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Crisis, Competition and Contested Meaning: Challenges to the Contemporary International Order

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By Major S.P. Brosha

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Canadian foreign policy has long been characterized by a declared commitment to multilateral institutions and rules. Since coming to power, the Justin Trudeau government has reaffirmed such a commitment, promising that Canada would work to strengthen a multilateral world order that has appeared to be on the verge of failure. This directed research project examines recent discourse surrounding the ostensible crisis of the post-1945 liberal, rules-based international order in the face of myriad endogenous and exogenous pressures. In recent years, the resilience of the liberal international order has been tested from within its traditional Anglo-American sources of leadership of strength, with the Donald Trump presidency in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom being the most striking examples. At the same time, the order has been straining due to contention and contestation from rising and revisionist powers, namely China and Russia. After surveying conceptualizations of the international order by political scientists and international relations theorists, this paper assesses material and normative challenges facing the current order. With a focus on high-level political and diplomatic discourse along with official foreign and defence policy documents from the US, the UK, China, and Russia, this paper uses discursive and constructivist analysis to illuminate both risks and opportunities associated with this moment of apparent crisis. Accordingly, the paper identifies implications that may be drawn upon to inform a purposeful refinement of Canada's foreign and defence policy, so as to avoid unconsciously constructing narratives that minimize the potential for Canada to play a meaningful role on the world stage in the future.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Canada's latest defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, was released by the

Justin Trudeau government in June 2017.[1] The day before its publication, then-Minister

of Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, delivered a speech in the Canadian House of

Commons outlining the broad foreign policy framework underpinning the new defence

policy. Offering a frank perspective on Canada's place in the world, Freeland declared

that the "rules-based international order" that had enabled Canada to successfully

advance its interests through multilateral institutions and decision-making frameworks

for over seventy years was under threat.[2] In a clear acknowledgement of the instability

engendered by the election of Donald Trump south of the border, Freeland cautioned that:

> The fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its
> mantle of global leadership, puts into sharper focus the need for the rest of
> us to set our own clear and sovereign course. For Canada that course must
> be the renewal, indeed the strengthening, of the postwar multilateral order.[3]

The turn toward insularity represented by Trump, along with the Brexit referendum in the

UK, have had the effect of placing Canada in a precarious position internationally. In

conjunction with rising Russian intransigence and the mounting demands for increased

representation of rising powers, most notably China, in the international order, the events

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[1] Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, 2017).

[2] Chrystia Freeland, "Address by Minister Freeland on Canada's Foreign Policy Priorities," (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 6 June 2017), last modified 12 June 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html.

[3] *Ibid*.

of the past few years revealed that long-established foreign policy precepts could no longer be taken for granted by Canadian policymakers.

As a framing device, the notion of Canada's need to bolster the international order has become a mainstay in the Trudeau government's approach to foreign policy over the past few years. Speaking in Montreal in 2019, Prime Minister Trudeau emphasised that "more and more, countries are turning inward, succumbing to the dangerous lure of populism and excessive nationalism … [resulting in] a more unpredictable and unstable world." [4] Similarly, Freeland's replacement as Foreign Affairs Minister, François-Phillippe Champagne, repeatedly stressed the need for Canada to strengthen the rules-based international order, contending that the order represents the principal means by which Canada is able to contribute to the management of significant global problems like climate change that require coordinated action beyond the level of individual nation-states.[5]

Both within Canada and beyond, the terms "rules-based international order" and "liberal international order" have been used with increasing frequency in recent years by political leaders, foreign policy practitioners, and academics to refer to the mixture of international institutions and arrangements that have flourished (under American leadership) since the end of the Second World War.[6] At the same time, many observers and participants in the foreign policy realm have emphasized the shifting tides of global

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[4] Justin Trudeau, "PM Trudeau Addresses Montreal Council on Foreign Relations," CPAC, 21 August 2019, last accessed 29 March 2021, https://www.cpac.ca/en/programs/headlinepolitics/episodes/66043723/.

[5] For example, François-Phillippe Champagne, "Address by Minister of Foreign Affairs at a Human Rights Conference," (Berlin: Global Affairs Canada, 10 December 2019), last accessed 12 April 2021, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2019/12/address-by-minister-of-foreign-affairs-at-a-human-rights-conference.html.

[6] See, for example, Stephen M. Walt, "China Wants a 'Rules-Based International Order,' Too," *Foreign Policy*, 31 March 2021, last accessed 18 April 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/.

power dynamics, noting in particular the seemingly inexorable rise of China, as threats to

the longstanding dynamics of the post-1945 international order, and especially the

preeminent position of the United States within that order.[7] Facing threats and stresses

emanating both from within its supposed leading nations and from external challengers,

the liberal international order is now generally perceived to be in crisis.[8] That being said,

the nature and consequences of such a crisis are still uncertain at this point.

For Canada to chart a clear course in foreign and defence policy going forward,

the impact of this crisis and potential transformation in the international order is indeed

consequential. As political scientist Andrew Thompson has observed, "as a middle

power living next to the world's only super power, Canada has a huge interest in an

international order based on rules,"[9] but it will be increasingly important for Canada to

articulate which of those rules are the most important to Canada's vision of international

order, and then to determine how best to advocate for and enable that vision.

In recent years, Canada has adopted its rhetorical defence of the rules-based

international order as a core element of its foreign policy while concurrently stressing the

dangers facing that order due to a changing balance of power stemming largely from the

rise of China.[10] Along the way, it seems that Canada has largely adopted language used

by the American and British foreign policy establishments, stressing the need to bolster

an international order in crisis while acknowledging a broad return to an international

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[7] See, for example, Gregory V. Raymond, "Advocating the Rules-Based Order in an Era of Multipolarity," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 3 (2019): 219-226.

[8] Trine Flockhart, "Is this the End? Resilience, Ontological Security, and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order," *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 2 (2020): 215-240.

[9] Andrew S. Thompson, "Canada, Human Rights, and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Journal* 73, no. 2 (2018): 300.

[10] Leigh Sarty, "The Fragile Authoritarians: China, Russia, and Canadian Foreign Policy," *International Journal* 75, no. 4 (2020): 616-617.

environment characterized by strategic competition between states.[11] For instance, within Canada's Department of National Defence, the new *Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept* (PFEC)[12] epitomizes this uneasy tension between reinforcing the rules-based order while preparing for increased state-based competition. In the foreword to the PFEC, the recent and longstanding Chief of the Defence Staff, Jonathan Vance, proclaimed that "Canada and its Allies are in a persistent state of competition with adversaries who use all instruments of national power to undermine the traditional rules-based order."[13] As the Canadian practitioners of foreign and defence policy seek to put such rhetoric into practical effect, it may be worth reflecting on the implications of this emerging discourse surrounding Canada's place in the international order.

As a cautionary tale, Political scientist Gregory Raymond warns that Australia's recent advocacy for the rules-based international order largely adopted US narratives about the order without particular reflection on the potential pitfalls of such a "welding" of language.[14] As he phrases it, "It has … seemed natural to embrace the language of our close ally, security partner, and fellow liberal democracy, the United States … It was easy for Australia to see the world through US eyes, and take up the same outlook."[15] For Canada, similar introspection is necessary to ensure that the country's rhetoric and policy approaches are consistent with core Canadian interests in the long run, rather than unconsciously constructing narratives that minimize potential for Canada to play a meaningful role on the world stage in the future.

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[11] Further detail on the rhetorical strategies of the US and the UK vis-à-vis the international order are explored below in Chapter 2.

[12] Department of National Defence, *Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept: Prevailing in an Uncertain World* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2020).

[13] *Ibid.*, 3.

[14] Raymond, "Advocating the Rules-Based Order," 222.

[15] *Ibid.*

Given the subject's importance to Canadian foreign and defence policy, this paper seeks to probe into recent political and scholarly discourse surrounding the liberal, rules-based international order in the face of perceived challenges. Chapter 2 will survey conceptualizations of liberal international order and its ostensible crisis by international relations theorists. The paper will proceed to explore both material and normative challenges facing the current international order, with an emphasis on discursive and constructivist insights that can shed light on elements of the international environment that may not be otherwise apparent. In so doing, the paper concentrates on high-level political and diplomatic discourse along with official foreign and defence policy documents from the US, the UK, China, and Russia. Chapter 3 highlights recent challenges coming from within the liberal international order's traditional Western sources of leadership of strength, namely by addressing the implications of the Donald Trump presidency in the United States and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. Chapter 4 focuses on challenges emanating from rising and revisionist powers that seek to confront Western dominance, namely China and Russia. In closing, Chapter 5 provides concluding observations and delves into resulting implications for the practice of Canadian foreign and defence policy.

CHAPTER 2

**CONSTRUCTING THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER:
GENESIS AND CONTESTATION**

The concept of a liberal, rules-based international order, popularized in the last

twenty years or so by political scientist and former US State Department analyst G. John

Ikenberry,[16] has become a common framework for understanding the key institutions and

arrangements that shape contemporary global politics in the post-Cold War era. Though

somewhat analytically imprecise and shifting in meaning over time and space, the

concept of the liberal international order has become part of the zeitgeist, especially since

the Donald Trump presidency has led to a growing chorus of voices raising the alarm

about the order's state of existential crisis. The aim of this chapter is to examine how the

liberal international order has been conceptualized by international relations theorists,

and to explore the nature of the current perceived crisis in the international order.

Before exploring discourse surrounding the contestation of the current liberal

international order, its underlying notions must be clarified. The term "international

order," for example, brings to mind two distinct, yet related, concepts: (a) the stability of

relations between states and actors in the international sphere, and (b) the mechanisms by

which interactions between such actors are regulated and influenced.[17] The first concept

represents a normative ideal of stability, implying a general absence of major conflict and

the ability for potentially disruptive actions to addressed and moderated through

somewhat predictable means. The second concept represents the manner in which the

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[16] See, for example, G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[17] Christian Reus-Smit, "Cultural Diversity and International Order," *International Organization* 71 (Fall 2017): 854

normative ideal of stability is achieved, or what international relations theorist Christian

Reus-Smit refers to as "order as an arrangement, not the absence of upheaval."[18]

Historically, various sorts of "international orders" have served to regulate and constrain

the behaviour of nation-states, including regional blocs, balancing between major powers,

hegemonic or hierarchical orders led by dominant states, and the more familiar mixture of

international institutions of various sorts that feature heavily in the contemporary

international order.[19] In practice, most international orders contain elements of these

various categories, so the distinction between them is rarely clear-cut.[20] Nonetheless, an

awareness of the different visions of international order beyond that which is most

familiar is essential to understanding the dynamics of the order in which we find

ourselves at this moment.

