democracy, contributes to European interests has lost steam. This is most evident in Europe's approach to its surrounding regions to the east and south, where the ambition of turning neighbouring countries into a 'ring of friends' increasingly aligned with EU standards and values has given way to a preference for stability. According to Smith and Youngs, Europe is undergoing a transition from a cooperative interdependence paradigm to a competitive interdependence paradigm. The EU as such is involved in the process as the Union is increasingly framed as a means to protect European borders as well as citizens' welfare and security rather than a liberal transformative force of global politics.

In a way, as Shaun Breslin explains, *China* is also engaging in selectively committing to liberal order structures and norms. The commonality, however, is superficial. Whereas Europe is a liberal polity forced by a lack of resources and uncertain domestic support to downgrade its commitment to the norms and structures of the liberal order, China is an illiberal state whose massive financial firepower allows it to pick and choose whatever bits of the liberal order suit its growing ambitions best. Whereas reactiveness and a desire to protect existing gains define Europe's global repositioning, China is proactive and hungry for 'conquest'. Deng Xiaoping's recommendation to keep a low profile no longer applies. The leadership of the Communist Party now sees China as a *confident trailblazer* in a world full of uncertainties.

The People's Republic has embraced liberal practices such as participation in multilateral cooperation and global trade; yet it has shown scarce attachment to liberal principles such as non-discriminatory trade, political pluralism, human rights, responsibility to protect. Lately, the Chinese government has made an explicit attempt at eliminating the apparent

contradictions of its global posture. In the words of President Xi Jinping, China's successful experience as a non-liberal capitalist country committed to global stability and trade has opened a "trail" that other countries in the world may follow to advance their economies while safeguarding their independence – that is, while resisting calls to align with the liberal powerhouses of the West.

Breslin insists that China's global repositioning is loosely happening within the contours of the liberal international order. Despite the fuss about the 'Chinese characteristics' of the country's development, there is no doubt that the People's Republic is much more aligned with liberal regimes and practices today than when it was a communist country for real and not only in name. China sees its strenuous defence of sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention as fully in line with international law, both customary and treaty-based. Its veto-wielding permanent seat in the Security Council is no longer just a shield but also a device to shape international relations, partly by obstructing undesired Western policies (for instance, sanctions against friendly governments such as Sudan's), partly by cooperating with Western powers on issues of mutual concern (Iran and North Korea, to cite just two examples). In a similar vein, Chinese-led development institutions like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are a way of restraining Western power (the US is not part of the AIIB, although most EU states are) while remaining anchored in the liberal order structures; after all (and contrary to expectations), the AIIB has developed projects in cooperation with institutions dominated by the US and its allies, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Beijing's successful campaign to get more voting power in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is further proof that China's quest for influence is predicated on its continued participation in the structures of the liberal order.

This, however, does not tell the full story. China's activism within the institutions of the liberal order is outpaced by its activism outside of them. China has worked on extending its military projection at sea far off its coasts to push back against US clout in Northeast Asia, the Strait of Taiwan and Southeast Asia. This explains China's refusal to pull the rug out from under North Korea, a key buffer between China itself and the US ally South Korea, as well as its assertiveness in the South China Sea, where it has placed military facilities on artificial islands built in disputed waters. Chinese leaders see the neighbourhood as critical to national security, but also as a launch pad for expanding Chinese influence globally. In cooperation with Russia, China has managed to rein in American influence in Central Asia, a key region for the development of the infrastructure that is supposed to enable the expansion of land trade along a new 'Silk Road' connecting East Asia to Europe. Similarly, the building of ports and other commercial and military facilities in countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Djibouti aims at securing control over the sea routes to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean – the maritime Silk Road. China has long set its eyes on other regions as well, such as Africa and Latin America, all of which have experienced massive Chinese economic penetration.

China's activity in development and infrastructure mixes elements of pressure or even coercion (as investments bring influence) with elements of spontaneous cooperation (unlike Western aid, China's help comes free of conditions that beneficiaries respect sound governance standards). Foreign direct investments, especially in infrastructure, by state-run enterprises awash with cash but opaque in terms of governance further complement China's power. With money pouring in, even EU member states feel the pressure not to go the extra mile to lambast China for promoting unfair competition, restricting access to its own market



or cracking down on political freedoms. The geopolitical design of China's development, infrastructure and investment policies is a re-orientation of trade and investment routes as well as political ties towards China, to make it the economic hub of the Asia-Pacific, the source of massive investment and trade with Europe, Africa, North and South America, and the pillar of the global economy.

