

Structural Constraints and Human Agency in Global Summitry and the Liberal Order

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Confusion surrounds how best to describe today the architecture of the liberal international order, its challenges, and prospects. The Liberal Order's various and changing configurations its distributions of power, as well as the variety of major actors, portend consequences for the operation of the international system. Although structural approaches remain dominant in international relations analysis, it is evident that there is an interaction of structure, the distribution, and redistribution of power, and agency—the diplomatic actions, norms, and rules of international politics. Historical and existing institutions, ongoing debates, and political efforts all point to the role of agency in global governance. The ongoing search for order was the basis for the Peace of Westphalia, the Concert of Europe, the effort to construct collective security following World War I, the Western liberal order of the Cold War, and global governance constructions of the post-Cold War era. The continuing existence and direction of the liberal international order are proving difficult to determine. There are rising powers and growing geopolitical rivalry. There are many new nonstate actors affecting international politics. And, there is current U.S. policy that puts in question its collaborative role and its continuing leadership. The many architectures of global governance, even competing ones, underline that structure alone is not determinative. In addition, debates over what course to take imply that the force of circumstance does not make one and only choice possible and inevitable, and that the search for order is ongoing and omnipresent.

Competing approaches to international politics abound. Structural approaches constitute the dominant framing in the broad field of international relations (IR). Yet these approaches confront significant alternative perspectives and their indeterminacy and incompleteness require an ability, in the end, to meld agency with structure to more fully comprehend global affairs. In our view, as this article describes, global summitry resides at this nexus between structure and agency—between power and diplomacy and is at the heart of the Journal's focus. This constitutes the second part of our inquiry into global summitry.¹

Structural explanations of international politics focus on the distribution of power among states and on redistributions of power. The distribution of power shapes influences and determines what states can or cannot achieve in the international system. In that sense, the international system constrains but does not determine international politics (Stein 2006). Moreover, the various relationships—alliances and clubs—that provide for the augmentation and aggregation of state power in IR also shape outcomes that result in

¹For Part One, see *Alexandroff and Brean (2015)*.

systemic stability or instability and are themselves products of choice and diplomacy.

Agency has always been a significant perspective both within IR and in the social sciences in general.² It captures the choices and decisions of actors and institutions, the debates that exist within the constraints of structure, and the heart of diplomacy and the effort to construct alternative political arrangements and understandings.³

Besides the constraining role of capability and the distribution of power, diplomatic behavior, norms, rules, and principles shape international outcomes. Agency can then be argued to be a principal lens for understanding global order and the outcomes achieved in IR, which “include a set of ideas and norms pertaining to sovereignty, security, development, human rights, environmental protection, etc., that help to limit conflict, induce cooperation and stability, and expand legitimacy through representation and participation” (Acharya 2018, loc. 344–6).

A focus on agency also underpins the growing attention to the many other actors in contemporary IR. This began with a focus on intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) but has come to include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and an array of actors including substate actors, provinces, states, and particularly cities and regions. Agency now also includes a great variety of nonstate actors (NSAs) from public and private corporations, foundations, advocacy organizations, all the way to particular individuals. And such a blossoming today of actors includes not just the “good” actors but also terrorist organizations, criminal organizations, migration gangs, etc. All these elements in contemporary IR figure in agency approaches and the analysis of international politics and policy.

Modern international politics, beginning with the end of World War II, and accelerating with the end of the Cold War, include collective arrangements that have come to be conceptualized as global governance:

‘Global Governance’ – which can be good, bad or indifferent – refers to existing collective arrangements to solve problems. Adapting our definition of governance, “global governance” is the sum of laws, norms, policies, and institutions that define, constitute, and mediate relations among citizens, society, markets and the state in the international arena – the wielders and objects of international public policy. Even in the absence of overarching central authority, existing arrangements bring more predictability, stability, and order to transboundary problems than we might expect. (Weiss and Thakur 2010, p. 6)

The architecture of the international system reflects not only the distribution of power, but also the efforts of political leaders to overcome and ameliorate the lack of a central authority in the world (what is described as the anarchy of the international system). Indeed, those very efforts have made possible the changes recently observed in the distribution of power, from the “rise of China” to the “rise of the rest.” That is, the currently discussed changes in the distribution of power are the product of a constructed economic order which made possible the more rapid growth of China and the rest, achievements these countries could not have accomplished on their own.

²For a discussion in sociology, see Giddens (1976, 1984).

³Constructivism, with its emphasis on the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966), emphasizes the role of agency, and the human possibility to reconceptualize and remake the world. For a discussion of the role of competing decision criteria in policy debates, see Stein (1990).

The role of agency and behavior is evident in how various fields deal with international politics. The fields of law, economics, and public policy feed into diplomacy and the impact of contemporary global summitry.

Contemporary global summitry is driven by leader-led informal gatherings and the impact that the preparation and then execution of these summits have on IR (Alexandroff 2008). Though the G7 and G20 are the most notable global summits, there are significant, though not global, leader-led summits, such as the Summit of the Americas, or Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which nevertheless hold significant diplomatic gatherings. In addition, global summits are built on foundations of serious and repeated gatherings of various ministerial, working group, and task force gatherings.

Moreover, contemporary developments are inexplicable from a purely systemic perspective. The great debates to be seen in major powers about their future direction and the implications of leadership shifts from centrists to populists and also to nationalists speak to the role of agency and choice in the direction of international politics.