     In parsing out the nuances of the phrase "liberal international order," a related

conceptual obscurity presents itself. Attempting to define the liberal international order

in terms of the "order as an arrangement" concept above is fraught not only by the dual

meanings of international order, but also of the myriad and shifting meanings of the term

liberal, even in this particular context. Firstly, when supporters of the contemporary

international order refer to it as "liberal," their usage of the term implies both a normative

and descriptive dimension. To them, it is not just a descriptive fact that the order is

liberal, but it is explicitly a goal. Further, and more generally, in the international sphere

the term liberal has morphed over time from an almost libertarian conception of "freedom

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[18] *Ibid.*

[19] For additional examples of international orders, see Charles Glaser, "A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept is Misguided," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 55. See also Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan.*

[20] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 13-15.

from" political and economic constraints to a notion of a social safety net that enables "freedom to" flourish, to a more recent conception wherein liberal connotes a "toleration of diversity and difference."[21] With these shifting definitions in mind, one could imagine several varieties of international order that may be liberal in some fashion or other. The League of Nations and its Wilsonian idealism offers one example, but when scholars and foreign policy practitioners speak of the liberal international order, they are generally referring to the specific order created at the end of the Second World War.

The postwar order was largely animated by the philosophical tradition of liberal internationalism that persisted from its Wilsonian roots. Its core notion that nation-states can and should cooperate to prevent war and generally advance the welfare of their citizens was premised upon a "belief that constitutional government and the rule of law were principles of universal applicability … [based on] an underlying harmony of real interests"[22] among individuals. This tradition of liberal internationalism also reflected a version of the Kantian democratic peace theory, whereby political and economic openness encouraged the development of democratic norms that would lessen the likelihood that countries would go to war.[23] With the creation of the United Nations, the universalist aims of the League of Nations did not go away, but were rather tempered by a sober realization that dynamics between great powers mattered. As such, the idealistic tenets of liberal internationalism have coexisted in near-constant tension with the

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[21] Marko Lehti and Henna-Riika Pennanen, "Beyond Liberal Empire and Peace: Declining Hegemony of the West?" in *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West In Crisis?* ed. Marki Lehti, Henna-Riikka Pennanen, and Jukka Jouhki (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 30. See also Isaiah Berlin's influential essay in which he distinguished between negative and positive liberty: "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

[22] Chris Brown, "The Promise and Record of International Institutions," *International Relations* 33, no. 2 (2019): 144-145.

[23] Tim Dunne and Matt McDonald, "The Politics of Liberal Internationalism," *International Politics* 50, no. 1 (2013): 2.

principle of state sovereignty (and its corollary, non-intervention) as enshrined in the UN

Charter.

Despite the overall "fuzziness" of the liberal international order in conceptual

terms as noted above, there is still enough commonality in usage of the moniker to save it

from being rendered impractical. Indeed, several observers have delineated a set of

common features to define the specific post-1945 liberal international order. Perhaps the

most wide-ranging is offered by historian and Sandhurst faculty member Ali Parchami,

who defines it as "the open and rule-based international structures enshrined in

multilateralism and multinational institutions and norms."[24] Practically speaking, these

principles are made manifest in the major intergovernmental organizations built in the

aftermath of two world wars and the Great Depression: namely the UN, but also the

Bretton Woods institutions, suggesting that economic liberalism must also be considered

among the core principles of the liberal international order.[25] In addition, most scholars

consider postwar collective security arrangements, specifically NATO, to be core aspects

of the liberal international order.[26] While it must be acknowledged that the shape and

tenor of the liberal international order came to be molded in terms of the bipolar contest

of the Cold War, the original impetus behind its push for political and economic openness

was largely distinct from the ideological divide of the Cold War itself.[27] Nonetheless, the

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[24] Ali Parchami, "Imperial Projections & Crisis: The Liberal International Order as a 'Pseudo-Empire'," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 47, no. 5 (2019): 1044.

[25] Mark Copelovitch, Sara B. Hobolt, and Stefanie Walter, "Challenges to the Contemporary Global Order: Cause for Pessimism or Optimism?" *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 7 (2020): 1114-1115.

[26] Charles L. Glaser, "A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept is Misguided," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 56. See also Guy de Jonquières, "The World Turned Upside Down: The Decline of the Rules-Based International System and the Rise of Authoritarian Nationalism," *International Politics* 54 (2017): 553.

[27] James Goldgeier, "The Misunderstood Roots of International Order—And Why They Matter Again," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2018): 7-8.

powers that played a central role in the creation of the liberal international order generally

came from the American side of the Cold War Divide, and American leadership has been

dominant in the order's evolution through much of the past seventy-five years.[28]

In the years immediately following the end of the Cold War, the advance of the

liberal international order reached something of a summit. After the fall of the Soviet

Union (and with it the ostensible collapse of credible alternatives to the liberal

international order's twin credos of political and economic openness), usage of the phrase

"liberal international order" by scholars and foreign policy practitioners increased

markedly.[29] Furthermore, the term came in the 1990s and early 2000s to include a larger

array of institutions and concepts than ever before, including the European Union, a

swath of international agreements and the emerging Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

humanitarian intervention framework.[30]

Indeed, over time, the liberal international order gradually evolved and expanded

to encompass increasing recognition and representation from those countries that

formerly sat across from the Western side of the Cold War divide.[31] In the process, as

political scientist Guy de Jonquières notes,

> it has contributed in the past 60 odd years to a tenfold real growth in the
> world's GDP and a 16-fold increase in world trade. Hundreds of millions
> of people have been lifted out of poverty—though many of course remain
> poor—while once impoverished or backward economies, such as China,
> Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, have industrialised and risen
> up the development ladder. Meanwhile, many countries have been
> transformed from dictatorships into democracies, albeit often imperfect
> ones. And although there have been numerous regional and local

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[28] de Jonquières, "The World Turned Upside Down," 553.

[29] Lehti and Pennanen, "Beyond Liberal Empire and Peace," 31.

[30] Glaser, "A Flawed Framework," 56.

[31] G. John Ikenberry, "The Liberal International Order and Its Discontents," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2010): 513. See also Paul D. Miller, "Non-'Western' Liberalism and the Resilience of the Liberal International Order," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 137-153.

conflicts, there has, mercifully, been no third world war—so far, at any rate.[32]

The causal mechanisms behind these advances are, of course, multi-layered and complex, given that we cannot simply create a control condition in which the liberal international order does not exist, but they should not on that account simply be discounted. Nonetheless, the practical record of the order is rightly criticized on a number of grounds. Conceptually, as Parchami notes, the contemporary liberal international order is similarly "layered with ambiguities and contradictions,"[33] to the point that many observers have proclaimed that the order itself is facing a crisis.

As we shall see, both the structures and the values of the liberal international order are indeed being challenged, both from within and under threat from external sources.[34] The 2008 financial crash engendered domestic political disillusionment and criticism from both the left and right within the leading states of the liberal international order, contributing to the rise of both populism and authoritarian nationalism.[35] This suspicion of an oft ill-defined "global elite" has manifested itself in the election of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom. Indeed, the rhetoric and actions of populist leaders including Trump have chipped away at the broadly liberal foundations of the international order in both normative and practical terms. Further, many observers and political leaders have acknowledged threats to the international order stemming from a shift in the global balance of power.[36] The rise of

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[32] de Jonquières, "The World Turned Upside Down," 553.

[33] Parchami, "Imperial Projections & Crisis," 1047.

[34] *Ibid*., 1044.

[35] Terry Flew, "Globalization, Neo-Globalization and Post-Globalization: The Challenge of Populism and the Return of the National," *Global Media and Communication* 16, no. 1 (2020): 19-39. See also de Jonquières, "The World Turned Upside Down."

[36] See, for example, Michael J. Boyle, "The Coming Illiberal Order," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 58, no. 2 (2016): 35-66.

China, in economic, diplomatic and military terms, coupled with a revisionist Russia, portends a trial for the existing order, and may herald a turn away from its liberal features and toward renewed great power competition. Set against this backdrop, a number of scholars have recently questioned the conceptual foundations and the political realities of the liberal international order, questioning how liberal, international, or orderly it ever was.[37] As a result, a narrative about the crisis in the liberal international order has become commonplace in both academic and policy circles.[38] That being said, whether this moment is a true crisis of the liberal international order itself, or rather simply a crisis of American hegemony, needs to be explored.

As noted above, over the past twenty years or so, perhaps the most influential account of the contemporary international order has been offered by Ikenberry.[39] Starting with a pivotal 1999 article he co-authored with Daniel Deudney,[40] Ikenberry has published numerous articles and scholarly monographs that have articulated and refined his conception of the liberal international order. Overall, Ikenberry is relatively positive about the record and future prospects for the post-1945 order, and indeed may be considered not only the principal theorist of the order, but also one of its principal advocates. Given his influence in recent discourse on the topic, it is worth surveying and contextualizing his contributions to the debate.

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[37] Parchami, "Imperial Projections & Crisis," 1046-1047. See also James Goldgeier, "The Misunderstood Roots of International Order," 7.

[38] Brown, "The Promise and Record of International Institutions," 148.

[39] Reus-Smit, for example, notes that Ikenberry "advances the most thoroughly elaborated liberal account of the post-1945 global international order." Reus-Smit, "Cultural Diversity and International Order," 870.

[40] Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 179-196.

Broadly speaking, Ikenberry approaches the topic of international order from a liberal institutionalist perspective.[41] While recognizing the role that power dynamics and ideas shape the behaviours of states, Ikenberry focuses on the manner in which the liberal international order has been able to constrain the behaviour of states, shaping decisions and actions that could not simply be explained by power politics.[42] Unlike classical or structural realist international relations theorists, Ikenberry and other liberal institutionalists posit that states will cooperate and interact peacefully if it is in their interests to do so, provided that they are supported by appropriate institutions. Indeed, his approach shares the core concepts of mainstream liberal institutionalism: it comes from a fundamentally rationalist and positivist epistemology, it is predominantly focused on states as the most important actors in global affairs, and it is generally hopeful about the potential for institutions to enable cooperation and overcome dangerous tendencies of anarchy in the international sphere.[43] Further, like prominent liberal institutionalists Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Ikenberry's perspective accepts that state actions are shaped by both international and domestic politics, unlike many realist theorists whose theoretical parsimony portrays states as "black boxes" motivated by material interests.[44] Importantly, however, Ikenberry's approach is not as optimistic as liberal peace theory or Wilsonian idealism, as he takes power dynamics to be a critical motivator of state behaviour,[45] but his outlook is generally sanguine.

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[41] Reus-Smit, "Cultural Diversity and International Order," 871.

[42] Orfeo Fioretos, "The Syncopated History of the Liberal International Order," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2019): 21.

[43] Denise de Buck and Madeleine O. Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," in *The Changing Global Order* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020), 4-6, 11-13.

[44] *Ibid*., 12-13.

[45] Reus-Smit, "Cultural Diversity and International Order," 871.

