

The Life and Times of America’s Liberal International Order: A Reflection of Power Politics, Not an Escape from It

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Why do hegemonic actors set up and then change international orders—or the particular set of rules that set parameters for states’ behavior on the world stage—when and as they do? This essay examines American motives in founding the so-called liberal international order after the Second World War and then expanding it after the Cold War. Contrary to more conventional thinking about international order, the article argues that hegemonic orderers have often been motivated by competition and exclusion, advocating for order changes out of a desire to combat and weaken other actors rather than cooperatively engaging with them. And contrary to the narrative supported by the liberal order’s fiercest advocates, this essay posits that the United States fits comfortably within this historical record rather than transcending it. Viewing the life and times of the liberal international order through a broader historical lens, this essay contends, can help illuminate why this order served American interests so well for decades but is under increasing strain today. In particular, the essay concludes by examining how the United States and China view the liberal order today, what history suggests they may seek to do with it tomorrow, and what these dynamics portend for calls to elevate fora like the G20 to address contemporary international problems.

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Why do powerful countries seek to enact major changes to international order, the broad set of rules that set parameters for states’ behavior on the world stage? This query is particularly important today, as observers have questioned the United States’ continued commitment to the very order it was responsible for building after World War II. It also ties in with concerns about the future, especially uncertainty over whether or not China will seek to replace this order with something fundamentally new. Clearly, assessing the future of world politics necessitates an understanding of great power motives *vis-à-vis* international order.

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Even so, the very idea of the American-led order itself—often called the “liberal international order”—is more controversial today than ever. On one side are those who believe this liberal order is exceptional—meaning it is unique when compared to typical orders of the past—as well as weighty, meaning it has significant effects on important international outcomes. Its advocates argue that it was crafted by the United States with precisely these considerations in mind, and above all for the purpose of realizing a more peaceful, just, and prosperous world. A “distinctive type of international order was constructed after World War II,” argues Princeton University’s John Ikenberry, a leading

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advocate of this perspective. In spite of America's unprecedented preponderance of power at that time, "its power advantages were muted and mediated by an array of postwar rules, institutions, and reciprocal political processes" where, for the first time in history, "weaker and secondary states were given institutionalized access to the exercise of [the preponderant state's] power"¹ (Ikenberry 2011, 7). 45

On the other side are those who decry all the attention and praise heaped upon the liberal order. Some critics argue that its effects on outcomes have been exaggerated (Schweller 2001; Allison 2018; Staniland 2018; Glaser 2019). Others contest the very existence of such an order in the first place. "Not only did a liberal order never truly exist," argues Patrick Porter, a prominent skeptic, but "Such an order cannot exist. Neither the USA nor any power in history has risen to dominance by being ethical, straight or truthful, or by supporting allies, not without a panoply of darker materials"² (Porter 2020, 8). To argue otherwise, skeptics say, is to promote a narrative of postwar American foreign policy that is not grounded in reality. 50 55

In moving the debate forward, I take a position between these extremes but closer to the critical view. The optimists' perspective has some merit in that we can identify a distinct and intentionally crafted set of order principles that constitutes the "liberal international order." Furthermore, this order has paid tangible dividends to the United States and its Western allies, thus affecting important international outcomes. 60

Nevertheless, for the rest of this essay I argue that the skeptics tell a more convincing story about American motives surrounding the liberal order's origins. And as I demonstrate, this story more closely aligns with broader patterns of hegemonic powers' order-building motives throughout history. Contrary to more conventional thinking about international order, then, the actual historical record reveals that order building has often in fact been a strategic and deeply exclusionary practice. And contrary to the narrative supported by the liberal order's fiercest advocates, the United States fits comfortably within this historical record rather than transcending it. Viewing the life and times of the liberal international order through a broader historical lens, I argue, can help illuminate why this order served American interests so well for decades but is under increasing strain today. 65 70

I develop these arguments in six steps. After first offering a basic conceptual definition for "international order," I highlight four patterns that emerge from examining the history of great power (or hegemonic) order building in the modern international system. Third, I consider the contents of the liberal order itself and make a case for what should and should not be included in its conception. Fourth and fifth, I briefly chronicle the two periods that proved critical for cultivating this order: its creation by U.S. elites at the end of the Second World War, and its extension by American leaders at and after the end of the Cold War. Sixth and finally, I examine how the United States and China view the liberal order today, what history suggests they may seek to do with it tomorrow, and what these dynamics 75 80

¹ See also James Goldgeier, "The Misunderstood Roots of the Liberal International Order—and Why They Matter Again," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, No. 3 (2018); Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal World: The Resilient Order," *Foreign Affairs* 97, No. 4 (2018); and Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "The Committee to Save the World Order: America's Allies Must Step Up as America Steps Down," *Foreign Affairs* 97, No. 6 (2018).

² See also Naazneen Barma, Ely Ratner and Steven Weber, "The Mythical Liberal Order," *The National Interest* 124 (2013); and Andrew J. Bacevich, "The 'Global Order' Myth," *The American Conservative*, June 15, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-global-order-myth/>.

portend for calls to elevate fora like the G20 to address contemporary international problems.

What is ‘International Order’?