*Russia* is arguably the global player that has developed the most conflictual relationship with the structures and principles of the liberal international order. In her contribution, Tatiana Romanova traces the origins of Russia's issues with the liberal order back to geopolitics, culture and history, as well as domestic politics. In Moscow, dissatisfaction with post-Cold War settlements curbing Russian influence, especially in the former Soviet space, is widespread. Lately, Russia's leadership has emphasised the unique nature of Russian civilisation, with the narrative of a conservative and patriotic nation permanently engaged in a fight to preserve its identity from cultural interferences from east and especially west. This nationalistic discourse has enabled President Vladimir Putin to create a mutually legitimising dynamic between an ambitious, even hazardous foreign policy and his increasingly illiberal rule.

Romanova nonetheless warns against assuming that Russia is bent on destroying the liberal order. The trappings of democracy, elections and public opinion remain the ultimate source of political legitimacy, which in theory leaves room for the government to re-align with liberal discourse should it eventually achieve its ultimate objectives: regime security, national power, global recognition. While the pursuit of these objectives entails a considerable dose of revisionism, the latter concerns Russia's place within the global (liberal) order, not the order itself. According to Romanova, Russia can be seen as a *restless neorevisionist*.

Russia is convinced that the success of its strategy is conditional on the delegitimation of America's hegemonic foreign policy, which Russia fears the most when it takes the form of support for ostensibly liberal (pro-Western) forces in the former Soviet republics. When the institutions of the liberal international order are compatible with its worldview, however, Russia is more than happy to support them (at the same time, nothing delights Russian diplomats more than denouncing US unilateralism as inconsistent with the liberal multilateral project). The United Nations Security Council, in which it holds a veto-wielding permanent seat, fits perfectly with Russia's vision of a multipolar, or multicentric, system of great power interactions.

Critical to performing 'polar' functions is exclusive control over each pole's neighbourhood and shared control over regions where great power influence is more balanced. This explains why Russia sees competition with the US and its allies in the former Soviet space as a zero-sum game, while the Middle East or other theatres are less critical to its security and therefore considered areas of potential accommodation. In Russia's eyes, regional arrangements should be organised around the interests of the dominant pole(s) rather than advancing any constitutionalisation of the international system. In these terms, Russia's view is inherently illiberal or at least non-liberal. That said, Russia is not opposed to regional settlements, provided they are backed by consensus among the great powers, and recognises the need for cooperative management of cyber, environmental, terrorism, and non-proliferation issues.

This profoundly state-centric and power-based view of global politics also infuses Russia's view of economic relations. An often-neglected component of Russia's neorevisionism is its attempt to disentangle itself from economic interdependence so as to reduce its vulnerability

to external shocks and pressure. The Russian government has not only adopted retaliatory forms of trade protectionism (for instance, in response to US and EU sanctions adopted after its aggression in Ukraine), but has also greatly expanded the role of state-owned enterprises in the economy (according to Romanova, 70 percent of Russian GDP can now be traced back to the state, whereas it was only 35 percent in 2005).

In the end, for Russia the question of ‘what rules’ should apply to global politics is always a function of ‘who rules’ global politics – something which Russian leaders assume all global players share, whether they say it openly or not. Their opposition to the liberal order is first and foremost opposition to an exclusionary US hegemonic design of which Russia is just an appendix. Yet Russia appreciates the order emanating from US power and the liberal international system and is therefore unwilling to undermine it fully. Its neorevisionism lies in its plan for a co-opted (or controlled) neighbourhood and a multilateral system of formal and informal arrangements that constrain US power while leaving room for great powers to cooperate on issues of mutual interest. However, so long as this objective is not secured, Russia is willing to act as a spoiler by inflicting damage on the US and its allies, creating confusion and fomenting divisions within NATO and the EU, as well as delegitimising liberal discourse and practices.