In their 1999 article, Deudney and Ikenberry describe the post-1945 liberal international order, and make efforts to explain its durability and ongoing relevance after the fall of the Soviet Union. Given the previous failure of either mainstream realist or liberal international relations theories to predict or adequately explain the end of the Cold War, Deudney and Ikenberry delineate a series of structural aspects of the liberal international order that illuminate its endurance to the end of the twentieth century. They outline five such characteristics: security co-binding, American "reciprocal" hegemony, semi-sovereign and partial great powers (namely the unique roles of Germany and Japan), economic openness, and civic identity.[46]

Over time, as Ikenberry has further articulated his understanding of the liberal international order into the twenty-first century, his original emphasis on Germany and Japan has subsided, and his attention has shifted focus to the rise of China and resurgence of Russia amidst perceived internal crises in the liberal international order.[47] In the process, Ikenberry's definition of the order has loosened to comprise the triad of "openness, rules, [and] multilateral cooperation."[48] Importantly, this definition decreases the explicit emphasis on perceived Western understandings of economic and political liberalism while creating discursive space for compromise with non-Western notions of a rules-based order that privileges other core features like sovereignty and stability. With this more cautious and inclusive definition in mind, Ikenberry is confident that the core of the liberal international order is capable of withstanding both internal and external

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[46] Deudney and Ikenberry, "Nature and Sources," 181.

[47] See, for example, Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, and G. John Ikenberry, "The Liberal International Order and its Discontents," *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (2010): 509-521.

[48] G. John Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive," *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 18.

threats. Rather, the "relatively open and loosely rule-based" liberal international order

will be able to adapt and incorporate rising powers rather than being displaced by them.[49]

Any crisis of the liberal international order, in Ikenberry's assessment, is associated with

the declining authority and leadership of the United States within the order, rather than of

the order itself.[50]

　　　　While Ikenberry's account of the importance and durability of the liberal

international order is comprehensive, it is by no means universally accepted by

international relations theorists. Advocates of realism, arguably the dominant strain of

international relations theory during the course of the twentieth century,[51] continue to

advance alternative explanations for state behaviour, particularly in light of evident recent

decline in American power relative to China and other rising powers. At its core, realism

views states as "rational actors that aim to maximize their power to increase their chances

of survival."[52] Early classical realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, saw the origins of state-

based conflict in human nature, whereas later neorealists saw state behaviour as being

driven by the structural features of an international arena that resembles the Hobbesian

state of nature, wherein there is no higher arbiter than the nation state itself.[53] Like

liberal institutionalism, its mainstream theoretical alternative, realism shares a desire to

rationally explain (and even predict) state behaviour through a positivist epistemology

and a statist perspective. Unlike liberals, who stress the absolute gains that can be

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[49] Ikenberry, "The Liberal International Order and its Discontents," 514.

[50] Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, xii.

[51] Tim Dunne and Brian C. Schmidt, "Realism," in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 2nd ed., ed. John Baylis and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 142.

[52] de Buck and Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," 6.

[53] *Ibid*., 6-8.

realized through cooperation, realist approaches tend to emphasize relative power between states, and see competition as largely a zero-sum game.[54]

In terms of more recent variants of realism and their approaches to international order, two schools of thought stand out. Offensive realists, such as John Mearsheimer, contend that states are best served by seeking to maximize their power.[55] To offensive realists, institutions—such as the liberal international order as a whole—are essentially reflections and manifestations of (pre-existing) power dynamics.[56] Rather than constraining state behaviour, international institutions simply mask what really matters: the material interests of states irrespective of the rhetorical cover of multilateralism.[57] Offensive realists thus caution against believing that institutions can truly constrain state behaviour. As a result, the liberal international order is inherently suspect.

To defensive realists like Kenneth Waltz, on the other hand, states are best served by pursuing "an appropriate amount of power"[58] to prevent other states from balancing against them out of fear of their relative disparities in material capabilities.[59] Cooperation between states, then, can arise from the self-interested and defensive decision by a state based on its rational assessment of material factors rather than due to institutional or normative constraints emanating from the liberal international order.[60] To both camps of realist theorists, however, the notion of the balance of power is central, as is the concept

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[54] de Buck and Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," 7.

[55] *Ibid.*, 10.

[56] John M. Owen, "Ikenberry, International Relations Theory, and the Rise of China," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 21, no. 1 (2019): 57.

[57] John Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 5-49.

[58] Quoted in de Buck and Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," 10.

[59] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Relations* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[60] For a further articulation of this defensive realist line of argument, see Glaser, "A Flawed Framework."

of polarity. The unipolar moment of relatively uncontested American hegemony following the end of the Cold War, in this light, enabled the concept of the liberal international order to flourish similarly. The transition to a bi- or multi-polar world means that standard assumptions about this contemporary order should be challenged. The rise of China in particular is thus seen (in terms of balancing or power maximization) as a major, perhaps even existential, threat to the major Western powers within what is referred to as the liberal international order. As a result, as realists such as Charles Glaser have noted, scholarly and political focus has "shifted sharply to the return of major power competition."[61]

In general, both realist and liberal institutional approaches to international relations theories have been criticized for failing to take into account the importance of ideas in the shaping of state behaviour. As political scientist Christof Royer phrases it, "many scholars found (and some still find) it difficult to accept the idea that the *social* science of IR is about *social* relations."[62] Since the early 1990s, however, a growing number of scholars of international relations have sought to rectify this deficiency. Social constructivists, first among them Alexander Wendt, have sought to emphasize how world politics surrounds the interpretation of social facts. To constructivists, repeated interactions between actors and contexts (e.g., states and the liberal international order) shape and reshape perceptions and give meaning both the actors and the contexts in which they operate.[63] The existence of anarchy, for example, is not taken for granted. Rather, if states act and communicate in a certain way because of how they understand

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[61] Glaser, "A Flawed Framework," 51.

[62] Christof Royer, "On World Order and Opportunities Not to Be Wasted." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* (2020): 7.

[63] de Buck and Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," 16.

the concept of anarchy, their action and communication serve to reinforce such understandings of anarchy as a concept with causative power. As other states reinforce similar understandings through words and actions, norms develop surrounding state behaviour in conditions of anarchy. Thus, as Wendt's influential 1992 article famously phrased it, "anarchy is what states make of it."[64]

Similarly, the power of the liberal international order to shape the behaviour of states and other actors is based upon how the various elements of such an order are understood. While actions supporting a liberal international order can reinforce the normative power of the order, the opposite also holds true. As such, the conceptual foundations of the liberal international order can be placed at risk when its erstwhile defenders—namely the United States and the United Kingdom—act in ways that are contrary to the rules and norms of the order. As Copelovitch, Hobolt and Walter note, "[u]nilateral refusals to comply with core norms of international institutions are dangerous, because they can fundamentally undermine both the specific institution in question *and* the broader principle of inclusive, rule-based multilateralism."[65] Further, they note that such actions pose an associated risk of what they term "political contagion": when influential actors turn their back on self-restraint and cooperation, others often follow suit.[66]

Building on core constructivist insights, Christian Reus-Smit has analyzed the manner in which theorists of the liberal international order have attempted (or not) to

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[64] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is what States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391-425.

[65] Copelovitch, Hobolt, and Walter, "Challenges to the Contemporary Global Order," 1120.

[66] *Ibid.*, 1120-1121.

address the question of culture.[67] According to Reus-Smit, traditional understandings of

international orders oversimplify the inherent cultural diversity of the contexts in which

they are created and interpreted.[68] In actuality, international orders involve the creation

of "diversity regimes" to define the types of political and cultural difference—both within

and between states and other actors—that are recognized and legitimized by the order to

accommodate change.[69] Reus-Smit marshals this line of reasoning to criticize

mainstream scholarly and political understandings of international order for being based

too heavily upon state sovereignty as the overriding norm, given that "multiple units of

authority" combine to shape the actions and identities of states and other actors through

an iterative process of contestation.[70]

　　According to Reus-Smit, the stability and utility of an international order is based

upon its perceived legitimacy,[71] which is itself a product of the mutually constitutive

interaction of material and ideational factors.[72] Addressing the perceived crisis in the

contemporary liberal international order, Reus-Smit concludes that the order is struggling

with a crisis of legitimacy due to deep-seated material and cultural anxiety. In particular,

a latent fear of rising non-Western (and particularly Chinese) influence serves to animate

this social construction of crisis in the liberal international order.[73]

　　As an attempt to delve into the complex relationship between the material and the

ideational in the international sphere, social constructivism arose in response to some of

the perceived failings of the dominant international relations theories to adequately

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[67] Reus-Smit, "Cultural Diversity and International Order."
[68] *Ibid*., 853.
[69] *Ibid*., 854.
[70] *Ibid*., 855-856.
[71] *Ibid*., 874.
[72] *Ibid*., 878.
[73] *Ibid*., 880-881.

consider the nuances of global political interactions. In doing so, has offered a potent

critique of the materialism and state-centricity of both liberalism and realism, and opened

up new avenues for research. As political scientists Denise de Buck and Madeleine Hosli

observe, the contributions of its proponents have become influential enough within

international relations theory that social constructivism may now be described as the third

mainstream theoretical approach to international relations.[74] Indeed, even Ikenberry's

broadly liberal institutionalist account, particularly in his treatment of policy feedback

between institutions and actors, embraces some of constructivism's core insights, albeit

with emphasis on the practical elements of interaction rather than the symbolic.[75]

In addition to social constructivism, scholars from a wide variety of critical

perspectives have levelled compelling analyses of various aspects of the liberal

international order. While the term "critical theory" is sometimes used as a catch-all to

encompass these perspectives, they share few commonalities aside from a rejection of the

universalist and teleological claims of mainstream IR theories, specifically liberalism and

realism.[76] Perhaps the most notable critical theorist is Robert Cox, whose insight that

"theory is always for someone and some purpose"[77] has been influential in challenging

taken-for-granted assumptions of mainstream concepts and institutions. Along these

lines, as political scientist Nathan Andrews notes, a perspective that might be categorized

as critical "stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order

came about," often with explicit activist aims.[78] Postmodern critics of liberal

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[74] de Buck and Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," 5.

[75] Fioretos, "The Syncopated History of the Liberal International Order," 23.

[76] Nathan Andrews, "Beyond the Ivory Tower: A Case for 'Praxeological Deconstructionism' as a 'Third Way' in IR Theorising," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2013): 59-76.

[77] Robert Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." Millenium: Journal of International Studies 10, no. 2 (1981): 128.