The term “international order” has been employed in many ways and for many purposes (Tang 2016). While more complex definitions are occasionally useful, we can use the term here to denote the simple fact that actors of a regional or international system are regularly observing a common set of general rules. More specifically, an ordered system in modern world politics is one where a common set of rules is observed by a majority of that system’s states (Bull 1977). 85 90

These rules or “order principles” come in two major types: those that govern international behavior and relations between states—behavior rules—and those that govern internal behavior and dictate the kinds of actors allowed full recognition and rights in the system—membership rules. Behavior rules often correspond to, for example, if and when it is appropriate for actors to use military force or intervene in other states’ internal affairs. Membership rules pertain to minimum internal standards actors must meet to be considered full participants of the order, such as adhering to a certain regime type or domestic economic system, for instance (Lascurettes 2020, 15-16; Lascurettes and Poznansky 2021, 1-4). 95

Not all orders throughout history have been constructed by great powers. Yet many of the most important changes to order principles have in fact been dictated by the most powerful actors in their respective systems. At a time when understanding American and Chinese views about the liberal international order has become an increasing priority, focusing on this subset of orders—or what are often called *hegemonic* orders—seems particularly important³ (Cooley and Nexon 2020, 41). 100 105

Why Do Great Powers Create Hegemonic Orders?

What motivates great powers to construct new hegemonic orders where and how they do? In seeking to explain this phenomenon, prior accounts have focused on the consensus-driven and inclusive motivations of the would-be orderers (Osiander 1994; Ikenberry 2001; Clark 2005). Neglected in these accounts, however, is the surprising degree to which orderers have often been motivated by competition and exclusion, advocating for order changes out of a desire to combat and weaken other actors rather than cooperatively engaging with them. In particular, analyzing great power politics from the 17th century to the present illuminates four important patterns of hegemonic ordering (Lascurettes 2020, Chapter 3). 110 115

First and foremost, great powers’ advocacy for significant order changes almost always comes in reaction to major threats on the horizon. The powers of the 1600s designed the famous Peace of Westphalia to target the imperial and religious forces they found so threatening to their survival, while the Peace of Utrecht in the 1700s was centered around imposing limits on the actor all of Europe feared at the time, Louis XIV’s France. Even historians who have been characterized as “liberal” for their times were in fact often initially set up as reactionary responses to combat rather than promote liberal forces. For instance, the vanquishers of Napoleon in the early 1800s created the so-called Concert of Europe to 120

³ On hegemonic orders more generally, see G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders,” *Security Studies* 28, No. 3 (2019).

contain and then stamp out the transnational spread of political liberalism across the continent. And even U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s vision for a new world order in the early 1900s came together out of a perceived need to respond to the radicalism unleashed across the world by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (Levin 1968). 125

Second, even when great powers have had the opportunity to pursue fundamental order changes, in the absence of perceived threats on the horizon these same actors have often chosen order continuity over order change. Sometimes this advocacy is passive, such as when hegemonic Britain declined to pursue more radical, punitive, and transformative order changes in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ and Crimean Wars. At other times the push for order continuity has been more overt, as it was when the United States insisted on the continuation of its liberal security order after 1990 even as the Cold War was ending. 130 135

Third, great powers have strategically weaponized order principles against their perceived adversaries in a variety of creative ways. One technique involves severing the very social ties through which the threatening entities derive power. After achieving *military* victory in the Thirty Years’ War, for instance, France and Sweden feared *political* encirclement by the powerful Habsburg and Holy Roman empires. So, in the famous Westphalian settlements of 1648, these powers enacted an order rule that granted unprecedented autonomy to the hundreds of small principalities that their imperial foes were built upon—a principle that has come to be known as “state sovereignty”—that forever destroyed the universalist authority claims that had made those empires so threatening in the first place (Croxton 2013). 140 145

Another such strategy entails delegitimizing a rival’s easiest pathway to amassing further influence. Take for example Britain’s order strategy in the Utrecht settlements of the early 1700s. Above all, English leaders feared for their country’s security from Bourbon France, a menace to the entire continent both for its enormous material advantages and for King Louis XIV’s well-known ambitions for conquering all of Europe. In response, Britain built an order that targeted the French ruler’s favorite technique for amassing power: the use of family marriages to bring foreign kingdoms under his control. By using the Utrecht settlement to outlaw any territorial gains acquired through dynastic ties, English elites were able to instantly cut off the Sun King’s preferred means for expanding French influence (Osiander 1994, Chapter 3). 150 155

Fourth and finally, as the nature of hegemonic orderers’ perceived threats has expanded, so too have their order strategies designed to beat back these threats. Since the 19th century, in fact, would-be orderers have often felt threatened at least as much by rival ideologies—ideas about how to best organize a domestic society—as they have by rival kingdoms or states (Walt 1996; Haas 2005; Owen 2010). And, crucially, it is when they are facing ideological threats—those wielding not only formidable military might but also formidable ideological appeal to a broad, transnational audience—that hegemonic orderers are most likely to advocate for the deepest and most penetrating changes to international order. 160

For example, it was no coincidence that the architects of the Concert of Europe in the early 1800s created the first order centered around an overt principle of membership. They did so out of fear for the first truly ideological threat in world politics, Revolutionary France. For the victors of the Napoleonic Wars, enacting new behavior rules to control states’ interactions remained an important but insufficient weapon to forestall revolutionary contagion and upheaval from *within* societies, an entirely new kind of menace at the time. 165 170

Today the Concert of Europe is often remembered as progressive for its time. Yet it was actually and ironically *anti-liberal* in the content of its order principles, as it explicitly privileged and protected conservative and monarchical governments while harassing and excluding liberal ones (Lascurettes 2017).