A common tactic employed by Russia and China to push back against the US’ global clout is to denounce liberal discourse as the rhetorical cloak in which America wraps its hegemonic designs. Another regularly heard accusation is that of applying double standards, whereby international rules are invoked selectively depending on whether they suit US (or European) interests. The result is that substantive discursive struggles over the meaning and implications of internationalism, institutionalism or liberalism are somewhat downgraded to rhetorical skirmishes between geopolitical rivals. This makes the case of *India*, a non-Western democracy experiencing sustained economic growth, especially interesting. As Samir Saran argues, with Western power on a declining curve and China embodying an illiberal development model, the importance of India’s combination of ‘non-Westernism’ and liberalism cannot be understated. Indeed, the profile of India that comes out of Saran’s analysis is singular. For Saran, India is the only *liberal alternative* (to the West).

While India holds a restrictive view of sovereignty and non-intervention similar to that of Russia and China, its approach to multilateral cooperation is broader and more inclusive. Unlike China and Russia, India is not obsessed with the centrality of states – witness its openness to include non-governmental organisations in international policymaking processes and especially the contribution given by Indian actors to developing a multi-stakeholder governance of the Internet. In addition, revulsion for ‘liberal interventions’ does not mean that India is uninterested in the promotion of democracy abroad, as attested to by its membership in the Community of Democracies and its sponsorship of the UN Democracy Fund. India is also strongly committed to global governance. Multilateral cooperation within formal institutions is its default policy preference when addressing issues such as piracy, maritime security, disaster relief and climate change. India is also allocating greater resources to development aid, particularly to its neighbours but increasingly to Africa as well.

Saran sees two fundamental threats to India’s continuing development as a resourceful non-Western democracy. The first relates to a political discourse of exclusion, enabled by digital platforms, eventually breaking the country’s longstanding national support for political, ethnic and religious pluralism. India’s billion-plus population is extremely diverse and not foreign to ethnic or religious tensions. If India’s deeply rooted nationalism were to



be construed along exclusionary ethnic or religious lines, the post-colonial social contract supporting the country's liberal institutions would be jeopardised. In turn, this would complicate India's appeal as a non-Western liberal democracy, as well as its ambition to elevate its position above that of a developing country struggling to expand its outlook beyond its surroundings. Such an occurrence would compound the second threat identified by Saran, which is characteristically geopolitical in nature: the risk that China's simultaneous development of the new land and maritime Silk Roads, like a standard pincer move, curtails India's access to global trade networks.

What does this review of the process of repositioning of each global player tell us about the future of the liberal international order? A first conclusion is that no player aims to destroy the order. Europe and India are genuine supporters of the liberal multilateral project, even if their ability to support it is constrained by limited resources (especially in India's case) and threatened by the possibility of a strong nationalist turn of their domestic politics. Russia and China's commitment to the liberal order relates to the 'order' part of it more than to the liberal one. But even accounting for the illiberal nature and generally anti-American views of the regimes in both Moscow and Beijing, neither is willing to do away fully with liberal practices concerning, in particular, the governance of global challenges such as climate change, economic imbalances or cooperative crisis management. Given the symbiotic relationship between American power and the liberal project described in the Introduction, the US is the only player that can actually threaten the very existence of the liberal international order. However, the lingering support for liberal norms, institutions and practices in the US seems strong enough to make the prospect of a full American withdrawal from the liberal order unlikely. Nevertheless, even if no global player champions an alternative vision, as was the case with the Soviet Union and communism, the endurance of the liberal international order remains in doubt. The crucial factor is less the conflicting visions of order than the competition among great powers within the existing system, especially in areas where liberal norms and practices are weak and contested.

## Regional conundrums

As the origins of each global player's dissatisfaction with the structure of the existing liberal order are different depending on the player considered, settling contentious issues has become an increasingly challenging task. To be sure, all global players are aware that some form of accommodation is needed, but as they are still in the process of global repositioning, their immediate preference goes to securing a power base from which they can 'negotiate' a new global settlement from a position of strength (national strength or regime strength, or both). This competitive pattern is especially evident in those regions of the world where order is more a matter of contestation than renegotiation: the former Soviet space in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific – the objects of the last three articles of this Special Issue. These regions are like atmospheric low-pressure zones around which winds gather force; as the regions themselves experience stormy weather, the surrounding areas become more volatile.