[78] Andrews, "Beyond the Ivory Tower," 61.

international order, for example, "seek to unmask putatively emancipatory grand

narratives as oppressive, and believe truth itself is a mask for power."[79] The paradigms

of political and economic openness, and their corollaries of capitalism, human rights, and

democracy, are thus to be viewed with deep suspicion. Along these lines, Jeff Noonan

has described the current ostensible crisis of the "liberal-capitalist global order" as a

crisis of "liberal hypocrisy" borne of the order's "underlying systemic contradictions."[80]

From slightly different standpoints, postcolonial theorists have roundly criticized

the concept of the liberal international order for being Eurocentric.[81] On this point

Vivienne Jabri suggests, it is not only the specific concept of the liberal international

order, but rather the general concept of "the international" that should be challenged from

a postcolonial perspective.[82] While some observers suggest that the liberal international

order's resilience in the face of challenges from states that were previously on the

periphery of world politics stems from the order's inherent pluralism and ability to

incorporate non-Western voices,[83] Jabri is skeptical. Jabri instead stresses that the

meaning of the "international" should be seen as a product of normative "contestations

and power relations."[84] As such, while there is potential postcolonial agency to be found

in the feedback loop between postcolonial "subjects" and the normative framework of the

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[79] Indraneel Baruah and Joren Selleslaghs, "Alternative Post-Positivist Theories of IR and the Quest for a Global IR Scholarship," in *The Changing Global Order*, ed. Madeleine O. Hosli and Joren Selleslaghs (Cham: Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020), 33.

[80] Noonan, "Trump and the Liberal International Order," 183-184.

[81] James McCormick and Gerald Schmitz, "Meeting the Challenge of 'America First' and the New Nationalism," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 26, no. 2 (2020): 115.

[82] Vivienne Jabri, "Disarming Norms: Postcolonial Agency and the Constitution of the International," *International Theory* 6, no. 2 (July 2014): 373-376.

[83] For example, Miller, "Non-'Western' Liberalism and the Resilience of the Liberal International Order."

[84] Jabri, "Disarming Norms," 376.

international, it is also important to avoid mistaking such pluralism for an inevitable march of the "struggles of subject peoples for individual rights."[85]

Non-Western states are indeed playing an increasing role in the formal institutions of the liberal international order, which provides some indication of its potential going forward. Nevertheless, there is still fundamental tension between the supposed ideals of the post-1945 order and of the relative lack of political and economic openness of these rising non-Western states that have come to shoulder more of the burden of supporting the contemporary international order. While the recognition of subjectivity and "respect for difference"[86] inherent in postmodern and postcolonial approaches to the liberal international order offer greater insights into the cleavages in the order, political scientists Indraneel Baruah and Joren Selleslaghs caution that "in its extreme, postmodernism can also often deteriorate into nihilism."[87] Nonetheless, by interpreting and re-interpreting dominant (Western) understandings of the international order, these critiques serve to re-shape the meaning and potential of international order itself. Rather than simply allowing voices of the global South to be heard in international fora, this normative contestation demonstrates a potential for pluralist and diverse transformation of a formerly monolithic understanding of international order.

As political scientist Michael J. Boyle has observed, a shift in the balance of power brought about by the rise of China poses challenges to the normative foundation of the liberal international order (in addition to being an obstacle to continued US predominance).[88] Eschewing the arguments of Ikenberry, Boyle suggests that as power

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[85] *Ibid*., 378-379.
[86] Baruah and Selleslaghs, "Alternative Post-Positivist Theories of IR," 33.
[87] *Ibid*., 34.
[88] Boyle, "The Coming Illiberal Order."

dynamics shift, "the key concepts of the liberal order … will be contested or reimagined by illiberal states with different interests."[89] Turning the insight of Mearsheimer—that institutions reflect power dynamics—on its head, Boyle posits that in the coming years, competition both within and external to the liberal international order will increase,[90] threatening both the hegemonic position of the United States and shape of the liberal international order itself. In this light, recent attempts to expand elements of the liberal international order and its myriad institutions (specifically the extension of Western influence in Eastern Europe through NATO expansion in the 1990s) may be seen as counterproductive. Nonetheless, the contestation of its core concepts and ideas can indeed be consequential for the liberal international order.

Despite significant stresses and seismic shifts in geopolitics, the liberal international order has endured. Since its formation in the 1940s, it has survived several periods of crisis, and indeed "[i]n every decade since the 1950s, we have seen a series of major institutional failures" on issues ranging from the demise of the gold standard under Bretton Woods to the periodic failure of the UN to address security dilemmas including the Vietnam War.[91] As such, the liberal international order has indeed proven resilient, as Ikenberry has repeatedly observed.[92] Nonetheless, the numerous challenges currently confronting the order are indeed substantial. While the core institutions of the liberal international order may yet endure, it is clear, as Ikenberry suggests, that American hegemonic leadership of the order is increasingly fraught. Yet the current crisis is not only a crisis about the role of the United States; rather, it is perhaps a deeper crisis of

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[89] *Ibid.*, 40.
[90] *Ibid.*, 43.
[91] Copelovitch, Hobolt, and Walter, "Challenges to the Contemporary Global Order," 1123.
[92] For example, Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive."

legitimacy, as the various actors involved in the liberal international order struggle with normative contestation over the meaning of the order and its core concepts.[93] Beyond normative contestation, it may even turn into a war of ideas between, as Parchami phrases it, "the liberal community and non-liberal states"[94] seeking to challenge the liberal international order in both theory and practice, all the while set against a backdrop of deep domestic fissures within countries that serve as notional leaders of the order.

In the face of such a crisis, Royer reminds us that crisis does not necessarily denote catastrophe. Instead, "throughout human history, 'crisis' has described an important turning point, one that requires discernment,"[95] and that can provide the impetus for positive change. In this case, the states that have traditionally led and supported the liberal international order may have an opportunity to ensure that the main tenets underlying the order are not diluted to the point of impotence. Instead, as Royer suggests, there may be an opportunity for the specific norms of pluralism and diversity—and the associated requirement for political openness and freedom—to be redoubled at the core of the liberal international order's constellation of institutions and values.[96]

The path forward is not clear, but the tensions pulling at the liberal international order may represent an opportunity for evolution. Those seeking to preserve the core of the order will need to be clear about what elements of it are most worth keeping. An international order based loosely upon rules and a strengthened norm of state sovereignty, but lacking a focus on economic or democratic openness, may not be the type of order that the traditional advocates of the post-1945 system will wish to defend.

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[93] Parchami, "Imperial Projections & Crisis," 1055.
[94] *Ibid*., 1054.
[95] Royer, "On World Order," 16.
[96] *Ibid*.

CHAPTER 3

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN INWARD TURN:
CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATIONS OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

In the 1940s, cooperation between the United Kingdom and the United States was

pivotal to the establishment of the institutions, rules, and norms that would come to

constitute the core of the liberal international order.[97] In particular, the signing of the

Atlantic Charter by Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941, with its

focus on sovereignty, self-determination, freedom of the seas and economic

liberalization, has been described by Robert G. Patman as a forerunner of the post-War

order.[98] In the last five years, however, seismic events in both countries have rattled

international confidence in the sorts of multilateralism underpinning the liberal

international order. Both the election of Donald Trump as US President on a platform of

"America First" and the Brexit referendum decision for the UK to remove itself from the

European Union signaled that the commitment of the traditional leaders of the liberal

international order was no longer unreserved. Thus, by 2016, policymakers in both the

US and the UK had become either unwilling or unable to support and lead the system

they had built and from which they both had benefitted significantly over many decades.

These incidents stemmed at least in part from a broader undercurrent of popular

resistance, which was mobilized in populist fashion by both Trump and the proponents of

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[97] Rex Li, "Contending Narratives of the International Order: US/Chinese Discursive Power and Its Effects on the UK," *Asian Perspective* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 367.

[98] Robert G. Patman, "The Liberal International Order and Its Populist Adversaries in Russia, UK and USA," in *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*, ed. Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald, and Dirk Nabers (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019): 279.

Brexit, in a narrative that positioned "the people" against powerful "elite" adversaries.[99]

At the same time, they cannot be understood without reference to a backdrop of changing

global power dynamics. The interplay between the narrative and material factors at play

here is critical. This chapter thus seeks to explore the symbolism and significance of both

Trump and Brexit in order to comprehend the endogenous practical and discursive

challenges facing the liberal international order, emanating from within its Anglo-

American foundations.

Trump and US Withdrawal from (Leadership of) the International Order

After over a half-century of preeminence in most international institutions,

American leadership of the liberal international order became almost an article of faith

for the US foreign policy establishment prior to the disruption of "elite consensus"

caused by the election of Donald Trump as President.[100] Trump's approach to foreign

policy, variously described as rhetorically bombastic,[101] populist,[102] mercantilist,[103]

nationalist,[104] xenophobic,[105] transactional,[106] zero-sum,[107] and even authoritarian,[108] has

without question been disruptive to the status quo both for the United States and for the

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[99] Flew, "Globalization, Neo-Globalization and Post-Globalization," 19-20, 31; Rubrick Biegon, "A Populist Grand Strategy? Trump and the Framing of American Decline," *International Relations* 33, no. 4 (2019): 518-520.

[100] Georg Löfflmann, "America First and the Populist Impact on US Foreign Policy," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 61, no. 6 (December 2019-January 2020): 600.

[101] Rodger A. Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda, and the Western Security Community," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 26, no. 2 (2020): 125.

[102] Biegon, "A Populist Grand Strategy,"; Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 121.

[103] Andrzej Mania and Tomasz Pugacewicw, "Confronting the International Order: Changes in US Foreign Policy from the Perspective of American Power Elites," *International Studies* 23, no. 1 (2019): 19; Biegon, "A Populist Grand Strategy," 533.

[104] Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 121.

[105] Löfflmann, "America First," 116.

[106] Michael Magcamit, "Explaining the Three-Way Linkage between Populism, Securitization, and Realist Foreign Policies," *World Affairs* 180, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 17; Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 122.

[107] Caroline Fehl and Johannes Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispensable Nation? Multilateralism Minus One in the Trump Era," *Global Governance* 25 (2019): 24.

[108] de Jonquières, "The World Turned Upside Down," 555-556.

liberal international order. In mobilizing lingering discontent with the perceived unfairness of the global trading system in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Trump was not *sui generis*, and was perhaps more a "rhetorical accelerator" of existing populist trends as opposed to an entirely new political phenomenon.[109] Nonetheless, in both style and substance, the Trump administration has come to epitomize a disavowal of the general ideals of cooperation and diplomacy underwriting the post-1945 order.[110]

From early on in his campaign to become US President, Donald Trump launched a series of scathing attacks on the liberal international order, claiming in April 2016 that a Trump administration would "no longer surrender this country, or its people, to the false song of globalism."[111] In his inaugural address, the newly minted president continued similar refrains, promising that "American will start winning again, winning like never before."[112] Even after being elected, Trump regularly hurled invectives against traditional US allies, once referring to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as "dishonest" and "weak" after a G7 meeting.[113] Famously, Trump considered the United States to be unfairly shouldering the financial burden of NATO, and declared early in his presidency that he considered the alliance to be "obsolete."[114] While intentional or

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[109] Löfflmann, "America First," 117.