Similarly, we can best understand the American pattern of order building in the 1940s if we view it through the prism of the military *and* ideological threat posed by the Soviet Union after the Second World War. The origins and evolution of this liberal international order are my focus for the remainder of the article. 175

Defining the Liberal Order 180

Observers sometimes posit that the liberal international order (LIO) forged by the United States in the aftermath of World War II is categorically different from other hegemonic orders not only in content but also in form, representing an entirely novel—and better—system of interstate relations (e.g., Ikenberry 2001, Chapter 2). In point of fact, however, there is little reason for treating the LIO as anything other than a particular flavor of hegemonic order, distinct from but comparable to orders of other eras. What makes it “liberal” isn’t some wholesale rejection of the broad organization or fundamental nature of international relations, but simply the classically liberal content of its order principles. In particular, at its founding in the 1940s the LIO was premised on five foundational rules of behavior and membership that each in some way corresponded with classical liberal ideals. Two of these rules focused on economic matters, while the other three were more germane to international security (Lascurettes 2020, 166-173). 185 190

The Liberal Order 195

On the economic side of the LIO ledger, members pledged via a behavior rule to work multilaterally to advance international standardization and stability, and, above all, economic openness (LIO rule 1: economic openness and multilateralism). Supplementing this first principle was an accompanying membership rule: governments were charged to accept greater responsibility for the general welfare of their citizens than ever before (rule 2: social welfare). On the security side of the liberal order’s ledger, a new behavior rule established an explicit collective security guarantee amongst the order’s members (rule 3: collective security). Further defining who “they” were was a principle limiting LIO membership to those with democratic political institutions at home (rule 4: liberal democracy). Finally, perhaps the rule most central to the entire edifice was a principle of behavior that created a liberal security community and society amongst the order’s members. Above all, this community/society succeeded in establishing unusually porous boundaries between and unprecedented cooperation amongst the liberal order’s mostly liberal members (rule 5: liberal security community).⁴ 200 205 210

These five rules were established and then enshrined in a number of the key international organizations of the postwar era. LIO rules 1 and 2 were consecrated in the

⁴ For a distinct yet compatible take that characterizes what I call a liberal security community as a “guiding coalition,” see Michael J. Mazarr, “Preserving the Post-War Order,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, No. 2 (2017).

Bretton Woods institutions—particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—as well as in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). If rule 1 established an open and interdependent world economy, rule 2 ensured that governments did the necessary work to protect their citizens from that world economy’s natural ebb and flow. This combination of international openness and domestic protection has come to be known as “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1982). 215

LIO principles 3, 4, and 5 were embodied in the North Atlantic Treaty and its resulting organization, NATO. While NATO has sometimes been characterized as a regional redraft of the United Nations (UN), from its beginning it was always much more than this. Yes, establishing true collective security where the UN had failed (rule 3) was its core purpose and mission, but so was promoting explicit democratic membership (rule 4) and establishing a security community and society amongst its democratic members (rule 5). While this last principle was strengthened via NATO, it originated even earlier, in the decisions to extend unprecedented amounts of aid to Europe via the Marshall Plan. And because the aid recipients agreed in exchange to band together and begin cooperating in unprecedented ways, the Marshall Plan is sometimes seen as the first step along a pathway culminating in the European Union (EU) (Rappaport 1981). 220 225

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Not the Liberal Order

Notice now what is not a part of this LIO conception: the United Nations (UN) itself, sovereign equality and non-intervention, great power supremacy, self-determination and decolonization, and the arms control and human rights regimes, to name but a few elements often lumped in with the liberal order.⁵ Many of these things were (and are) elements of a larger set of *global* order principles that have often existed alongside the LIO. Yet they are not actually part of the liberal order itself. We can briefly consider each in turn. 235

First, the bedrock principles upon which the UN was founded—sovereign equality, non-intervention, great power supremacy—predate the founding of the LIO. They also predate the United Nations itself, though the UN Charter was certainly important in formalizing and reaffirming them. Second, the recognition of all nations’ self-determination and the accompanying wave of mass decolonization were without doubt important developments in the postwar world. Yet they were not the work of the LIO, whose core members were ambivalent if not openly hostile toward colonial independence when it occurred (Mazower 2009). Next, the international arms control regime, as well as any of the agreements and institutions the United States and Soviet Union forged together during the Cold War, were the result of negotiations across orders rather than a product of the LIO itself (Glaser 2019). Finally, while a greater respect for human rights has arguably become part of 240 245