In Laure Delcour's article, *Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus* emerge as a region entirely defined by order contestation. This geographical non-contiguous, economically non-integrated and politically divided area arose only recently, after it was separated from the Central and Eastern European states that were accepted as NATO and EU candidate

member states. Initially, the ‘excluded’ former Soviet republics (Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine; Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) adopted liberal discourses and practices, yet they were only partly or superficially internalised. True, all claimed allegiance to liberal norms, sought stronger ties with the quintessentially liberal EU, and joined institutions of the liberal international order such as the UN, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe. However, the democratic addendum to these diplomatic moves was limited, with some countries experiencing some progress (Georgia, Ukraine), others stuck in troubled transitions (Armenia and Moldova) and still others never actually exiting from dictatorial rule (Azerbaijan, Belarus).

As Russia gradually but decisively withdrew its support for Western liberalism, the region’s disconnect from liberal frameworks widened. In the 1990s, respect for human and minority rights came under pressure in all the places where internal conflicts had first arisen and then become ‘frozen’ under provisional and dysfunctional arrangements: Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh. Following Russia’s interventions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), the region experienced a near-total collapse of internationalist principles, most notably the norm forbidding military intervention unsanctioned by the UN Security Council.

Regionalism has remained weak, with the former Soviet republics being continuously drawn to competing ideas of order: on the one hand, the US-backed and EU-enabled liberal model of economic integration and political cooperation; on the other, Russia’s hub-and-spoke system (formalised in projects such as the Cooperative Security Treaty Organisation or the Eurasian Economic Union) enforced through a mix of coercion and elite co-optation. Even economically the region is anything but integrated, not least due to Russia taking aggressive steps (tariff and non-tariff barriers, energy price manipulation, and visa restrictions/concessions) to divert or obstruct movement of goods, capital and people along political lines, and the incompatibility between the EU’s trade and economic agreements and Russia’s customs union ambitions.

For Delcour, the result is an area of overlapping orders that hinders the development of shared governance of transnational issues. Eastern European and South Caucasus countries possess neither the resources nor the political will to embark on regionalisation processes that may one day produce an endogenous alternative to the competing orders the area has been dragged into. The most they can aspire to is either to become part of one of those orders or engage in constant balancing.

The *Middle East* is a region that, in theory at least, could produce an endogenous order, independent from global players and nonetheless fully capable of distributing benefits among its population. It is of considerable size demographically, full of natural resources, and relatively homogeneous in cultural and religious terms. Nevertheless, the Middle East has experienced a growing degree of conflict over the last decades, and is arguably the region where geopolitical order and political authority is most contested. The problem, Paul Salem explains, lies with the inability of intra- and extra-regional players to create synergic connections between Middle Eastern politics and the broader international system. One reason for that is liberalism’s troubled relationship with the region.

Salem’s arguments explaining the sources of the Middle East’s imperviousness to liberalism are rooted in history rather than culture or, as Samuel Huntington’s disciples contend, civilisational aspects. Between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the Europeans imposed – and the Americans tolerated – an imperial system of military subjugation of

regional countries, co-optation of the elites and manipulation of the masses, as well as exploitation of local resources. As the US' global role became more prominent in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, so did its involvement in the region. Over time, and largely with European acquiescence or outright support, the US built a system of partnerships with authoritarian regimes aimed at securing American strategic interests in checking Arab nationalism, excluding left-leaning as well as Islam-rooted political options, exploiting hydrocarbon resources and supporting Israel's occupation of Arab lands.

As Western policies have undermined internationalist principles of self-determination, non-exploitation of foreign resources and non-intervention, it is not hard to see why liberalism has struggled in the Middle East. Even less controversial elements of the Western liberal tradition, such as republicanism, are losing ground, in spite of support for democracy and the rule of law being widespread in largely disempowered masses. Historically situated at the intersection of the three republics of Egypt, Iraq and Syria, the centre of gravity of Arab geopolitics has moved to the dynastic monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. Secularism is also facing mounting challenges. Extremist groups taking inspiration from Wahhabism conceive of power only as an emanation of religious authority, and even the president of the once staunchly secularist Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is blurring the line between state and religion. And of course, the constitution of post-1979 Iran, though republican and with elements of democracy, is predicated on the explicit rejection of religion as a private matter with which the state should not concern itself.