[110] These themes were earlier developed in S.P. Brosha, "Canada After America First: Making Sense of the U.S. Withdrawal from the Rules-Based International Order" (Joint Command and Staff Programme Course Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2020).

[111] Donald Trump, "Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech," *The New York Times*, 28 April 2016, last accessed 6 April 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html.

[112] Donald Trump, "Inaugural Address," 20 January 2017, last accessed 6 April 2021, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/.

[113] Damien Paletta and Joel Achenbach, "Trump Accuses Canadian Leader of being 'Dishonest' and 'Weak,'" *The Washington Post*, 10 June 2018, last accessed 6 April 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-canada-to-show-north-korea-hes-strong-aide-says/2018/06/10/afc16c0c-6cba-11e8-bd50-b80389a4e569_story.html.

[114] James Sperling and Mark Webber, "Trump's Foreign Policy and NATO: Exit and Voice," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 3 (2019): 523.

unintentional bureaucratic inertia sometimes mitigated the seeming impulsiveness of

Trump's policies in realms such as defence,[115] the cumulative impact of his often caustic

rhetoric has helped to shape an overarching narrative about an international order that

was seemingly no longer serving US interests.

Drawing upon the insights of social constructivism and discourse analysis, several

scholars have recently arrived upon provocative conclusions about Donald Trump's

rhetorical strategies. Trump's language in the diplomatic realm has been described as

being "hyperbole well beyond the standard in international negotiations,"[116] but he was

nonetheless able to garner support for his "Make America Great Again" slogan by

rallying populist discontent and crafting narratives surrounding the notion of American

decline.[117] Consistently portraying the United States as the victim of unfairness on the

part of other countries, Trump relied upon perpetual "themes of fear and crisis to

mobilise his supporters, rather than emphasize the successes of his administration."[118]

During the years of the Trump administration, the language of several key foreign

and defence policy documents was altered considerably from that of previous

administrations. Following the multilateral exuberance of the administrations of both

Bush the elder and Bill Clinton,[119] the George W. Bush administration was rather marked

by what Caroline Fehl and Johannes Thimm have termed an "embrace of aggressive

unilateralism."[120] The 2006 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), written while the US was

embroiled in conflict in both Iraq and Afghanistan, professed a commitment to

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[115] Löfflmann, "America First," 123.
[116] Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 125.
[117] Biegon, "A Populist Grand Strategy."
[118] Jonny Hall, "In Search of Enemies: Donald Trump's Populist Foreign Policy Rhetoric," *Politics* 41, no. 1 (February 2021): 49.
[119] Fehl and Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispensable Nation," 27.
[120] *Ibid*.

"leadership over isolationism."[121] However, its legacy must also be viewed in light of its

program of democratization that emphasized and manifested itself in a highly assertive

promotion of freedom and democracy abroad. Barack Obama's 2010 NSS shifts away

from this democratization agenda, recognizing that shifting global power dynamics were

starting to place strain on "the international architecture of the 20th century" while

concurrently affirming a desire for the United States "to lead once more."[122] By 2015,

Obama's next NSS is direct in its assertion that "America must lead. Strong and sustained

American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order that promotes global

security and prosperity as well as the dignity and human rights of all peoples."[123] Indeed,

the document goes on to stress that the United States must "embrace [its] responsibilities

for underwriting international security."[124]

Trump's 2017 NSS, on the other hand, is framed almost entirely in terms of

threats that require the United States to "compete continuously."[125] Presenting the United

States as existing in an "unfair" and "extraordinarily dangerous world," it stresses that the

priority for the United States should be "defending America's sovereignty without

apology."[126] The Trump NSS thus sets the stage for the Trump administration's 2018

National Defense Strategy Summary (NDSS), which underlines "long term strategic

competitions with China and Russia" as "the principal priorities" facing the US

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[121] United States of America, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, March 2006).

[122] United States of America, *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, May 2010).

[123] United States of America, *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, February 2015).

[124] *Ibid*.

[125] United States of America, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, 2017).

[126] *Ibid*.

Department of Defense going forward.[127] Taken together, the 2017 NSS and 2018 NDSS

mark a significant break from the established discursive practice of post-Cold War US

presidential administrations.

In articulating such a vision of a country surrounded by threats and competitors in

a world of anarchy, Trump ended up constructing his rhetoric in starkly realist terms.[128]

It should be cautioned, however, that Trump's renunciation of a multilateral world order

based on liberal values in favour of a more confrontational understanding of state

survival in an anarchic international system may have indirectly advanced Russian and

Chinese aspirations for a world order based on Westphalian sovereignty and spheres of

influence.[129] Though Trump's eschewal of moralistic leadership has certainly appealed

to some realists, his lack of discernment between allies and competitors renders it

difficult to perceive a coherent or principled "realist" vision underpinning the rhetoric

and actions his administration in terms of foreign policy.[130]

While in office, Donald Trump not only launched repeated verbal assaults on the

liberal international order; rather, his administration undertook a number of practical

steps to cement a broad US withdrawal from multilateralism.[131] His administration made

good on promises to renege on a number of preexisting US commitments, ranging from

backing out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran (also known

as the Iran Nuclear Deal),[132] to withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on climate

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[127] United States of America, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2018).

[128] Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 127; Löfflmann, "America First," 121-122, 127.

[129] Löfflmann, "America First," 122.

[130] *Ibid*., 127; see also Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 129-130.

[131] Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 122.

[132] Löfflmann, "America First," 121.

change,[133] to pulling the US out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade deal that was intended to constrain China.[134]   In addition, Trump kicked off trade wars with both adversaries and allies alike, including the imposition of tariffs on Canadian aluminum based upon spurious national security grounds.[135] While some of these actions have already been reversed by the Biden administration, a more lasting American shift toward a more competition-based approach to foreign affairs may persist well into the future.

The cumulative effects of Trump's words and actions on the global stage may well endure long after the Trump administration's policies remain in effect. As Rodger Payne has observed, many longstanding allies are no longer considering the US to be a reliable partner, and the shift to a new administration will not restore trust overnight.[136] Notably, a former German Ambassador to the United States recently declared in relation to the Trump era that "the world of yesterday is history and … there will be no return to the status quo ante."[137] Indeed, a number of international partners have already begun hedging their bets, not only in terms of their relations with the United States but with the liberal international order in general.[138] Accordingly, the four short years of Trump's presidency have accelerated an emerging global preference for limited and issue-specific bilateralism as opposed to comprehensive multilateral agreements and alliances.[139] Such

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[133] Fehl and Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispensable Nation," 33.

[134] Derek H. Burney, "Canada-US Relations: No Longer Special or Privileged," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 50, no. 1 (2020): 129.

[135] *Ibid*., 36; Löfflmann, "America First," 120.

[136] Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 126.

[137] Peter Wittig, "Hope for the Future of American Leadership Dies Hard," *Foreign Affairs,* 16 October 2020, last accessed 9 April 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2020-10-16/hope-future-american-leadership-dies-hard.

[138] Löfflmann, "America First," 125.

[139] Fehl and Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispensable Nation," 26.

"fragmentation" of the liberal international order has the follow-on consequence of empowering potential challengers of the order, including and especially China.[140]

It is against such a backdrop that the 2020 election of Joe Biden must be considered.   Given his role as Obama's Vice President, Biden's recent proclamation that "America is back" and ready to "repair … alliances and engage with the world once again"[141] after four years of Trump's aggressive approach to foreign affairs is hardly surprising.   That being said, the initial months of the Biden administration suggest that a smooth return to an Obama-era posture is unlikely. Following through on a campaign promise, Biden has issued an executive order doubling down on Trump-era "Buy American" policies,[142] signaling an ongoing reticence to embrace fully free and open trade. Furthermore, Biden has stressed the need "to get tough with China."[143] Perhaps more significantly, the Biden administration seems to have internalized some Trump-era language about a broad shift to a competition mindset in foreign affairs.

This competition-based linguistic shift is exemplified in the administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, released in March 2021.[144] The document uses a mixture of both realist and liberal internationalist language to portray the position of the United States in global politics. From a realist perspective, it highlights a changing balance of power and renewed inter-state competition, paying particular attention to the

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[140] *Ibid.*, 39.

[141] Joseph Biden, Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World (Washington: The White House, 4 February 2021), last accessed 8 April 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/.

[142] *Ibid.*

[143] Biden, Joseph. "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2020), last accessed 8 April 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again.

[144] United States of America, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance: March 2021*. Washington: The White House, 2021.

need to "prevail in strategic competition"[145] with a "more assertive" China and

"disruptive" Russia.[146] On the other hand, it expresses support for the liberal notion that

the United States should "lead and sustain a stable and open international system,

underwritten by strong democratic alliances, partnerships, multilateral institutions, and

rules."[147] While it may appear that this new guidance harkens back to the democracy

promotion agenda of the 2006 Bush-era NSS, it is not directly concerned with

democratization, per se. Rather, Biden's goal appears to involve courting and

consolidating support from established democratic countries in the Global South[148] in

favour of a US vision of international order as opposed to a less democratic alternative.

On the whole, the broad undercurrents that enabled the rise of Donald Trump,

namely the substantial domestic political divisions and related simmering mistrust of

elites that have provided fertile ground for populist nationalism, have certainly not

evaporated with the termination of Trump's term in office.[149] If the tumultuous transfer

of power was any indication, these deep rifts will continue to shape US politics, and will

likely divert US political attention inward for the time being. Concurrently, the

weakening and fragmentation of the liberal international order—exacerbated by US

withdrawal under Trump—hangs in the air, without a clear way forward. While this

moment of upheaval has created opportunities for transformation, it is not without its

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[145] *Ibid.*, 20.
[146] *Ibid.*, 8.
[147] *Ibid.*, 9.
[148] Indeed, Biden's 2020 article in *Foreign Affairs* highlights India and Indonesia along with democracies in Latin America and Africa as candidates for inclusion into his model of a "broader network of democracies." Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again."
[149] McCormick and Schmitz, "Meeting the Challenge," 115.

risks, for the United States and its allies along with the future of the liberal international order itself.[150]

Brexit and 'Global Britain' in a Contested International Order

Beyond simply acknowledging its role as one of the founding nations of the post-1945 liberal international order, in British foreign policy over the years, much has been made of the United Kingdom's role as a leader of that order.[151] Building on Churchill's famous doctrine of the "Three Circles," whereby British power and influence on the world stage is magnified by its unique position "at the intersection of transatlantic relations, the European order and [what became] the Commonwealth,"[152] the idea of the UK as a power broker within the liberal international order has formed part of British national identity for much of the past seventy years.[153] Indeed, as David Blagden observes, "since 1945, Britain has remained obsessed with performing the social role – and maintaining the associated status – of 'great power,'"[154] whether or not its material capabilities matched up to others in the great power club.