The Evolving Order: Power and Diplomacy

Confusion surrounds how to describe properly the architecture of the international order with its various configurations and distributions of power, the variety of major actors, and the consequences of all of this for the operation of the international system. There is, in fact, no singular typology that all IR experts agree on. And, as we suggest below, there are different interpretations of the dominant aspects of what has been accepted by many as the contemporary order – the liberal international order.

Characterizing International Politics

One of the great difficulties in understanding the management and operations of global order, and indeed disorder, is the confusion created by experts around characterizing international politics. Probably no term is more confusing and less understood than the balance of power in historical and indeed in contemporary IR.⁴

This core concept – balance of power – was a critical element in the examination and our presumed understanding of great power relations. This mechanism, it was asserted, lay at the heart of international governance in the 18th, 19th, and again in the 20th century. The structure and operation of the balance of power motivated, so it was assumed, great power relations over many decades. Balance of power analysis and realist thinking dominated during the decades of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a fading of balance of power analysis because the predicted emergence of a coalition to balance U.S. power did not emerge and U.S. hegemony and preponderance characterized the distribution of military power.

In IR, much ink has been spilled over what exactly constitutes a balance of power. There is confusion over whether the balance of power is an order built on equilibrium or whether the great powers are engaged in a

⁴The studies of the meaning of balance of power are too numerous to mention. Several include Claude (1962, 1989), Haas (1953), Gulick (1955), Kaplan (1957), Waltz (1959, 1979).

competitive manipulation of power, as identified by one of the classic interpreters of balance of power, Inis Claude (1989). As Claude suggested (1989, p. 77) in reflections on the interpretation of the balance of power, "... we cannot be certain whether we are being asked to welcome a result or to accept the claim that a certain mechanism is reliably conducive to that result." There is then no agreement over how the balance of power system operates, or if and when it operates. At a generic level, the balance of power apparently relies on the assessment of power among the great powers, especially where balance of power relies on equilibrium. It promotes more moderate behavior among the great powers and encourages the maintenance of independence of great and small powers alike. But maintaining the balance also may mean in fact recourse to force to restrain powers from seeking dominance. The balance of power, therefore, does not mean the elimination of conflict but relies on its use to maintain equilibrium and the international order (Stein 2015).

The analytic issues associated with the distribution of power and the concept of balance were made even more problematic by the ambiguities served up by international politics. Scholars could not agree on the nature of the distribution or whether it was balanced. The 19th century has been variously characterized as multipolar by those focusing on security and landed military power, and hegemonic by those focusing on financial power or sea power. During the Cold War, scholars, especially security scholars, characterized the system as bipolar but international political economy experts characterized the system as hegemonic (Stein 1984). The post-Cold War world was characterized as unipolar in security terms, but multipolar in economic power.⁵

Scholars have also disagreed about the distributions of power that typically characterize international politics. The majority of scholars see a balance of power as the typical outcome of the competition among security-seeking states in a world characterized by anarchy. Ironically, historical assessments have often argued the exact opposite:

[the] gravitational pull towards hegemony, and the ubiquity of some hegemonial authority in societies of independent or quasi-independent states, stands out so clearly from the evidence that the question arises why studies of state systems and political theory underestimate or even ignore it. (Watson 1992, p. 314)⁶

Not only did scholars disagree about the typical historical distribution of power, but they disagreed also over which distribution provided stability in the international system. The dominant view, that of balance of power theorists, held that balance provided stability. In contrast a set of scholars arose to argue that power preponderance provided stability.⁷

⁵Henry Kissinger (2014, p. 9) went so far as to argue that "World order describes the concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world." This formulation places the distribution of power as not an external reality, but the one "thought to be applicable."

⁶The same point is made by Gilpin (1981), Wohlforth et al. (2007), and Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth (2007).

⁷This view was developed by a number of scholars who provided different labels and slightly varying formulations: power transition theory (Organski 1958), power preponderance theory (Doran and Parsons 1980), long cycle theory (Modelski 1978), hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin 1975; the term coined by Keohane 1980), an overbalance of power (Rosecrance 2014, 2015).

Still, others dubbed the “English School” argued that international politics constitutes an international society. Rather than merely being characterized by the distribution of power, international life is presumed to also embody the rules and norms that characterize a society. Hedley Bull, a key intellectual figure in the English School made his point that an anarchical system could still be thought of as a society by titling his key work, *The Anarchical Society* (1977).⁸ Bull and Watson (1984, p. 1) offer the following definition:

A group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interests in maintaining these arrangements.

In this view, the candidates for primary institutions of the modern state system include religious sites and festivals, dynastic principles, trade, diplomacy, alliances, guarantees, war, neutrality, arbitration, balance of power, international law, and sovereignty (Buzan 2004, p. 174).

Ostensibly, these disparate views embody different views of agency. For example, in one formulation of the balance of power, balance is something purposely sought by the leaders of states. For others, however, balance is an equilibrium resulting from a process of state interaction and thus agency could be ignored. But here too, scholars admitted of state choice, in that some states could choose a policy of aggression but would be met by a countervailing coalition at some point, and others could choose not to balance but would disappear.⁹

Ironically, the role of agency also can be found when evaluating the works of modern realists and neorealists. Although these scholars argue that they offer a positive explanation for international politics, they act as prescriptive advocates for policy positions and are critical of the foreign policies pursued by governments. Hans Morgenthau, the father of modern realism, was a staunch critic of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. John Mearsheimer, a leading contemporary realist, has been a vociferous critic of U.S. policy in the Middle East.¹⁰

Concert Diplomacy and the Search for an International Order

For centuries, states have responded to the setting in which they found themselves by searching for and constructing different political arrangements. As a result, scholars added conceptualizations of order distinct from the distribution of power. Paul Schroeder, one of the great diplomat historians of the modern period, argues that the anarchic state of the international system, “impels states to constantly to be on their guard against one another [and] likewise compels them to try to devise various ways—rules, norms,

⁸On the English School and international society, see Buzan (1993).