⁵ For more expansive LIO conceptions, see Christian Reus-Smit, “The Liberal International Order Reconsidered,” in *After Liberalism?: The Future of Liberalism in International Relations*, ed. Rebekka Friedman, Kevork Oskanian, and Ramon Pacheco (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Stewart Patrick, “World Order: What, Exactly, are the Rules?” *The Washington Quarterly* 39, No. 1 (2016); Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016); Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “The Day After Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order,” *The Washington Quarterly* 41, No. 1 (2018), 8-12; and Alastair Iain Johnston, “China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations,” *International Security* 44, No. 2 (2019).

the contemporary LIO—a development I return to later—for most of its history the concept of “human rights” was not a core component of the liberal order. 250

Building the Liberal Order

Much of the confusion over the LIO’s contents as well as its origins stems from the fact that, as mentioned earlier, the United States led the way in constructing not one but two distinct orders after the Second World War. There was a universalist global vision of order—manifested most prominently in the UN—and a smaller Western vision of order—comprised of the five LIO principles and corresponding institutions detailed earlier. Even those observers who recognize this distinction sometimes posit that these layers were complementary, representing an evolving but not contradictory American strategy to build a multilayered international order (Ikenberry 2011, Chapter 5). 255 260

This reasoning suffers from a hindsight bias, however. For American leaders at the time, the Western liberal order was never intended to fit within the global one. Instead, it was considered as an alternative to a universalist world order and became a priority only when that global vision failed to deliver on its initial promises. The primary story of American order building in the 1940s is the extraordinary transition away from a more inclusive vision of global order to a smaller Western vision of order that was far more exclusive. 265

Furthermore, we can best account for this extraordinary transition by examining shifting American threat perceptions at the time. While elites began by focusing on the global vision of order that served their interests so long as they were most focused on the power of Nazi Germany and the ideology of fascism, they soon became as wary of the threat posed by their wartime ally the Soviet Union. It was at this point, and in response to heightening perceptions of an emerging Soviet threat, that American elites began prioritizing the more exclusive Western order vision over the inclusive global one (Lascurettes 2020, 173-206). 270 275

Liberal Security Order

Simply stated, it isn’t difficult to trace the three security principles of the LIO (rules 3, 4, and 5) to the emerging Soviet and communist threats in the late 1940s. As Graham Allison has plainly put it, “Had there been no Soviet threat, there would have been no Marshall Plan and no NATO” (Allison 2021; Tierney 2021). 280

The principal objective behind the Marshall Plan was to provide Europe with the capacity to halt the westward movement of both communist ideology and Soviet military power (Steil 2018). To address the communist ideological threat, U.S. officials told Europe’s leaders that kicking or keeping communists out of their governments would be a condition for participating in the aid program.⁶ To address Soviet military power, the Marshall Plan called for unprecedented coordination amongst the states of Europe. American officials made clear that they would only support a massive aid package if it demonstrated “substantial evidence of a developing overall plan for economic cooperation by the Europeans 285 290

⁶ They also disingenuously offered the same aid to Eastern European states already under Soviet influence as a trojan horse of sorts, intending to use this offer to drive a wedge possibly through the communist bloc while weakening Soviet control over it.

themselves” that could culminate in “economic federation” (FRUS 1947). In other words, it was premised on building Europe into an independent third force that could resist communist subversion as well as Soviet invasion. This mission would be continued through NATO.

It is already well established that NATO was founded in response to perceptions of the growing Soviet menace (Sayle 2019, 11-17). What remains less appreciated is how the shape NATO took was also a deliberate response to this threat. Often forgotten is that it was the United States, not the governments of Europe, that insisted the organization be a consensual and a positively-purposed one—a genuinely multilateral pact directed toward a common ideological vision of shared values—rather than a barebones hierarchical alliance solely premised on deterring a military attack. 295 300

American officials favored this particular vision of NATO precisely because it would be superior to a traditional alliance in combating all aspects of the Soviet material and ideological threat. First, by emphasizing the importance of democratic membership and liberal solidarity, NATO would help the requisite states fight the most immediate menace: the ideological threat of internal communist subversion. “The problem at present is less one of defense against overt foreign aggression than against internal fifth-column aggression supported by the threat of external force,” argued the State Department’s John Hickerson, a key NATO architect, at the time of its founding (FRUS 1948a). 305

Second, U.S. officials recognized that a consensual and positively purposed alliance would offer a favorable contrast to the coercive and hierarchical eastern bloc the Soviets were constructing in the eyes of the international community at that time. The North Atlantic pact “would lose a great deal of its moral strength,” argued Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett, “if it appeared merely to be aimed at the Soviet Union” militarily rather than representing the embodiment of anti-Soviet behavior and ideology (FRUS 1948b). It was thus designed in the form that it ultimately took in part to draw a favorable contrast to Soviet relationships with their own “allies” in Eastern Europe. 310 315

Liberal Economic Order

The connection between the Soviet threat and the LIO’s economic principles is more circuitous but still easy enough to trace. The fact that the Soviets were invited to the Bretton Woods Conference is sometimes used as evidence that the LIO was relatively inclusive. Yet that conference was held in 1944, at a time when U.S. elites were still primarily focused on the German/fascist threat. Accordingly, the LIO’s economic principles were initially designed to target those entities rather than Soviet/communist ones. 320 325