The privileged international position of the UK may be part holdover from its imperial past and part the product of its position as one of the victors of the Second World War, but deserved or not, the UK has leveraged its position into a continued role of outsized influence.[155] During the Cold War, the UK was able to capitalize on its

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[150] Fehl and Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispendable Nation," 40-41; see also Payne, "Canada, the America First Agenda," 129, regarding the risks Trump has posed to NATO and the "Western Security Community" writ large.

[151] Andrea Pareschi, "At a Crossroads or Business as Usual? British Foreign Policy and the International Order in the Wake of Brexit-Trump," *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 119.

[152] Michael Smith, "The European Union and the Global Arena: In Search of Post-Brexit Roles," *Politics and Governance* 7, no. 3 (2019): 84.

[153] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 118-120.

[154] David Blagden, "Power, Polarity, and Prudence: The Ambiguities and Implications of UK Discourse on a Multipolar International System," *Defence Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019): 217.

[155] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 136.

"special relationship" with Washington as a transatlantic bridge to the NATO alliance in countering the Soviet Union, and more generally the UK's "embeddedness" in the liberal international order "has consistently allowed the country to 'punch above its weight.'"[156] In this light, Britain's gradual accretion into the European Union may be seen as something of a logical extension of its efforts to guide the levers of power in a grand and cosmopolitan liberal internationalist project.[157] Indeed, the UK has consistently emphasized its global leadership role as it has sought to retain its status and profits as a beneficiary of the "club goods provided by the Western hegemonic order that US unipolarity delivered after the Cold War."[158]

In recent years, British support for the post-1945 order has become direct and unequivocal.[159] Coming on the heels of Russia's annexation of Crimea and less than a year before the Brexit vote, in 2015 the UK released its *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR).[160] While clear in its defence of the sanctity of the "rules-based international order," its language signaled that the "happy illusion" of liberal ascendancy and humanitarianism following the end of the Cold War had been shattered.[161] Like the Obama NSS published earlier that year, the SDSR outlined an explicit goal of helping to "strengthen the rules-based international order and its institutions"[162] against a "re-emergence of state-based threats."[163] For a country that reaped the benefits of its privileged position in the liberal international order for many

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[156] *Ibid*.
[157] Goldgeier, "The Misunderstood Roots of International Order," 14.
[158] Blagden, "Power, Polarity, and Prudence," 210.
[159] Li, "Contending Narratives," 368.
[160] United Kingdom, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom* (London: HM Government, November 2015); hereafter *SDSR*.
[161] Blagden, "Power, Polarity, and Prudence," 213.
[162] United Kingdom, *SDSR*, 10.
[163] *Ibid*., 11.

decades, the aim to strengthen or restore the authority of the extant arrangements would certainly have been attractive as a way to advance British interests. As Blagden cautions, however, the SDSR's overriding focus on the "rules-based" order fails to reflect on "whose interests such 'rules' are designed (not) to serve."[164]

While British government policy and leadership continued to offer full-throated rhetorical support for the liberal international order, it did so in spite of growing domestic opposition to perceived external interference in British sovereignty. This domestic tension was not entirely new, as Euroscepticism has long been a factor in British politics,[165] but both the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum and the Conservative governments charged with implementing the referendum results have garnered support by declaring the need for "re-establishing popular sovereignty and control."[166] British politicians of various stripes had long traded on the country's "awkward" position at the European bargaining table to increase its influence, particularly as a European entry point for the United States and even China.[167] With Brexit, however, the elite consensus that had formed over many decades regarding this uneasy position of the UK within a continental framework was shattered.[168]

Along with a rejection of European integration in particular, Brexit can also be seen as a "repudiation of the liberal democratic norm," and part of a global trend toward increasing populism, nationalism, and even authoritarianism.[169] Though Russia appears

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[164] Blagden, "Power, Polarity, and Prudence," 218.
[165] Li, "Contending Narratives," 369-370.
[166] Angelos Chryssogelos, "State Transformation and Populism: From the Internalized to the Neo-Sovereign State?" *Politics* 40, no. 1 (2020): 32.
[167] Tim Oliver, "Never Mind the Brexit? Britain, Europe, the World and Brexit," *International Politics* 54 (2017): 522, 529.
[168] Flew, "Globalization, Neo-Globalization and Post-Globalization," 20.
[169] Tom Ginsburg, Aziz Z. Huq, and Mila Versteeg, "The Coming Demise of Liberal Constitutionalism?" *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (March 2018): 240-241.

to have played a role in the Brexit vote through the exercise of malign influence campaigns, seeking to sow internal division so as to undermine states and multilateral groups that would counter Russia,[170] Brexit can still rightly be interpreted as a populist phenomenon.[171] Further, Brexit has become important as a symbolic chink in the armour of multilateralism, and has "encouraged other opponents of further European integration and threatens fundamental changes in the EU"[172] serving as a potential instigating source of an inward turn for the European Union as a whole.[173]

Beyond its symbolic importance, Brexit may be seen as a constructivist example of the importance of identities, norms and values—not just material factors—in shaping state behaviour.[174] Clearly, the decision of the UK to withdraw from the European Union was not solely an interests-based decision, but rather one based upon how the role and independence of the British state were understood by the British people. As two recent studies of UK foreign policy discourse have shown, post-Brexit British governments have made concerted efforts to construct narratives to deliberately shape the role and relative agency of the country in the international order.[175] In particular, Britain has sought to counter accounts of its isolation and marginalization on the world stage while promoting "Great Power" narratives largely in line with Churchill's "Three Circles" doctrine.[176]

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[170] Patman, "The Liberal International Order," 277.
[171] Chryssogelos, "State Transformation and Populism," 32.
[172] Margaret P. Karns, "A Pivotal Moment in Global Governance? Looking Back to Look Forward," *Global Governance* 23, no. 3 (2017): 338.
[173] Oliver, "Never Mind the Brexit," 526.
[174] de Buck and Hosli, "Traditional Theories of International Relations," 17.
[175] Kai Oppermann, Ryan Beasley, and Juliet Kaarbo, "British Foreign Policy After Brexit: Losing Europe and Finding a Role," *International Relations* 34, no. 2 (2020): 133-156; Smith, "The European Union and the Global Arena."
[176] Oppermann et al., "British Foreign Policy After Brexit," 140; Oliver, "Never Mind the Brexit," 523.

Boris Johnson, first as Brexiteer and later as the British Prime Minister responsible for overseeing the exit of the UK from the EU, has worked to build on such great power narratives to craft an image of a country destined to retain its seat among the world's power brokers. Recognizing the unsteady material ground on which a British claim to major power status rested, Johnson memorably proclaimed at the British Conservative Party conference in 2016 that "Global Britain is a soft power superpower."[177] This claim created the discursive core of subsequent attempts— including by Theresa May,[178] British Prime Minister from 2016 until 2019, when the reins were passed on to Johnson—to position the UK as an international leader in the post-Brexit era. Still, Johnson's attempts to portray British global influence in benign and benevolent terms has been criticized as for its neo-colonial undertones, especially given a previous article by Johnson proclaiming that in terms of Africa, "The problem is not that we [the British] were once in charge, but that we are not in charge any more."[179]

Despite claims to soft power supremacy, the post-Brexit foreign policy vision of "Global Britain" is primarily built upon trade. As proponents of the Leave campaign promised and Johnson himself emphasized,[180] the British economy after Brexit would be able to capitalize on bilateral trade deals on terms favourable to the UK, enabling the country to prosper "once freed from the shackles of the protectionist European bloc."[181] The UK certainly has not been alone in its pursuit of bilateralism following frustration with larger multilateral arrangements. As Alexander Mattelaer of the Belgian-based

[177] Boris Johnson, "Full Text: Boris Johnson's Conference Speech," *The Spectator*, 1 October 2016, last accessed 2 April 2021. https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-boris-johnson-s-conference-speech.

[178] Oppermann et al., "British Foreign Policy After Brexit," 141.

[179] Eva Połońska-Kimunguyi and Patrick Kimunguyi, "'Gunboats of Soft Power': Boris on Africa and Post-Brexit 'Global Britain,'" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 30, no. 4 (2017): 326, 335.

[180] See, for example, Johnson, "Full Text: Boris Johnson's Conference Speech."

[181] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 122.

Egmont Institute has remarked, "bilateral diplomacy is back in vogue" both in the European Union and globally as countries react to perceived weaknesses in the liberal international order.[182] That being said, the UK has thus far encountered little success in carving out its own post-EU bilateral trade agreements, as other countries have sought to prioritize trade deals with the larger European trading bloc than the smaller and increasingly insular British market.[183] Given that Britain's success "depends on the rest of the world being open to such approaches," the Global Britain slogan is starting to appear hollow, at least in terms of trade.[184]

On the subject of security, Blagden notes that British narrative efforts have exhibited an increasing—yet superficial—usage of realist language, namely an emphasis on multipolarity and competition with peer adversaries.[185] Blagden cautions that a transition to a truly multipolar international order would leave the UK on the sidelines, as its current position is certainly not an independent "pole" in the realist understanding of the term, but rather that of a "major power in the Euro-Atlantic region."[186] Blagden levels similar criticism at the notion of peer or near-peer competition, as the "peers" in question are typically peers of the United States more than the United Kingdom.[187] Nevertheless, the UK has highlighted its historic and contemporary support for and

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[182] Alexander Mattelaer, *The Resurgence of Bilateral Diplomacy in Europe*, Egmont Paper 104 (Brussels: Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations, 2019), 5.

[183] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 122-123; Oppermann et al., "British Foreign Policy After Brexit," 139; Patman, "The Liberal International Order," 289.

[184] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 131.

[185] Blagden, "Power, Polarity, and Prudence," 210, 214-215.

[186] *Ibid*., 211.

[187] *Ibid*., 216.

leadership within NATO as a core element of its general approach to security, as a trusted

partner of both the United States and Europe.[188]

On the whole, the narrative advanced by Johnson and Brexiteers around the UK

"taking back control" seems to have largely backfired so far.[189] Instead, the UK is

becoming increasingly isolated, and is being rebuffed in its attempts to play larger roles

despite its "outward-looking"[190] rhetoric.[191] Indeed, to this point, international responses

to British attempts to eke out post-Brexit leadership roles on the global stage "have

largely been negative."[192] As a result, as Oppermann et al. posit, the UK is left

> playing the role of a sovereign castaway on an island largely of its own
> making. While Brexit may enhance Britain's sovereignty, it did not free
> its foreign policy, which remains conflicted between its anti-isolationist
> goals and the international community's reluctance to accept the
> alternative roles it seeks to play.[193]

Furthermore, Andrea Pareschi submits that Brexit may have actually resulted in the

transfer of elements of British sovereignty from the EU to the United States.[194] Such a

sentiment is shown in recent remarks of the former National Security Advisor to British

Prime Ministers Cameron and May (and former UK Ambassador to the UN) Mark Lyall

Grant, who admitted that maintaining the "special relationship" with the United States

post-Brexit will inevitably require compromise on security issues.[195]

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[188] Oppermann et al., "British Foreign Policy After Brexit," 140; Jan Marinus Wiersma, "Brexit and the Future of European Security and Defence Cooperation," *Security and Human Rights* 27 (2016): 91-92.