⁹This is the Waltzian version in which states need not be assumed to be minimally concerned with their own survival, but they disappear, and thus evolution results in a system in which all states are so minimally concerned. Waltz engaged in the intellectual contortion in which he argued that his theory of international politics was not meant as a theory of foreign policy while simultaneously arguing what states in a bipolar setting did to reconstitute a balance.

¹⁰In another case, Mearsheimer (1993) simultaneously argued that states, such as Ukraine, would not give up their nuclear capability while he also wrote urging Ukrainian officials not to do so.

practices, conventions, institutions – that enable them to rationally and prudently to trust one another” (Schroeder 2010, p. 81) and thereby promote order.

The beginnings of global summity, or at least global order, in our view then, can be traced to the general peace congress of a majority of the European states that extended over years and resulted ultimately in the Peace of Westphalia. Beginning at the end of 1644, more than 100 delegations came together in Münster and Osnabrück to negotiate the end of the religious conflict that was the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648).¹¹ Thousands of diplomats spent four years negotiating a set of agreements that are called the Peace of Westphalia. These included several territorial adjustments, but the long-term impact of the agreement was to establish the principle of exclusive sovereignty of rulers over their lands and people, including the right to establish a state religion. In exchange, rulers promised those living in their countries the right to practice their faith even if they were not part of the established church. The agreements established an order that exchanged exclusive sovereignty and nonintervention for restraint on the exercise of that sovereignty. Although the Peace of Westphalia entailed substantial continuity, the principles enshrined, however, contested since then, remain the bases for international order and continue to have their applicability for modern conflicts debated.¹²

Similarly, the next major European-wide war also led to an effort to ameliorate the dangers that had brought war. Following the Napoleonic wars, European diplomats of the early 19th century recognized the need for different mechanisms designed to avoid the disorder generated by balance of power politics and this was the basis for the Concert of Europe.¹³

In the first instance, the Concert derived from the common realization of European statesmen of the Napoleonic era that something new and different must be devised to mitigate the increasingly chaotic and warlike balance-of-power system of the previous century. Both critics and defenders of the balance-of-power idea, even during its apogee, recognized that it was unsatisfactory. (Elrod: 1976, p. 161)

This Concert of Europe that characterized politics following the Napoleonic Wars came to be seen as an alternative form of international order. One of the great interpreters of the balance of power, Edward Vose Gulick (1955), distinguishes balance of power from an order that he identifies as “coalition equilibrium.”

¹¹Sources give different numbers for the states represented, from 109 to 194.

¹²On Westphalia, see Croxton (2013). There is a vast literature on sovereignty but see Jackson (2007). The agreements did not end intervention or the role of religion in politics but did bring an end to religious war in Europe and slowly established a modified international order. Westphalia has been discussed as one way to deal with religious conflicts in the Middle East (Milton, Axworthy, and Simms 2018, and the University of Cambridge project on “A Westphalia for the Middle East?”). Krasner (1999) argues that sovereignty constituted organized hypocrisy in that states would both espouse the principles of sovereignty while sometimes violating it. It should be noted though that hypocrisy constitutes social glue in that it means that states are willing to enforce principles on others that they are sometimes willing to ignore for themselves, and this maintains the force of the principles rather than making them moot.

¹³The intellectual confusion about how to characterize international politics is such that there are those who see the Concert of Europe not as an alternative form of international order but as the embodiment of the balance of power. As described by Martin Wight (1966, p. 154), “the Concert of Europe was in origin and essence a common agreement on the principle of the balance of power.”

The great powers of Europe would propose a conference whenever a crisis arose, and they met with regularity.¹⁴ “Concert diplomacy” served to prevent war among the great powers of Europe.¹⁵

The purpose of concert diplomacy was to maintain peace among the great powers, to prevent unavoidable conflicts of interest from degenerating into actual hostilities. Concert diplomatists realized that no surer method of provoking conflicts existed than openly to confront a great power – to menace its vital concerns or to impugn its honor and prestige. So long as the European Concert functioned, the five great powers had the assurance that both their legitimate rights and their self-esteem would be respected. (Elrod 1976, p. 166)

The Concert became a model of a security arrangement in which great powers could manage issues of potential conflict and avoid war. Although the Concert of Europe was called together periodically in the late 19th century,¹⁶ the effort to gather a conference of the powers shortly before war’s outbreak in 1914 proved futile. A number of the states declared themselves unwilling to meet. The great powers were unable to prevent the outbreak of World War I.