The first economic principle of the LIO, economic multilateralism and openness (rule 1), was enacted to combat a key component of the Nazi threat: autarkic and mercantilist policies that created closed economic blocs. And the targeting of fascist ideology was manifest in the membership rule charging regimes with greater responsibility for the domestic welfare of their citizens (rule 2). Key officials of the Franklin Roosevelt administration believed that a focus on individual rights in this way would provide a favorable contrast to fascism’s subordination of the individual to nation or race. 330

Yet while neither economic LIO principle was initially designed to target the USSR and communism, it would prove easy enough to repurpose them in that direction in the subsequent years. Furthermore, though the Soviets were formally invited to Bretton Woods, it quickly became clear that their participation would only take place on American terms. 335

This meant that the USSR would have to open its economy as well as those of its client states to market forces and unprecedented international scrutiny. For a communist non-democracy to do all of this only to join an economic system openly premised on private enterprise and individual rights would have been a supremely tall order. It is little surprise that the Soviets ultimately declined the Bretton Woods invitation and membership offers. 340

Once they did so, however, the economic components of the LIO were quickly redirected in an anti-Soviet direction. Through sidelining economic aid programs overseen by the UN and rerouting them through the Bretton Woods institutions and Marshall Plan, U.S. elites succeeded in rapidly choking off Western exchange with the Soviet sphere. This effort remained ad hoc until 1949, when American leaders led the way in forging a coordinated export control regime with their European allies, the Coordinating Committee or CoCom (Pollard 1985; Mastanduno 1992). 345

In sum, American apprehension over the daunting material and ideological gains made by the USSR in the 1940s is the single most important element in explaining the United States' founding blueprint for the liberal order that remains with us to this day. That Soviet threat is the critical force in explaining the monumental shift in America's ordering strategy from global inclusion to Western exclusion, and the story of the LIO's origins simply cannot be told without it. Furthermore, the "liberal" nature of this order's content was not preordained by the fact that the United States was a liberal power. Instead, it had much more to do with the anti-liberal nature of the actor and ideology it was specifically designed to combat, discredit, and exclude. 355

Expanding the Liberal Order 360

The liberal order proved enormously successful in helping America exclude, isolate, encircle, and antagonize the Soviet Union, ultimately vanquishing its ideological appeal and then blunting its material might. With the end of the Cold War, however, the United States suddenly found itself in an environment characterized by the *absence* of major threats. Looking out onto this altered strategic landscape, President George H.W. Bush could only identify "apathy" and "unpredictability" (quoted in Meacham 2015, 402) as America's principal security challenges, while the incoming administration of Bill Clinton perceived "a world that would be broadly stable" and appeared "remarkably benign" (Slocombe 2011, 78-79). "I'm running out of demons," quipped Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs for both presidents. "I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung" (quoted in Cumings 2011, 140). 365 370

Even so, in the years since the Cold War ended the United States has forcefully sought continuity in the Western and liberal vision of order rather than fundamental change. While this may at first appear surprising, it comfortably fits with the second pattern of hegemonic ordering highlighted earlier: in the absence of new threats, great powers will pursue continuity in existing order principles rather than change. Continuity should not be mistaken for inclusivity, however. Instead, America's ordering strategy since the decline and fall of the Soviet Union has just as often been motivated by competition and exclusion as it was at the Cold War's apex. 375

Take for instance U.S. behavior in Europe in 1989-90. In a period, ripe with possibilities for change—a visionary Soviet leader who sought to move beyond superpower competition, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the possibility of peaceful German reunification— 380

American elites were steadfast in pursuing continuity in the liberal security order rather than even entertaining the possibility for transformative change. This meant that even as Mikhail Gorbachev called for the superpowers to scrap their Cold War alliances and build something fundamentally new, the Bush administration remained adamant that the United States would accept nothing less than a fully reunified Germany fully integrated into a NATO that would remain the premier security institution of Europe (Sarotte 2009; Lascurettes 2020, 208-227). 385

At each step along the way in those fateful months, the Bush team used America's advantages in the LIO to discredit the transformative plans of other actors while disadvantaging or shutting out the Soviets in the negotiations over Germany and NATO. Through diplomatic skill as well as outright deception, they ultimately succeeded in pressuring their former adversaries into accepting the continuation of NATO even as the Warsaw Pact disbanded, the reunification of Germany on Western terms, and, most dramatically, full NATO membership for this reunified actor. Evidence simply does not support the oft-made contention that "U.S. foreign policy at the end of the Cold War was generous and inclusionary." Instead, concludes the historian Mary Sarotte, "shielding that status quo in an era of dramatic change became the United States' highest priority" (2010, 135-136). 390 395

Continuity in, and expansion of, the LIO remained the overriding goal of American grand strategy even after the USSR's dissolution. On the economic front, at America's urging the IMF welcomed 20 former communist countries into its ranks practically overnight, while American leaders of both parties led the way in transforming the GATT into a full-fledged World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. To be sure, these developments had inclusive elements for some. Yet as with the initial Bretton Woods invitation, post-Soviet Russia soon found that promises of inclusivity would occur only on American terms⁷ (Mazower 2012, 355-356). 400 405