As for regionalism, it has made little progress – if any. In fact, Salem argues that the kind of regionalism Middle Eastern countries have engaged in has resulted in less, rather than more, cooperation. The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have at best papered over interstate differences, and at worst served to reinforce the legitimacy of the mostly authoritarian regimes in power through mutual recognition. In addition, both organisations (incidentally, now moribund) have excluded non-Arab countries such as Israel, Turkey and Iran, thereby making intra-regional rivalries even more acute. Fragmentation has increasingly run along ethnic and also sectarian lines, the latter becoming more prominent after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq exacerbated conflicts between Sunnis and Iranian-backed Shias. Governments have failed to devise instruments of shared governance even of intra-regional trade, which is extremely underdeveloped. With few exceptions, Middle Eastern countries have not integrated their economies. In part, history provides the explanation, as they sought rapid industrialisation through protectionism and import substitution. The over-reliance on hydrocarbons is another reason, with most countries competing for the same extra-regional markets. But political divides probably matter the most, as security and politics have regularly trumped economic sense. Today, only Turkey and the Emirate of Dubai stand out for their extensive trade and financial relations with regional players.

The interaction between the Middle East and the broader international system has been anything but beneficial for its security, stability and cohesiveness. External players have for the most part played a disruptive role, exploiting or fomenting intra-regional divisions to secure advantages they have used in a broader, global contest. The story has repeated itself cyclically, first with European imperialism, then superpower competition during the Cold War, and lastly with the US' attempt to reorganise the region around its interests (the ultimate rationale of the 2003 invasion of Iraq). With Russia's intervention in Syria and China's growing focus on the region, the Middle East is again enmeshed in bigger power games.

The region, Salem concludes, is a 'penetrated' system, not so much by liberal discourse and practices as by brute geopolitics.

There is, however, one key difference with the past. While during the age of imperialism and the Cold War the external powers competed for local resources and thus an outside-in logic was mostly dominant (some exceptions notwithstanding, such as the 1973 Yom Kippur war Egypt and Syria waged against Israel), now an inside-out logic is strongly at play, with Middle Eastern divisions reverberating negatively beyond the region. To start with, regional disintegration harms global stability through the spread of jihadism and illicit traffics, as well as by generating massive outflows of refugees. Even more worrisome is the effect on great power relations. To give just one example, the brief era of consensus over the 'responsibility to protect' norm, which lasted from the World Summit of 2005 to the Security Council resolution authorising the use of force in Libya in 2011, died in the ashes of Syria's civil war. That war has resulted in the emergence of a new regional power bloc, enabled by Russia and centred on Iran and its allies, namely the Assad regime in Syria, Shia forces in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. While the US unquestionably backs Iran's rivals Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, other players such as Europe, Turkey or China are reluctant to take sides. Yet inevitably they will, as they will have to modulate between their relations with Russia and the US and the latter's preferences in the Middle East. Different priorities will thus complicate relations not only between the US and Russia, but also the US and Europe, the West and Turkey, and eventually the US and China.

If the former Soviet space in Europe and the Caucasus is an area of overlapping orders, and the Middle East a tragic instance of order breakdown, what about the third theatre of contestation, the *Asia-Pacific*? Here, signs of an endogenously produced order are visible below and beside thin liberal frameworks.

As Richard Stubbs recalls, it was only during the winding down of the Cold War in the 1980s that the norms and practices of the liberal order started to consolidate. South Korea and Taiwan eventually transited to pluralist democracy, free of military rule and based on the rule of law, partly as a consequence of their sustained economic growth. Liberalism also seemed to sink in gradually in Southeast Asia, where regional countries moved along the hub-and-spoke system of security ties with the US to pursue greater economic dynamism and cooperation.

For decades, East Asian countries followed the 'developmental paradigm', whereby the state had a direct role in managing the economy, including through mercantilist trade policies aimed at developing a domestic industrial base protected by tariffs, subsidies and affordable credit. With Cold War barriers broken down and globalisation looming, the paradigm was no longer viable, and also tolerated less by the only superpower left. While the US supported democratisation processes in South Korea, Taiwan and elsewhere (with great ambivalence, for instance in the Philippines), it also concentrated on fostering free-market reforms – actually neoliberal supply-side policies – such as privatisations, deregulation and removal of capital controls. The elevation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to summit level in the early 1990s on the personal initiative of US President Bill Clinton contributed to strengthening a political-economic system organised around American liberal economic ideals.

However, the project of creating a regional liberal order in East Asia was only partly successful. Stubbs lists three reasons for that. The first was the lingering developmental mind-set of local economic policymakers. The second was the devastating financial crisis

of 1997-98, which discredited liberal economic policies as well as liberal agents, such as an IMF blindly insisting on recessionary fiscal adjustments and an absent US. The third and most important reason was the rise of China, which provided not only a model of an illiberal capitalist economy but also concrete help to governments in financial distress. While Asian countries did not renege entirely on liberal norms and economic practices, they sought an autonomous way of ensuring regional governance to protect themselves from external economic shocks, such as the Chiang Mai Initiative.