Collective Security and the Search for Order

Following World War I, there was still another effort to create a more institutionalized system of collective security. Woodrow Wilson, President of the rising power, took the lead in this effort. Even before the armistice, Wilson was signaling his determination to do so. In a speech on January 8, 1918, to a joint session of Congress, he delivered what became his Fourteen Points speech. Wilson before Congress called for a new international institution to keep the peace. This, of course, would come to be the League of Nations. But the underlying frame going forward was to be collective security: “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.”¹⁷ This was embodied in Article 10 of the League of Nations in which the signatories undertook to respect and preserve: “against external aggression the territorial integrity and political independence of all members of the League. In case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation will be fulfilled.”¹⁸ Yet reality never matched Wilson’s vision. First, the United States failed to enter the League after the Senate failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. In addition, in Wilson’s view, the obligation to respond to breaches of the peace relied largely on the force of collective public opinion. As Wilson, himself, put it, the League would (Ambrosius 2002, p. 52) “operate as the organizing moral force of men throughout the world,” and would throw a “searching light of conscience” on breaches of the future peace and, “. . . Just a little exposure will settle most

¹⁴For a list of the congresses and conferences of the concert era, see *Lascurettes (2017, Table A.1)*.

¹⁵For a history of the concert, see the magisterial work of Paul *Schroeder (1994)*.

¹⁶The concert gatherings included London Conference 1878 (in Berlin), 1880 (Madrid), in Berlin (1884–1885), in 1906 at Algeçiras (First Moroccan Crisis), and London (1912–1913, ending the Balkan War).

¹⁷Woodrow Wilson, “Address Delivered to Congress,” January 8, 1918. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp.

¹⁸*League of Nations. The Covenant of the League of Nations (Including Amendments Adopted to December, 1924)*. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leacov.asp.

questions.” This system of collective action deriving from collective decision-making was missing a critical power and depended on a “set of norms and pressures – public opinion and the moral rectitude of statesmen – [that] would activate sanctions and enforce the territorial peace.” (Ikenberry 2010, p. 26)

The failure to maintain peace and stability in the interwar period and the economic and political consequences arising from the Great Depression provided a powerful lesson for those leaders that followed. Despite the failure of the League, the leaders of those states that were ultimately victorious in World War II against particularly Germany, Italy, and Japan appeared determined to avoid the consequences that emerged from the previous efforts to fashion a peace after the guns fell silent.

Building the Post World War II Liberal International Order

In the wake, then, of World War II, there were renewed efforts to create an international order that would provide peace and stability and promote economic prosperity. The United States dramatically acted to build an order that would retain U.S. involvement. Well before the peace, as pointed earlier (Alexandrov and Brean 2015, p. 15), the U.S. Administration concerned itself with the management issues of the postwar world. The Commission to Study the Organization of Peace prepared many reports. The United States sought to organize the peace through new institutions created as the War wound down: peace and security through the United Nations; and lasting prosperity with the Bretton Woods negotiations that led to the formation of what became the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Nations in Western Europe that had fought repeated wars searched for ways to create institutions to prevent future wars. They created a community that transformed relations from one in which war was a regular feature of interstate relations in Europe, to one in which it has become unthinkable (Jervis 2002).¹⁹ Karl Deutsch et al. described a basis for such an order, a security community, one in which peoples “have come to agreement on at least this one point: that common social problems must and can be resolved by processes of ‘peaceful change’” (Deutsch et al. 1957).²⁰ Their historical analysis suggests that the prerequisites for a security community consist of a compatibility of values, a mutual responsiveness to one another’s needs, and a free mobility of persons. At the time they wrote, only one of the three was present, yet all three are now present at least among many European nations.

The grand plans of the postwar world, of course, were cut short by the emerging Cold War conflict. The institutions remained but principally influenced states in the West and left open the prospect of wider reach among the growing number of newly emerging states of what became known the Global South. East-West relations remained, however, frozen in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The operation of the liberal international order is of interest to this Journal.

¹⁹For the critical role of European powers in the shaping of the postwar order in Europe, see Stein (2014).

²⁰The analytic disagreements about conceptualizations are such that Kupchan (2010, p. 18) argues that the Concert of Europe was a security community. In addition, Kupchan adds other organizing principles for the international system, including contingent cooperation and rapprochement, among others.

After the Cold War

After the end of the Cold War, there were renewed analyses of the bases for order, this time for a global order. A concert, or an encompassing coalition of the world's great powers, was suggested as a model for the post-Cold War world and the possibility of creating an encompassing coalition of great powers (Rosecrance 1992, 2001).²¹

Nonsecurity scholars, those focused on the global economy and the role of international organizations, proffered an alternative basis for order. These analysts focused on arrangements that could deal with collective action problems: a world order that could exist and be sustained apart from changes in the distribution of power. These efforts multiplied significantly with the end of the Cold War and the rising examination of global governance challenges in IR—global financial reform, global health challenges, rising migration, and the existential challenge posed by climate change.

Still other analysts examined the web of arrangements in various issue areas that contained agreed-upon rules and institutions for dispute settlement. These analysts suggested that a weak constitutionalism or a weak federalism had surfaced as an emergent feature in international politics. Faced with the impossibility of solving many of the growing challenges on their own, states sought a different course: “a world of weak confederalism precisely because states find independent decision making inadequate to their governance needs; they thus prefer forms of joint decision making and governance” (Stein 2008, p. 75).

In short, scholarly conversations and conceptualizations appear to differ as a function of the domain. Political economists and security scholars see different configurations of power and wealth, different bases of stability, and different possibilities for providing order and governance in international politics according to domain they focused on. Whatever arrangements for dealing with conflict, whether by treaty, whether institutionalized, whether based on norms or rules, they have emerged from summitry, from meetings and exchanges, and from negotiations between governments. All are of interest to this Journal.