[189] Patman, "The Liberal International Order," 289.

[190] Boris Johnson, "Boris Johnson: First Speech as PM in Full," *BBC News*, 24 July 2019, last accessed 2 April 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-49102495.

[191] Oppermann et al., "British Foreign Policy After Brexit."

[192] *Ibid*., 145.

[193] *Ibid*., 147.

[194] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 139.

[195] Mark Lyall Grant, "Updating Security and Defence Policy," *National Institute Economic Review* 250 (November 2019): R45.

Brexit has also resulted in more pressing economic and political damage to the UK. At the drop of a hat, British economic growth—which had been on the upswing and was leading EU countries prior to Brexit—took a precipitous turn.[196] The loss of the EU as a diplomatic forum has inhibited the ability of the UK to pool influence with its European counterparts to challenge Russian aggression, placing Britain at a disadvantage relative to before Brexit.[197] Further, the failure of the UK to secure the election of a British judge to the International Court of Justice for the first time ever in 2017 was seen as a major blow to Britain's diplomatic standing.[198] In sum, Pareschi argues that the UK's overall "risks of diplomatic and political 'overstretching' approach certainty" as the growing disconnect between Britain's global ambition and combined hard and soft power resources becomes more apparent.[199]

Since Brexit, the UK's traditional role as "efficient diplomatic bridge"[200] between the US and Europe has come into question, limiting the foreign policy clout of the UK, but also hindering the EU as a major international actor.[201] Indeed, though the detrimental impact of Brexit on the UK is notable, the removal of a Permanent 5 (P5) member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) has had the effect of checking the geopolitical influence of the EU.[202] Where that leaves the EU is not entirely apocalyptic, but Brexit is still problematic, as it poses "a major if not fundamental challenge" for Europe.[203] In confluence with other factors, including the Trump election in the United

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[196] Patman, "The Liberal International Order," 289.
[197] Wiersma, "Brexit and the Future of European Security and Defence Cooperation," 89.
[198] Oppermann et al., "British Foreign Policy After Brexit," 141.
[199] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 138.
[200] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 132; see also Oliver, "Never Mind the Brexit," 522.
[201] Oliver, "Never Mind the Brexit," 531.
[202] Wiersma, "Brexit and the Future of European Security and Defence Cooperation," 90.
[203] Smith, "The European Union and the Global Arena," 86, 90.

States and shifts in balance of power globally, Brexit is not alone in testing the resilience of the EU,[204] but it seems to have contributed to an increasing tendency to question the so-called "elite consensus" sustaining the legitimacy of not just the EU, but the liberal international order as a whole.[205]

At present, the UK is still generally supporting the concept of a liberal international order, Brexit notwithstanding.[206] In particular, the *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, approved by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in March 2021, continues to pronounce steadfast support for an "open and resilient international order."[207] Unlike the 2015 SDSR, however, the new document stresses the importance of not only strengthening, but also working to "shape the international order of the future"[208] in order to prevent it from being undermined by adversaries.

For the UK, going it alone will be increasingly resource-intensive in the years to come, and the British economy is already suffering in the aftermath of Brexit. As a result, Pareschi contends, the UK will likely couch its support for the liberal international order in terms of the economic sides of the order rather than the weightier and more contested human rights dimensions.[209] In so doing, British policymakers will consolidate the country's ongoing withdrawal from democracy promotion and interventionism that began years before Brexit itself.[210] Taken together, it seems reasonable to suggest that

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[204] *Ibid.*, 89.
[205] Li, "Contending Narratives," 369.
[206] *Ibid.*, 367.
[207] United Kingdom, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: HM Government, March 2021), 3.
[208] Ibid., 12.
[209] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 140.
[210] Parchami, "Imperial Projections & Crisis," 1051.

British support for the liberal international order is thus likely to be "limping and less deliberately consistent" in the post-Brexit era.[211] Regardless, the fact that the British foreign policy establishment has acknowledged the need to not just restore or strengthen, but also "shape," the international order in the years to come highlights their recognition that the battleground of ideas concerning the international order is becoming almost as important as its formal institutions and rules.

Anglo-American Challenges to International Order

As noted, the issues underlying both the election of Donald Trump and Brexit are not entirely new. The populism and nationalism that were given voice and amplification by these two indicators of an inward turn by Anglo-American sources of the liberal international order's strength were simmering long before 2016. As Robert Patman contends, these recent explosions are mere symptoms of systemic problems related to rapid late 20th-century globalization that remain unresolved.[212] Indeed, many global problems transcend the abilities of individual nation states to respond,[213] but the possibilities for meaningful multilateral cooperation are limited by this increasingly reluctant leadership of the liberal international order by both the US and the UK.

The withdrawal of the United States during the Trump presidency may, in the long run, come to be seen as an aberration, but the lingering effects of his iconoclasm on the global practice of head-of-state diplomacy will not fade immediately. The British abandonment of the grand European project, however, is perhaps more concerning to the foundations of the liberal international order. Overall, as Pareschi notes, "Britain can be

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[211] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 141.
[212] Patman, "The Liberal International Order," 295-297.
[213] *Ibid.*, 297.

regarded as an inward-looking an overburdened power, uneasily balancing between Europe and America,"[214] and this uneasy ambiguity of UK foreign policy is bound to come to a head in the immediate future. As the UK is, according to Blagden, "simultaneously keen to claim its independent great-power status while consuming the low-cost, high-quality fruits of continued US primacy,"[215] the outcome of the practical and discursive battle over the nature of the US-led international order is of immediate import to the UK.

In the short run, it is becoming evident that the UK—bereft of its former place in the EU—will increasingly pin its hopes on its leadership within NATO in order to project power and influence.[216] Given the post-Brexit dependence of UK foreign influence on the "special relationship" with the United States, which has never been guaranteed, a revitalized British role within stronger NATO and Anglo-American connections (including the Five-Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance) will be paramount to realizing the ambition of "Global Britain."[217] Nonetheless, as Wiersma cautions, "NATO itself … might not be the strong player Britain wants it to be."[218]

Though it is oftentimes difficult to definitively separate the foreign policy effects of Brexit from the effects of the Trump administration,[219] the combined impact of these two phenomena in 2016 are indeed substantial. Both Brexit and Trump can be seen as good news for both China and Russia, whose preference for "great-power politics to the

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[214] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 139.

[215] Blagden, "Power, Polarity, and Prudence," 219.

[216] John Peterson, "Structure, Agency and Transatlantic Relations in the Trump Era," *Journal of European Integration* 40, no. 5 (2018): 642.

[217] Smith, "The European Union and the Global Arena," 87.

[218] Wiersma, "Brexit and the Future of European Security and Defence Cooperation," 91-92.

[219] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 118.

detriment of multilateral solutions"[220] is well acknowledged. In addition to the fact that

the practical departure of the US and UK from multilateral leadership left immediate gaps

in the leadership of key institutions of the liberal international order,[221] the discursive

impact of these retreats have perhaps been more significant to the shape and structure of

the international order moving forward. In their own ways, both the election of Trump

and the Brexit referendum have created normative space for China and other challengers

to undertake their own efforts to construct alternate narratives to reshape the very nature

of international order.[222]

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[220] Wiersma, "Brexit and the Future of European Security and Defence Cooperation," 89.
[221] Fehl and Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispendable Nation," 39.
[222] Li, "Contending Narratives," 375.

CHAPTER 4

ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER:
CHINESE AND RUSSIAN CHALLENGES

In former US President Donald Trump's 2017 *National Security Strategy*, Russia

and China loom large. They are singled out as aggressive, revisionist actors striving "to

shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests."[223] The 2018 US *National*

Defense Strategy Summary, similarly, designates a "decline in the long-standing rules-

based international order," emanating from Russian and Chinese aggression, as the

reason for adopting a shift to a posture of "inter-state strategic competition" as the

primary national security concern of the United States.[224] Shifting global power

dynamics emanating from the rise of China has long been on the horizon,[225] leading

some observers to frame an ascendant China as the "critical challenge" facing the Unites

States in particular and the liberal international order in general.[226] Other observers such

as Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen see Russian intransigence as the most

immediate challenge to the international order.[227] On the other side of the coin, as

recently as December 2020, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, has

identified unilateralism—particularly on the part of the United States—as the "most

disruptive factor in the international system."[228] As a result, a competition mindset has

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[223] United States of America, *National Security Strategy* (2017), 25.

[224] United States Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (2018), 1.

[225] Jyrki Käkönen, "Global Change: BRICS and the Pluralist World Order," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 4, no. 6 (2019): 416.

[226] Suisheng Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 113 (2018): 644.

[227] Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, "Russia and the Question of World Order," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2019): 133.

[228] Wang Yi. "Serving the Country and Contributing to the World: China's Diplomacy in a Time of Unprecedented Global Changes and a Once-in-a-Century Pandemic," address by Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations in 2020 (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 11 December

become dominant in the general tenor of great power politics,[229] a sentiment that was articulated by Russian President Vladimir Putin in Davos in January 2021, when he pointedly declared: "We all know that competition and rivalry between countries in world history has never stopped, do not stop and will never stop."[230]

As China has increased its economic and military power since the 1990s, it has accordingly sought a more prominent role on the world stage. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been striving to reclaim its status as a great power. China's and Russia's increasing assertiveness must be viewed in light of the present perceived crisis in the liberal international order. At least in part, Chinese and Russian ambitions have been buoyed by the power vacuum left in the wake of US withdrawal from multilateral leadership during the Trump administration.[231] This power vacuum was not entirely new, however, considering the fact that the United States had been preoccupied with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for much of the past twenty years.[232] In any case, the unwillingness or inability of the United States to act as effective stewards of the liberal international order provided challengers with space to manoeuvre and start attempting to reshape that order in line with their own interests.

In both practical and conceptual terms, both China and Russia have exhibited revisionist tendencies in their foreign policies. According to political scientist Yi Edward

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2020), last accessed 17 March 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1839532.shtml.

[229] Glaser, "A Flawed Framework," 51.

[230] Vladimir Putin, Remarks in the Final Plenary Session of the 17th Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club (Moscow: The Kremlin, 22 October 2020), last accessed 17 March 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261.

[231] Yi Edward Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30 (2020): 10.