After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the US government's approach to the region shifted to security, to the extent that counterterrorism cooperation was critical in the US' decision to move negotiations over free trade deals forward with Australia, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand. Superficially, the years immediately following 9/11 saw a consolidation of American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific, yet US commitments remained narrowly focused on bilateral relations. The US was absent from the regionalisation processes, none of which espoused distinctive liberal characters.

The Asia-Pacific had long suffered from an inability to formalise patterns of cooperation, with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) being a (weak) exception. China's boom in the early 2000s changed the picture. With more and more countries redirecting trade towards and from China, and with Chinese investments flooding the region, the Asia-Pacific was experiencing an order reconfiguration whose roots and origin were endogenous. The great recession of 2008-09 further dented the US' credibility as the economic hinge of Asia's economy, and actually reinforced the perception of China – relatively unscathed by the financial storm – taking up the baton. After all, China was the critical player in the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit, and is now the driving force behind the project for a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The contours of a distinctive Asian regionalisation model have thus started to emerge: economic though not market-based, infused with superficial political dialogue, committed to state sovereignty, and enabled by China.

While China's economy is the main engine transmitting power to this nascent order, the People's Republic does not perform critical hegemonic functions, such as ensuring a stable and secure political system. For the time being, it seems more interested in expanding its influence – hence its assertiveness in the East and South China Seas – and pushing back against US clout than in assuming the role (and relative burden) of a hegemon. Exclusion of the US seems the main objective of the regional initiatives mentioned above. RCEP, in particular, has been designed to counter former US President Obama's project for a Transpacific Partnership (TPP), whose strategic aim was to consolidate US influence in East Asia through increased trade and regulatory influence. America's withdrawal from TPP, one of the first acts of nationalist President Trump, means that the region is unlikely to unfold along a liberal, US-led pattern and that liberal-leaning regional players will have to adapt to a less forthcoming environment.

The fact that TPP member states have decided to move forward anyway indicates that the region is not impervious to liberal economic practices. However, the strategy of hedging adopted by many regional countries in an attempt to balance between the US and China remains an obstacle to the promotion of liberal values and practices. What the Asia-Pacific shows today is an amalgam of ideas and practices in which free market-based elements co-exist with developmental practices of state management, US power is less normatively framed but nevertheless remains very important as a check on China's assertiveness, and



political liberalism is limited to the domestic politics of certain countries and relatively weak intergovernmental institutions reveal the limited internalisation of internationalism. The Asia-Pacific is a community of countries bound by geography and therefore economic needs, but without much in common in terms of political regimes, ideals and cultural legacy.

The review of the areas of contested order attests to the limitations of the universalist ideational project. In theory, the liberal project is supposed to organise the totality of international relations but, in reality, it is invariably dependent on the geopolitical weight of its main proponents, most notably the US and Europe. The effect of this dependence, most visible in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus and to a lesser extent in the Asia-Pacific, is that liberal norms, practices and institutions are turned into political instruments that rival powers fight with or against. Another conclusion is that the areas of contestation expose the contradictions between the normative premises of the liberal project and the actual policies of its main Western promoters, particularly in the Middle East. In a way, the case of the Middle East shows that the continued existence, and even expansion, of the liberal project is invariably linked to its 'de-Westernisation'. This process involves internalisation but also transformation of liberal norms and institutions so that they reflect political and cultural specificities and engender local ownership of regional governance. Whether the result will be a reformed liberal order, however, remains an open question. More likely, it will be a different system mixing liberal elements with non-liberal ones, as is happening in the Asia-Pacific.

### **Reform, conflict or adjustment**

For all its faults and imperfections, the US-guaranteed liberal international order has provided the ideational glue and normative-institutional framework for three critical order-related functions: first, facilitating great power peace; second, promoting a more widespread distribution of economic gains; third, ensuring greater international representation. In order for the world of tomorrow to deliver similar results, global players, along with their partners, will have to reframe the notion of a multipolar world of unchecked competition as a concert of powers collectively guaranteeing a governance system embedded in at least certain liberal norms (peace, economic fairness, environmental protection, human security), institutions (the UN and the international financial institutions, IFIs) and practices (cooperative and inclusive rather than competitive). This is a vision of a *reformed liberal international order* resting on the ability of major competitors to reconcile diverging normative priorities, for instance sovereignty and human security, make global institutions more inclusive (for instance the Security Council and the IFIs), and fully embrace informal cooperation, ranging from the G20 to minilateral endeavours such as the P5+1 group that handled Iran's nuclear programme, as the standard back-up option for addressing emergencies and crises.