The Changing International Structure and the Implications for Diplomacy

So, what is the trajectory of the liberal international order? What are the consequences of the structural changes and the return of geopolitical rivalry on continuance of the order? Will the diplomacy of Trump, bring the current order, as we know it, to an end? Will a successor to Trump bring a return to a liberal order? Or, is it destined to fade away? Can multilateral action by major powers, even without the United States participation preserve or even refurbish collaboration in the face of the many challenges to the

²¹“Concert diplomacy” was, as noted above, recognized and analyzed by a series of diplomatic historians. Political scientists as well describe the mechanics of concert diplomacy and the capacity of the order to maintain peace and stability in the international system (Rosecrance 1963, Mitzen 2013). For a more critical examination of concert diplomacy see Lindley (2003/4).

international system? Will great power rivalry undermine international collaboration? Is a world then without great power collaboration likely to be the future of the international system? We look at these questions in the following section.

Who Leads the Global Order?

Contemporary disagreements about the nature of the world and how it is changing abound. In many ways, they reflect past debates, though the range of explored possibilities seems much greater than in the past.

There is a debate about the sources and nature of power. The distribution of military power continues to differ from the distribution of economic power. The centrality of the attractiveness of a society, its political system, and its values has been enshrined in the concept of soft power (Nye 1990, 2004, 2015 and 2019). Economic power, so it is argued, is diffusing from the United States to developing countries and large emerging market states. Not only China's rise in particular but also the rapid economic growth of Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey, and others has generated debate and consternation over the shape and consequences of this changing distribution of power on the international architecture. And, soft power is diffusing from states to substate and NSAs as well.

The diffusion of economic power and thus a changing global configuration has resulted in changing institutional arrangements. The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 resulted in the creation of the G20 as a necessary complement to the G7 to deal with international financial issues.

The rise of NSAs has resulted in their inclusion in many international and regional conferences to deal with a variety of issues. NSAs have been engaged in efforts to meet global challenges such as climate change. For instance, at the time of the conclusion of the Paris Peace Agreement, wealthy entrepreneurs came together to fund renewable energy efforts through the Breakthrough Energy Coalition and then in a more directed manner, the Breakthrough Energy Ventures Fund. Notwithstanding President Trump's opposition to the Paris Climate Change Agreement, Governor Jerry Brown of California and his cochairs gathered numerous NSAs and substate actors in San Francisco to address climate change and to encourage substantial climate change commitments by these NSAs.²²

Additionally, the declared return of geopolitics represents a significant contrast to the global governance discussions following the end of the Cold War. The Russia–United States friction certainly has framed growing geopolitical tensions between the two former superpowers. These tensions have been raised particularly following the Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014, the continuing war in Syria, the low level but persistent conflict in Ukraine, and Russian cybersecurity activities intervening in U.S. elections. Analysts have turned to assessing the changing dynamic in IR. A Brookings Institution study characterizes the current situation this way:

Renewed great-power competition is rapidly replacing post-Cold War cooperation as the dominant framework in international security affairs. This does not yet mean that we are locked into a new Cold War or systemic competition. However,

²²The cochairs for the Climate Action Summit included Michael Bloomberg, Patricia Espinosa, the executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and Anand Mahinda, Chairman of Mahindra Group, a Mumbai-based business conglomerate in September 2018.

the prospect of major-power conflict has returned, spurred by dangerous new escalation dynamics. Space for, and confidence in, diplomacy is eroding, with technological advancement and nuclear instability heightening tensions. Even without direct conflict, great powers are employing “all measures short of war” in pursuit of strategic ends (Jones, Feltman, and Moreland 2019, p. 1).

While Russia–U.S. tensions have suggested the return of geostrategic rivalry, the sharpest geopolitical tensions have emerged with the rise of China. Growing Chinese economic and military power has led to debates about the future of Sino–U.S. relations and their implications for the world.²³ A “small industry” has grown up in recent years assessing the likelihood of conflict between these two major powers.²⁴ Some see an inevitable security competition. This rising competition and rivalry are often described as the “renewal of the Cold War,” though sound analysis generally dismisses the view that the current U.S.–China rivalry matches the U.S.–Russia rivalry of the Cold War. There were few links between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, whereas a tightly economic interdependent relationship exists between the United States and China as a result of globalization. Nevertheless, the Trump Administration has labeled China a “strategic competitor” in its 2018 national defense and security strategies. President Trump has insisted that his predecessors ignored the unfair advantages that China’s leaders took of the United States over decades. These unfair measures, according to Trump, led to the loss of thousands of jobs. Before the 74th United Nations General Assembly Trump charged recently that: “The United States lost 60,000 factories after China entered the World Trade Organization. . . . For years, these abuses were tolerated, ignored, or even encouraged. Globalism exerted a religious pull over past leaders, causing them to ignore their own national interests.”²⁵

For some, the end of U.S. preeminence and leadership is almost here. The labels proffered differ *The Post-American World* (Zakaria 2008, p. 2011), *No One’s World* (Kupchan 2012), a G-zero world (Bremmer 2012). And the implications extend beyond a power transition with China as the rising power. The rise of more than just China implies, for some, not just a decline of the United States, but also a decline of the West (Kupchan 2012). These rising powers, according to Kupchan, will be unlikely to adopt the norms and rules of the current liberal international order that were created and shaped by the United States after World War II, and more particularly after the Cold War and the Soviet Union’s demise. The consequence of such a redistribution of power will be that there well may not be a single power in the international system to replace the fading leadership of the United States, nor will there be defined “rules of the game” for states in the global order. By implication, it suggests, disorder may well reign—the global order will be chaotic and leaderless.