Furthermore, while U.S. leaders spoke frequently about wanting to integrate outsiders like Russia and China into the LIO as partners, American behavior in the security sphere often contradicted their rhetoric. The leaked Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) document in 1992 revealed U.S. opposition to multipolarity in favor of enhancing U.S. primacy. The means for achieving this would involve not only maintaining military superiority but also broadening the reach of the liberal order. Though the Clinton administration repudiated the language of the DPG upon entering office, they essentially followed through on its prescriptions for extending the LIO's principles to as much of the world as possible (Leffler 2017, 261-272). They couldn't have been much clearer about this objective than in declaring that "the successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement—enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies." (quoted in Edelman 2011, 79). 410 415

These plans culminated in the fateful American decisions, first, to offer NATO membership to the states of the former Soviet sphere; and second, to begin sidelining the UN Security Council (UNSC) in favor of the more exclusive NATO as the premier institution for legitimizing the use of force abroad. The former decision is today bitterly resented in Russia. The latter decision—the earliest manifestation of which was NATO's humanitarian war in Serbia in 1999 that commenced without UNSC authorization—remains a deeply 420 425

⁷ There was no new Marshall Plan for the former Soviet bloc, for instance. And despite Western promises associated with economic "shock therapy," it became clear to Russia by the late 1990s that the amount of tangible aid necessary for fulfilling those promises would not be forthcoming from the United States.

troubling development for both Russia and China. Whether or not U.S. elites anticipated these reactions, they were choices that sprouted from an overriding desire to expand the scope and influence of the LIO at any cost (Mearsheimer 2018, Chapter 5; Ikenberry 2020, 233-246).

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The Future of The Liberal Order

Stepping back, this brief chronicle of the LIO’s life and times reveals that hegemonic international orders—even liberal ones—are typically more a product of power politics than an escape from them. Unfortunately for many of its advocates, the United States, and the liberal order it created and then expanded in the 20th century are wholly unexceptional in this regard.

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These findings can help us shed light onto an uncertain future of hegemonic ordering. And two questions about present and potential future hegemonic orderers loom large above all others. First, what changes to the liberal order might the United States advocate as it declines in relative power yet remains an influential orderer? Second, what might its projected hegemonic successor, China, do with the LIO once it too becomes a hegemonic actor capable of shaping order on a regional or even global scale? Addressing these questions will help illuminate why the prospects of Sino-American cooperation on order-level issues are currently so bleak.

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America and the LIO in the Near Term

Assuming the United States remains motivated by the same competitive impulses that have fueled the liberal order project thus far, we can expect U.S. leaders to continue assessing the LIO’s utility by its ability to combat America’s greatest perceived rivals and challengers. And, at least for the moment, no threat appears to loom larger to American statesmen of both political parties than that of a rising China. It follows that the United States will judge the continuing usefulness of the LIO by whether it can be used to target and weaken China.

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This observation yields two more specific predictions about American ordering behavior in the coming years. First, as China continues to gain on the United States in aggregate power, American leaders will increasingly attempt to redirect LIO principles against China. Their focus will at least initially be on targeting the types of international behaviors that they believe most benefit Chinese power and influence. But second, if China continues to rise without significant changes in its domestic political makeup at home, we can expect U.S. elites to redirect the principles of order to counter not only China’s behavior but also the Chinese ideological model itself, sometimes referred to as “authoritarian capitalism” (Gat 2009; Halper 2010; Milanovic 2020).

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On this second point in particular, predicting American advocacy of even deeper and more far-reaching changes to the LIO in the near future might at first sound farfetched. After all, many observers see the recently departed Trump administration’s apparent disdain for the liberal order as an aberration. More specifically, they characterize his as the first and only of the postwar administrations that failed to recognize the LIO’s inherent value and at the same time view (with relief) Joe Biden’s victory as a fundamental repudiation of the

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Trumpian disdain for the LIO (Patrick 2017; Ikenberry 2017; Miller 2017; Posen 2018; Stokes 2018; Daalder and Lindsay 2018; Haass 2020). Yet this set of assumptions belies the fact that both Republican and Democrat presidents had begun signaling their discontent with important aspects of the LIO well before Trump took office. More specifically, while the overall trajectory of America's post-Cold War order strategy has been one of continuity amidst its global expansion, a case can be made that a package of subtle but significant LIO modifications has had bipartisan buy-in as far back as the 1990s (Chan 2021). 475

Most striking in this regard has been a movement to incorporate an additional criterion into the liberal conception of order membership: a baseline respect for the "human rights" of all peoples under a regime's purview (potential LIO rule 6). In the past, human rights abuses were typically treated as domestic matters walled off from international scrutiny. In the post-Cold War era, by contrast, the United States has increasingly led the way in reconceptualizing such abuses as international dangers as much as domestic ones. "The sovereignty of individual governments is not absolute," argued Strobe Talbott, Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State, in giving voice to this shift in thinking. "A national government that systematically and massively abuses its own citizens" risks "being put out of business" by the international community⁸ (quoted in Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, 216). If the meaning of "put out of business" isn't clear here, one need only ask for an adequate translation from the regimes of Milošević, Hussein, or Gaddafi. 480 485