The conditions needed for this order to evolve and consolidate are manifold. The main international players will have to view their mutual relationships as not threatening perceived fundamental interests, re-internalise internationalism as part of their global identity, and re-embrace a revised multilateral order (also including regional bodies and informal initiatives) as 'legitimising' a new, accepted configuration of power. For the main international players to see their mutual relationships as unthreatening, there must be an accommodation of interests globally and regionally, meaning that areas of contestation will gradually have to turn into areas of accommodation through, possibly, greater regional institutionalisation



and local ownership of whatever political, security and economic arrangement is eventually reached.

The problem is that the main international players today do not see their mutual relationships as entirely not threatening their fundamental interests. Furthermore, they are in the process of re-elaborating their adherence to internationalism along a power-infused nationalist paradigm, and increasingly see multilateral institutions instrumentally. Unsurprisingly, they are unable to reconcile their differences over the areas of contestation, and are either generating local tensions or conflict, such as in the former Soviet space west of the Urals and the Asia-Pacific, or being drawn into competition by competing local players, as has increasingly been the case in the Middle East. Thus, concerns that a multipolar (that is, less American-shaped) and less liberal (more power-driven) world will also be less orderly (that is, more prone to conflict) are anything but groundless.

Beside this scenario of *increasing conflict*, wherein the structures of the liberal order would gradually be emptied of legitimacy, authority and eventually capacity to function, another, less disheartening future is also possible. Underlying this less downbeat expectation are two fundamental conclusions drawn from the two sets of analyses included in this Special Issue – one on the global players, the other on the areas of contestation. First, global actors are in the process of repositioning themselves in the order rather than advocating a fundamentally different project organising international relations. They are (still) willing to play according to the rules of internationalism, although to a varying degree. Second, conflict is not the default outcome of order contestation, as countries in areas where liberal norms and structures are not established can play along with the interaction of outside-in and inside-out dynamics to produce endogenously elements of an order still capable of fostering interstate peace, tightening economic ties, and facilitating intergovernmental exchange. The Asia-Pacific is the main case in point, as regional players have worked out governance mechanisms that may embed not only regional rivalries, but also US-China competition (and to a lesser extent China-India competition). For sure, the same cannot be said of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus or the Middle East. Yet, the former Soviet republics inhabiting the land ‘in-between’ the EU/NATO and Russia have also shown a capacity to balance between the two power blocs they are drawn to, which has the potential, if not to create a cooperative environment, at least to keep a fragile status quo of ‘non-conflict’ in place. As for the Middle East, the emergence of a power bloc enabled by Russia and centred on Iran and its proxies may be a first step towards the consolidation of a regional balance of power with some stabilisation potential.

This scenario of *global-regional adjustment* is what Grevi refers to when he insists on the link between an overarching system of global governance and regional subsystems in which liberal elements are alternatively supplemented or replaced by non-liberal ones. In this scenario, the liberal international order would be thinner and more fragile, yet it could still ensure a degree of interaction among global players capable of absorbing tensions originating from contested areas. Yet, the question about the future is not whether it will be defined by competition – because it will be – but whether competition will be managed or, instead, usher in an era of recurrent warfare. Today’s global powers are more keenly aware of the costs of great power conflict and are therefore unlikely to march blindly into war as the European empires did in 1914. They are also more integrated economically. These are two incentives to refrain from war and address economic imbalances while avoiding beggar-thy-neighbour policies. For a multipolar world to be stable, however, the key aspect of

order is its inclusiveness, based on the internalisation of the norm dictating international cooperation. The policymakers of today and tomorrow can still tap into the lingering legacy of the liberal order, which will continue to exist in normative frameworks, institutional procedures, intergovernmental and transgovernmental practices and regionalisation processes. More than the eternally shifting balances of power, it is in the transformative potential of this legacy that the hopes for a world less prone to conflict lie.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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