²³The many volumes on this subject are too numerous to mention. Just two include both China and U.S. scholars: Rosecrance and Gu (2009) and Hachigian (2014).

²⁴Rosecrance (2013, p. 94) points out that the historical record of power transitions is an unhappy one that leans toward conflict. Of the thirteen historical cases since 1500 of a challenge to a declining hegemon, ten have resulted in major war. According to Rosecrance, only three have failed to result in conflict: the United States and Great Britain in the 1890s; the Soviet challenge to the United States in the Cold War; and Japan’s outdistancing itself from the Soviet Union in the 1980s. More recently, the consequences on IR of the emergence of rising powers has been dubbed the “Thucydides Trap” (Allison 2017).

²⁵Remarks by President Trump to the 74th Session of the United States General Assembly. September 24, 2019.

Still, others argue that United States, leadership, which may have been necessary following World War II, Ikenberry (2001, 2011) is no longer needed. In this view, new “rising Powers,” such as China, India, and Brazil, will be attracted by the benefits accruing to them to maintain this liberal order built largely on an open- and rules-based system:

The American hegemonic organization of liberal order is weakening, but the more general organizing ideas and impulses of liberal internationalism run deep in world politics. What liberal internationalism offers is a vision of open and loosely rules-based order. It is a tradition of order-building that emerged with the rise and spread of liberal democracy, and its ideas and agendas have been shaped as these countries have confronted and struggled with the grand forces of modernity (Ikenberry 2018, p. 8).

Emphasizing the role of leadership implicitly, if not explicitly, recognizes the role of agency and choice. Examining it is important to the Journal.

New Leadership and Identifying If Collaboration Is Still Possible

Still, in the contemporary global order, and after several decades of global governance cooperation, even collaboration, there continue to be various venues that promote potentially collaborative behavior. In the near past, there was a close examination of the bilateral U.S.–China relationship through the Security and Economic Dialogue. The Trump Administration has reconfigured this previous Dialogue with China but has limited the actual number of meetings.²⁶ There are collaborative settings with various regional and global summits and dialogues. For instance, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the East Asia Summit continue in the Asia-Pacific region. Under the Obama Administration, a plurilateral trade and investment regime were negotiated—The Trans-Pacific Partnership. The TPP had a U.S. –China dimension with Obama suggesting that it was necessary for the United States to set the rules. As he declared, “When more than 95 percent of our potential customers live outside our borders, we cannot let countries like China write the rules of the global economy. We should write those rules, opening new markets to American products while setting high standards for protecting workers and preserving our environment.”²⁷ Nevertheless, and maybe because of the view expressed by President Obama, the Trump Administration in one of its early actions withdrew from the concluded agreement. However, leaders of the remaining eleven countries, particularly Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, renewed their negotiations and concluded a revised Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. Though China has not sought to join the TPP, it has continued to promote its own regional trade arrangement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.²⁸ And there are a number of Asia-Pacific countries in various fora including The Trilateral Summit,²⁹ ASEAN,³⁰ ASEAN plus 3,³¹ and ASEAN plus 6.³² And, of course Asia-

²⁶The new venues include the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue, the Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue, and the Social and Cultural Dialogue.

²⁷“Statement by the President on the Trans-Pacific Partnership.” October 5, 2015.

²⁸Though much effort has been dedicated to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) India has remained a reluctant partner and as a result the negotiations have been unable to reach a final conclusion.

²⁹China, Japan, and South Korea.

Pacific countries are members of other fora including APEC, the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and of course the G20. In all, there are many fora where collaborative behavior is promoted even within the context of a changing distribution of power.

All this means great disagreement about the nature of current and more pertinently the future international order and its politics. The distribution of power among the major powers is shifting significantly as the 21st-century proceeds. But so, has the influence and actions of the international organizations that are situated in the international system and represent significant elements of the contemporary international order. What has emerged over the most recent decades is a set of informal institutions, referred to by some analysts as the Informals (Alexandroff and Brean 2015). The most notable and impactful of these Informals have been leader-led ones notably the G7, G20, and the BRICS.

Informal institutions generally are contrasted with formal ones, many of which were created after World War II including the UN and its many institutions as well as the Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The features that distinguish formal from informal institutions are specific and clear:

We thus define an (Informal Intergovernmental Organizations (IIGO) as:

1. An explicitly shared expectation – rather than a formalized agreement – about purpose
2. With explicitly associated state “members” who
3. Participate in regular meetings but have no independent secretariat or other significant institutionalization such as a headquarters and/or permanent staff. (Vabulas and Snidal 2013, p. 197).

A number of studies have examined these two types of intergovernmental organizations (Klabbers 2001; Vabulas and Snidal, 2013; Roger 2016). Whereas the vast majority of International Organizations were formal ones created after World War II, today the informal institutions constitute nearly a third of all the currently “active” IOs. Experts do not completely agree on the reasons for the emergence and growth of informal institutions, but the key to their appearance and significant rise, would appear to be their “flexibility.” Overall, the Informals “tend to be more flexible, agile, and confidential. They also place fewer domestic demands on governments in terms of ratification, monitoring, and resource requirements” (Roger 2016, p. 52).