Hand in hand with this has been U.S. advocacy for a related but additional new order principle of behavior, one that would further weaken state sovereignty while legitimizing more frequent military interventions undertaken to advance liberal ends (potential LIO rule 7) (Finnemore 2003, Chapters 3-4; Legro 2005, 168-169, 178; Barma, Ratner and Weber 2013, 61; Christensen 2015, 59-62; Cooley and Nexon 2020, 58; Ashford and Denison 2020). Only time will tell if this rule change continues to gain traction, both in the international community as well as within the United States itself. But it is not hyperbole to say that its consecration would represent the most significant revision of the liberal order since its inception.⁹ Not coincidentally, it is also the liberal order dynamic that most antagonizes America's potential hegemonic successor China today (Rolland 2020). 490 495

China and the LIO in the Long Term 500

LIO advocates continue to argue that China mostly supports the liberal order, predicting that even in an unknowable future, Chinese leaders are likely to ultimately keep its foundational principles in place. After all, they posit, why would China seek to fundamentally overturn a system of rules that allowed for its own meteoric rise in power and prosperity in the first place? (e.g., Ikenberry 2008) 505

⁸ On NATO's 1999 Serbia campaign in particular as an exemplar of this approach, see Chollet and Goldgeier 2008, 211-234.

⁹ Another major LIO rule change—the move from embedded liberalism to neoliberalism (or cosmopolitan liberalism)—is interesting and important but beyond the scope of this essay. See Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, "The Liberal Order is Rigged: Fix It Now or Watch It Wither," *Foreign Affairs* 96, No. 3 (2017); G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, No. 1 (2018), 21-23; John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, No. 4 (2019), 38-42; and John M. Owen, "To Make the World Select for Democracy," *Hedgehog Review* 22, No. 3 (2020).

This view once again belies past patterns of hegemonic ordering, however. Rather than sticking with the liberal order, history suggests that China will eventually seek to advance a new vision of order designed to target its own perceived threats. And if current Sino-American tensions are any indication of what's to come, possibilities are ripe for China to use its future dominance to enact an order premised on targeting the United States and whatever remains of the American-led LIO. To put it even more plainly, the most likely outcome for the future is one where China designs its own hegemonic order to compete with rather than complement the contemporary liberal order.

If this is the future that ultimately comes to pass, what form might China's alternative order vision take? Rather than a total rejection of all elements of the liberal order, history suggests that China will engage in selective and strategic revisions to it. Chinese leaders after all accept and even embrace important components of the LIO's behavior rules today, namely its commitments to global economic stability and openness that keep China's colossal export-oriented economy churning and growing. What they strongly reject are Western attempts to use the LIO's principles to dig down and meddle into members' domestic politics, passing judgment on human rights practices or even attempting to alter regime types. Indeed, China's greatest concerns about the LIO today involve not that order's behavior rules but its principles of membership.

The optimism that LIO advocates express about China's propensity to stick with the liberal order's existing rules comes in large part from the assumption that "there is simply no grand ideological alternative to a liberal international order," as John Ikenberry puts it. "China does not have a model that the rest of the world finds appealing" (Ikenberry 2018, 23). What Ikenberry is referring to here is the seeming lack of appeal for China's "authoritarian capitalist" ideological model outside of its own borders. Yet such optimism mistakenly assumes that a Chinese-led alternative to the LIO would have to contain an ideological component in the first place. There is a more plausible possibility, however. Rather than continuing with an unchanged LIO or totally rejecting it in favor of an authoritarian capitalist one, China could choose to advance what we might call an "agnostic capitalist" order instead.¹⁰

An agnostic capitalist order would carry forward some of the LIO's principles, namely its rules of behavior promoting economic multilateralism and openness and perhaps also some basic form of collective security. The big distinction from the contemporary LIO would be the absence of any form of domestic conditionality for various regimes around the world via membership rules.¹¹ In other words, the order would be capitalist in its commitment to international free trade as well as at least rudimentary coordination over keeping the global economy afloat. Yet it would remain agnostic on the internal nature and issues of its member states, establishing a strict differentiation between the international and domestic and walling the latter off from external scrutiny.¹² As Chinese President Xi Jinping

¹⁰ Mearsheimer also discusses "agnostic" orders in his "Bound to Fail" essay, but uses the concept differently than I do here.

¹¹ Other recent accounts that at least partially align with my analysis of Chinese order preferences include Shiping Tang, "China and the Future International Order(s)," *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, No. 1 (2018); and Johnston, "China in a World of Orders."

¹² But for an alternative prediction whereby China promotes an order vision that incentives autocratic membership, see John M. Owen, "Two Emerging International Orders? China and the United States," *International Affairs* 97, No. 5 (2021).

put it at the inaugural Belt and Road Forum in 2017, “we are ready to share practices of development with other countries, but we have no intention to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others” (quoted in Benabdallah 2018, 10).

Erecting such an order would help Chinese leaders advance their *defensive* objective of blocking the perceived expansion of Western-led liberal interventionism that has so agitated nondemocratic regimes in the post-Cold War era, China foremost among them. Yet it would also serve an offensive objective of enacting an alternative set of Chinese-led order rules more appealing to a broad swath of new members. Most promising here would be those developing states of the Global South that perceive increasing pressure under the principles and purview of the American-led LIO to rapidly and substantially liberalize major aspects of their domestic societies (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). 550 555

If this vision of an agnostic capitalist order comes to pass, the fundamental choice thus wouldn’t be between hegemonic orders containing either democratic or authoritarian principles of membership. Instead, it would involve developing states choosing between an American-led liberal order often seen as imposing ever-increasing domestic burdens on its least capable members and a Chinese-led agnostic order offering such states the promise of freedom to forge their own domestic paths (Stephen and Skidmore 2019, 87). From China’s perspective, this would represent the kind of favorable contrast that could finally make the prospect of its hegemony more palatable—or even attractive—to much of the rest of the world (Broz, Zhang, and Wang 2020). And in a future characterized by competing superpower visions of international order, it is a proposition that could ultimately prove to be the winning one. 560 565

Sino-American Relations, the G20, and the Future of the LIO 570

None of the above should be taken to suggest that there will be outright military conflict between the world’s two foremost superpowers. Yet it does portend slim prospects for meaningful cooperation between China and the United States on issues of order-level importance. Moreover, it represents the kind of fraught scenario that reforms to existing global governance institutions like the G20—as comprehensive and well-intentioned as such reforms may be—are nonetheless unlikely to fix. 575

The LIO’s advocates and optimists might note that even in the seemingly bleak analysis of the previous section, the fact that China’s advocacy of an agnostic capitalist order does not represent a total rejection of the LIO suggests there is still room for compromise with the United States. The problem with such optimism, however, is that the LIO principle China remains most enthusiastic about—unfettered economic openness at the international level—is precisely the rule America has most strikingly soured on in recent years. This is no coincidence, as China favors this principle for the same reason the United States now questions its utility: both actors perceive it as a rule that currently helps rather than hinders China’s ability to amass relative power and influence at others’ expense. By the same logic that China sees it as advantageous, the United States increasingly views it as a Cold War relic no longer capable of contributing to a liberal-ordering-against-threats strategy that worked so well against the Soviet Union but now appears unsuited for combating America’s competitors in the 21st century. Likewise, the LIO principles American elites continue to most enthusiastically champion today—those emphasizing liberal membership via the 580 585 590

simultaneous delegitimization of sovereign barriers against intervention and the promotion of human rights protections and democratic norms of governance (LIO rules 4 and 5 and proposed rules 6 and 7)—are precisely the elements China views as most objectionable and threatening.

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These incompatibilities are unfortunate but not coincidental. So long as it remains a competitive and exclusionary process, great power order building between anticipated hegemonic rivals will necessarily remain a zero-sum endeavor. The implication that follows is that shifting gears to focus on “repairing international order” cannot serve as a lifeboat for fixing the relationship between China and the United States. Rather than a repudiation of *realpolitik*, throughout history hegemonic powers have in fact built and shaped orders to serve as *realpolitik*’s very instruments. Perhaps counterintuitively, the path forward for breaking such a cycle is for the powers to set aside rather than highlight order-related issues and focus instead on directly attempting to mend their own bilateral relationship. The only escape from the spiral of adversarial order building, in other words, is overcoming the adversarial relationship at its core.

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This last point illustrates one of the shortcomings of reforming and re-empowering existing global governance institutions as a solution to fundamental problems today. Advocates of elevating an organization like the Group of Twenty (G20) believe that doing so would correct for the incongruity that exists between states’ relative influence in the traditional institutions of the LIO on the one hand and the actual distribution of power in the 21st century on the other¹³ (Cooper 2010; Drezner 2014, 142-144; Kirton 2016; Hajnal 2019). That is certainly a problem, but it is not the fundamental problem this essay has argued is at the root of contemporary global governance woes.¹⁴ So long as the United States and China view each other as their foremost competitor, no institution, organization, or order will prevent that competition from poisoning the well of sustained and meaningful cooperation at the global level.

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It would be one thing if the G20 offered the promise of ameliorating core tensions in Sino-American relations. Yet operating through larger fora like the Group of Twenty often appears to only make these tensions worse: in such negotiations, each side works more to make the other look irresponsible or hostile and less to truly forge consensus over the most important and controversial issues.¹⁵ Much as the liberal order failed to provide a magical lifeboat away from history and the reality of international conflict, so too will efforts to simply repair or repackage existing institutions come up short so long as they do not fix the fundamental great power relationship that will make or break the 21st century. A more formal and elevated G20 might be the *cause célèbre*, but an informal and flexible G2 is the only forum that stands a chance of moving the needle at the level of international order.

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¹³ For a more skeptical view, see Robert H. Wade, “Emerging World Order? From Multipolarity to Multilateralism in the G20, the World Bank, and the IMF,” *Politics & Society* 39, No. 3 (2011).

¹⁴ Indeed, recent analysis has found that at least in global financial institutions, representation concerns are not a primary driver of current grievances against American hegemony or the LIO. See Broz et al, “Explaining Foreign Support for China’s Global Economic Leadership.”

¹⁵ For similar analysis, see Geoffrey Garrett, “G2 in G20: China, the United States and the World after the Global Financial Crisis,” *Global Policy* 1, No. 1 (2010).

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