A common thread in the creation of early leader-led summits appears to be their creation arising from crisis. For instance, the economic recession of the early 1970s, which demonstrated the interconnected nature of the leading economies in the global economy, led to the creation of the G7. As Hajnal (2007, p. 11) notes, “the traditional organs of international cooperation were no longer able to reconcile the difference among the leading Western powers or to give them a sense of common purpose.”

In retrospect, observers suggest that such a collective informal approach to the global economy seems reasonable. G7 leaders were all deeply

³⁰The member states include Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

³¹ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea.

³²ASEAN plus 3 plus India, Australia, and New Zealand.

concerned with and engaged in the global economy and these states dominated the international system.

The next informal institution of some note, and the precursor to the G20 Leaders' Summit, was the creation of a G20 meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors. It too was created in crisis: in this instance the Asian financial crisis ([G20 History 2007](#), p. 9). The crisis extended to a number of emerging economies. The G20 retained the core liberal democratic governments but expanded to include states that were significant in the evolving global economy. These non-G7 members were regarded as "systematically important." Globalization and dramatic global economic growth underlined the need for a wider grouping than had been the case in the 1970s. Fareed [Zakaria \(2008](#), p. 1) described this as the "Rise of the Rest," not so much about "the decline of America but rather about the rise of everyone else."

The quickening pace of global growth marked a dramatic redistribution of power from the established, or developed, states in North America, Western Europe, and Japan to the large emerging market powers. At least by purchasing power parity comparisons, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) share of the world for China and the United States reflected a dramatic change with China by 2019, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), representing 19.24 percent of total GDP and the United States representing just 15.03 percent. Nevertheless, the dramatic rise of China's economic power does not in and of itself reflect the influence of each.

At the time of the first leader-led G20 summit called by George W. Bush on November 14–15, 2008 yet another and indeed much greater financial crisis was upon the global economy. The crisis in this instance raised the chilling prospect of a collapse of the global economy in the face of the crisis that emerged in the financial markets of the United States and threatened to engulf the global economy *in toto*. This convening of the G20 Leaders' Summit was a sign, if unacknowledged at the time, that the United States could not unilaterally resolve this deepening financial crisis ([Alexandroff and Kirton 2010](#)). Implicitly, as well, the calling of this Leaders' Summit signaled that the major powers believed that more than the formal organizations of the Bretton Woods–UN system, in particular the IMF, were required to solve the threatened crisis.

There is disagreement about the impact of the G20 in dealing with the financial crisis that resulted in its creation. Some scholars have been reluctant to attribute success to the G20 at the time of the global financial crisis: "the G20's significance as a manager of the 2008 global financial crisis has often been exaggerated. . . the most important aspect of the international financial management of the crisis was the U.S. willingness to act as an international lender-of-last-resort (ILLR) on a large scale" with the U.S. Federal Reserve taking the critical liquidity steps required to "unfreeze" the banking and near-banking sectors ([Helleiner in Farrell 2015](#); also see [Helleiner 2014](#)). Others saw the G20 as an effective forum for the collective effort to stimulate the global economy and in doing so avoided a repeat of the Great Depression ([Drezner 2014](#)).

The G20 policy agenda has expanded over the years following the global financial crisis, yet there is little to suggest that the G20 is acknowledged as a singular global leadership forum, or that it is likely "to make globalization work in the 21st century" ([Bradford and Lim 2010](#), p. 4). Yet while the debate over the role of the leaders' G20 continues, it is more than a little ironic

that the nontreaty-based, nonsecretariat, and ill-defined informal summitry of the G20 have come arguably to be viewed as the “top of the food chain” of multilateral global governance institutions.

The Trump Challenge to Multilateralism

Trump’s presidency has put much of this presumed progress in global governance at issue. Trump appears to have challenged the central features and tenets of the so-called liberal international order including these leader-led summits. Trump has criticized multilateral trade arrangements in particular, as pointed out above. He campaigned arguing that other countries had taken advantage of the United States, not only China but also America’s closest neighbors Canada and Mexico. He has insisted on negotiating a series of new trade arrangements including Mexico and Canada, South Korea, and Japan. His administration has approved stiff tariffs on steel and aluminum using a provision intended to protect national security. He has threatened to impose automobile tariffs on the same national security grounds against Europe, Canada, Mexico, and Japan. His administration imposed a series of significant tariff increases in China, which in turn has imposed tariffs on U.S. imports. Characterizing the United States under Trump as a “rogue superpower,” Robert Kagan argues that “Trump is not merely neglecting the liberal world order he is milking it for narrow gain, rapidly destroying the trust and sense of common purpose that has held it together and prevented international chaos for seven decades” (Kagan 2018).

The leader-led summits have not escaped the “Trump effect” either. At the 2018 Charlevoix G7 summit in Canada, Trump took umbrage over statements by host Prime Minister Trudeau and withdrew his agreement to the leaders’ declaration. More recently, anticipating difficulties at the Biarritz Summit, France’s President Macron did away with the collective leaders’ declaration altogether. At G20 summits, recent hosts including President Macri of Argentina and Prime Minister Abe of Japan have largely “tipped-toed” through their respective gatherings. But that has not prevented collective efforts that have ignored Trump policy. Most notable has been the determination of leaders at the Hamburg Summit, the Argentinian Summit, and the Osaka Summit to express at least G19 support for the Paris Climate Change Agreement.

In the face of President Trump’s attacks on allies, his growing rivalry with China, his evident distaste for multilateral organizations and arrangements, a rethink of global governance and the liberal international order is underway. To meet the challenges of global governance and global security, those determined to avoid a G-zero world and a return to great power struggles have been seeking to shape new structures of leadership but without necessarily U.S. leadership or even U.S. participation.

Possible New Forms of Multilateralism

In this rather chaotic context, a debate rages over the prospects for, and the nature of, contemporary multilateralism. In the face of growing great power rivalry, and the assertion of “America First,” is multilateralism even possible especially in the face of the lack of participation let alone the leadership of the United States?³³ There appear to be various forms of multilateral action

possible in the near future. We sketch several possibilities below that have been identified.

Some suggest that the forms of earlier collaboration are vanquished in the face of growing great power rivalry, and as a result, it is necessary to see multilateralism in quite a different light. Rather than referring to forms of collaborative multilateralism of the previous decades of global governance, analysts refer instead to a contemporary “competitive multilateralism.” For them then,

competitive multilateralism harkens back to that original postwar era, when it became clear that layered and flexible institutions yield results in divided geopolitical environments. Multilateralism’s future must similarly balance cooperation, deconfliction, and competition within existing and new architectures. All three dimensions are necessary to navigate preventing war without sacrificing democratic values in a geopolitically competitive world (Jones, Feltman, and Moreland 2019, p. 6).

It is hard to pinpoint the diplomacy that these multilateral actions might take. But these analysts suggest, for instance, that the past actions of the G20, those that were successful in meeting the challenge of the financial crisis of 2008, would be unable to drive reform in the contemporary setting.

On the contrary, there is evidence of sustained multilateralism without U.S. leadership and even in the face of U.S. opposition. For example, it had been assumed that G20 declarations could only operate on the basis of consensus. But the G19, as noted above, was prepared to support the environmental actions of the forum, and in particular, they insisted on a leaders’ statement of continuing support for the Paris Agreement in recent G20 Leaders’ Declarations. Statements noted of course that the United States did not agree but affirmed their support even absent a consensus.

European leadership has shown an unwillingness to accept Trump Administration opposition to various multilateral efforts. On a more positive note, though as yet on the unproven “side of the ledger,” European leaders have been willing to press forward on multilateral initiatives. In particular, French and German leaders announced during the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly the launching of an “Alliance for Multilateralism” which was held with over fifty foreign ministers attended the meeting.³⁴ Officials made clear that this forum was designed to counter rising nationalist currents, promote global cooperation, and support joint efforts to tackle inequality, climate change, and the consequences of new technology. The effort suggests that multilateralism remains a serious option, with or without the United States, though these initiatives are only consequential if they promote collective action.³⁵ The question of advancing multilateralism, however, it is described, in the face of growing great power rivalry is a key to understanding the future global order, an issue that we anticipate will be addressed in these pages.

³³On the classic definition of multilateralism, see Ruggie (1992).

³⁴See, Deutsche Welle. “Germany, France to launch multilateralism alliance.” <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-france-to-launch-multilateralism-alliance/a-48172961>. Friday, September 27, 2019.

³⁵A number of us, namely, Colin Bradford, Yves Tiberghien, and Alan Alexandroff have promoted a Vision 20 approach to international collaboration. See “Effective Multilateralism: 2019 Vision20 - Brookings Blue Report.” https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/1bfab0_1141546a09a74a5085b7b2ae2cf9cde0.pdf

Conclusion

What is striking in any assessment of the development of international politics is the intermingling between international structure and agency, as described in this article. The reality of a decentralized international world in which states arm themselves to assure their security is omnipresent. Yet just as persistent is the search for establishing arrangements that would better assure peace and prosperity than a reliance on the balance of power and the periodic resort to the use of force. These arrangements reflect agency and constitute the different global orders scholars have discussed. Scholars, in fact, have often simply developed conceptualizations around the practices established by states. The result of Westphalia has generated mountains of studies of sovereignty and the kind of order constructed and its effectiveness in establishing and maintaining stability. The Concert of Europe led to discussions of concerts as a form of order and the setting in which such arrangements are effective. The efforts of the major powers following World War I generated a similar discussion about collective security. A historical study of cases of amalgamation and integration resulted in the conceptualization of security communities. The arrangements established by the great powers in the decades following World War II led to numerous discussions of the liberal order and more recently a reflection on various forms of multilateralism in the face of U.S. actions under the Trump Administration.

There are those, careful to demarcate the intellectual terrain, who reject the role of international organizations in whatever form they appear and find that all international reality merely reflects the balance of power. They can point to the continuing role of power but are simply unable to explain the reasons for states' efforts to construct alternative orders.

Existing institutions, ongoing debates, and political efforts all point to the role of agency in global governance. The world is replete with both broad-spectrum and narrowly functional organizations intended to deal with the vast array of extant concerns. The many architectures of global governance, even competing ones, underline that structure alone is not determinative. In addition, debates over what course to take imply that the force of circumstance does not make one and only one choice possible and inevitable. Rather, we observe continuing efforts by political actors of all types to reach across borders and construct arrangements that provide more stability and certainty. This is the case even in these more chaotic times for the liberal order. All of these discussions and efforts we anticipate will be addressed in these pages of *Global Summitry*.

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