[232] Andrew M. Akin, "Role Conceptions and Belligerent Foreign Policy: Why Russia is Remaking the International Order," *Russian Politics* 4 (2019): 135.

Yang, "restoring China's previous standing as a great power" has been a critical element of Xi Jinping's vision for Chinese foreign policy.[233] In Russia, similarly, Putin has been carrying out a concerted campaign to reclaim Russia's stature after its purportedly undeserved decline following the end of Cold War.[234] While the two countries frequently cooperate on areas of mutual interest, there are important distinctions between Chinese and Russian versions of revisionism. Accordingly, this chapter aims to explore these nuances in order to illuminate the various points of engagement and contestation between both countries and the rules-based international order.

China and International Order

From a realist perspective, the rise of China has immediate consequences for the contemporary international order. As China's material strength increases in economic and military terms, so too does its intention to shape international relations, and with it comes an increasing likelihood that China will come into outright conflict with other major powers, namely the United States.[235] Liberal IR theorists, on the other hand, have generally stressed the institutional constraints and liberalizing tendencies of the liberal international order itself,[236] suggesting that further integration of China into the institutions of the contemporary order would dull the sharpness of Chinese ambition.[237] In recent years, China has both integrated with and diverged from the liberal international order, through its actions and words. Further, neither realist not liberal accounts

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[233] Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives," 2.

[234] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 120.

[235] See, for example, Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015, last accessed 18 March 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/.

[236] See, for example, Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive."

[237] Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives," 3. See also Li, "Contending Narratives," 358, regarding the Obama administration's integrationist approach to the rise of China.

thoroughly account for the myriad and deliberate manners in which China has sought to alter the conceptual foundations of international order.

As political scientist Rex Li notes, there is an important discursive element to China's engagement with the contemporary international order that must be explored.[238] According to Li, the study of Chinese discourse, involving analysis of both the text and context of official and unofficial "speech acts," is critical to understanding China's evolving relationship with international order because the narratives crafted in such discourse seek not only to describe the order but to "construct the social reality" of the international order itself.[239] In so doing, China appears to be taking on board the Wendtian insights of social constructivism, anticipating that the liberal international order will become what China makes of it.

Since formally being admitted into the United Nations in 1971, the People's Republic of China has gradually become more enmeshed in key institutions of the liberal international order. From the outset, China has embraced the Westphalian concept of sovereignty enshrined in the UN Charter, and over time has increased its participation in UN organs, international legal frameworks, and other institutions such as the World Trade Organization.[240] China has recently become the largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, and has shifted from opponent to advocate of global climate accords.[241] Along the way, as Youcheer Kim has observed, China's voting patterns in the UN have largely converged with those of the erstwhile leading states of the liberal

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[238] Li, "Contending Narratives," 350.
[239] *Ibid*., 351-352.
[240] Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder," 646-647.
[241] *Ibid*.

international order.[242] As such, it might be said that China has come to internalize some, though certainly not all, of the norms of the order.[243]

At the same time, China remains generally uneasy with many aspects of the liberal international order. Notably, China's perspective diverges from the order's emphasis on norms surrounding individual human rights and democracy.[244] In addition, China is wary of the dominant role played by the United States, a source of contention shared by many UN member states.[245] Furthermore, China is quick to point out evidence of hypocrisy or uneven application of the rules of the game by those countries that are most vocal about the order's liberal virtues.[246] Despite the aspirations of Western advocates of Chinese "integration," it appears that the liberalizing goals associated with the country's integration into the international order have fallen short.[247]

In practical terms, China has consistently challenged the dynamics of the post-1945 international order. The simple fact of China's rising economic and military strength, for example, invites discussion about the relative weight of ascendant countries in an order that largely locked in the power dynamics that existed at the end of the Second World War. China's economic system has evolved and increasingly opened up to global markets in recent decades. During this period, China has employed protectionist policies and promoted its State-Owned Enterprises in ways that could raise questions about the country's commitment to economic liberalism, though similar criticism could

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[242] Youcheer Kim, "Is China Spoiling the Rules-Based Liberal International Order? Examining China's Rising Institutional Power in a Multiplex World Through Competing Theories," *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 56, no. 1 (March 2020): 15.

[243] Kim, "Is China Spoiling," 7.

[244] Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder," 646-647.

[245] *Ibid*.

[246] *Ibid*., 648.

[247] David A. Beitelman, "Living with Giants and Inconvenient Truths: The US, China, and Everyone Else," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 50, no. 1 (2020): 89.

be levelled at other major trade powers.[248] China's aggressive actions in the South China

Sea also can be seen as a manifestation of China's repudiation of international law and

the US-led international order.[249] However, while their actions in this region are

particularly brazen, the United States and other countries are also selective in their

application of international law to pursue their economic and strategic interests.[250]

Nonetheless, China's practical commitment to the ideals of the liberal international order

remains questionable.

Aside from its direct practical confrontations with the liberal international order,

China has also sought to build alternate frameworks and institutions to bolster its regional

and global influence. The development of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China,

South Africa) organization, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) may all be seen as manifestations of China's

discontent with the existing institutions of the liberal international order.[251] With respect

to the BRI, there is also a military-strategic element that bears on China's intentions

regarding power projection, namely through establishing naval presence to secure ports

being financed by BRI,[252] a scheme that has been dubbed the "string of pearls" theory.[253]

Along these lines, some observers contend that China is seeking to create an alternative

framework to the liberal international order. In particular, Anton Malkin posits that—

[248] Matthew Louis Bishop and Zhang Xiaotong, "Why is China a Reluctant Leader of the World Trade Organization?" *New Political Economy* 25, no. 5 (2020): 756.

[249] Michael Tkacik, "Understanding China's Goals and Strategy in the South China Sea: Bringing Context to a Revisionist Systemic Challenge – Intentions and Impact," *Defense & Security Analysis* 34, no. 4 (2018): 322.

[250] Kim, "Is China Spoiling," 19.

[251] Li, "Contending Narratives," 365.

[252] Owen, "Ikenberry," 59.

[253] Terry Mobley, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China's Bakyard," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 56.

particularly through cooperation with Russia—China is seeking to build a "Chinese-led alternative parallel order" by challenging the technological and economic structures underpinning the liberal international order.[254] Nevertheless, the overall extent of China's ambition may not be so sweeping, at least in the short- to medium-term.

As China has increased its participation in the institutions of the liberal international order, it has also begun insisting—successfully for the most part—on more of a say in the leadership of those institutions, particularly given recent US withdrawal.[255] Despite these advances, Yang offers a reminder that, still, "Beijing feels a status deficit."[256] Even if China wished to build a top-to-bottom alternative to the liberal international order, though, the country as yet still lacks the "comprehensive national strength" to mount a wholesale challenge extant order.[257] Moreover, it must be remembered that China accrues considerable benefits from its position in the current order, and much of its trade-based growth has been enabled by the rules and institutions of the liberal international order.[258] As such, Suisheng Zhao has compellingly argued that China's position in the liberal international order can best be characterized as that of "revisionist stakeholder, generally happy with the rules but wanting changes in the distribution of status."[259] That being said, China's position vis-à-vis the liberal international order is not set in stone,[260] and there remains significant unresolved tension

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[254] Anton Malkin, "Challenging the Liberal International Order by Chipping Away at US Structural Power: China's State-Guided Investment in Technology and Finance in Russia," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2020): 89.

[255] Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder," 644.

[256] Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives," 4.

[257] Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder," 651.

[258] *Ibid*., 654. See also Bishop and Xiaotong, "Why is China a Reluctant Leader," 761.

[259] Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder," 655.

[260] Kim, "Is China Spoiling," 4.

within China about how China sees itself and how it conceptualizes its relationship with the broader international community.[261]

Notwithstanding this unresolved tension about China's place in the world, a brief appraisal of official and unofficial sources of Chinese discourse surrounding the international order is instructive in revealing the nature of China's foreign policy aspirations. In the last decade, and particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has sought to subtly shift and redefine the language of the international order.[262] In recent years, Chinese leadership have been emphatic in their professed support for some of the core elements of the liberal international order.[263] Xi declared in 2017 that China's success was dependent upon a "stable international order," and that China would be "the defender" of that order.[264] Wang Yi, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, has gone on to emphasize the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs,[265] while offering Chinese support to an international order built around the UN, international law and the WTO.[266] At the same time, Chinese officials have underscored some areas of contention for China, namely the unfair distribution of power in existing institutions and the interpretation of certain aspects of the international order's "liberal ideology" such as freedom and democracy.[267]

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[261] Bishop and Xiaotong, "Why is China a Reluctant Leader," 761.

[262] Li, "Contending Narratives," 362-363.

[263] *Ibid.*, 363.

[264] Xi Jinping, "His Own Words: The 14 Principles of 'Xi Jinping Thought'," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 23 October 2017, last accessed 16 March 2021, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dmwn4r.

[265] Wang Yi, "Upholding Multilateralism to Tackle Global Challenges," remarks by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Global Advisory Board Meeting of the School of Public Policy and Management of Tsinghua University (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 7 November 2020), last accessed 17 March 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1830291.shtml.

[266] Wang Yi, "Serving the Country and Contributing to the World," December 2020.

[267] Li, "Contending Narratives," 363-365.

Xi Jinping's speech celebrating the 75th anniversary of the United Nations provides insight into China's rhetorical aims in this regard. After lauding the achievements of the UN, Xi stresses that "Mutual respect and equality among all countries"[268] should be considered as the central guiding principle for shaping the UN's present and future role. In elaborating a second guiding principle about the rule of law, Xi emphasizes the role of the UN Charter in particular as a "cornerstone of stable international order."[269] Xi's language carefully articulates a normative goal of stability enabled by a rules-based system, and amplifies a minimalist core of the liberal international order based upon Westphalian sovereignty as opposed to some of the liberal internationalist elements that came to the foreground in the international order around the end of the 20th century.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang declared in December 2020 that China continues to "stand for greater democracy [of countries] in international relations,"[270] following up on his remarks just a month prior when he stressed that "countries … are all equal members of the international community. They have equal rights to develop, to pursue a better life, and to participate in world affairs."[271] The particular emphasis on countries as opposed to individuals, using phrasing that suggests the flourishing of human beings but instead has states as the focus, is evidently deliberate. As political scientist Yi Edward Yang reminds us, the narrative strategy of China aims to shift understandings of human

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[268] Xi Jinping, Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, at the High-Level Meeting to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 21 September 2021), last accessed 17 March 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1816751.shtml.

[269] *Ibid*.

[270] Wang Yi, "Serving the Country and Contributing to the World," December 2020.

[271] Wang Yi, "Upholding Multilateralism to Tackle Global Challenges," November 2020.

rights from universal, individualist standards to "an alternative standard that gives nation-states the right to balance individual rights against competing national objectives."[272]

In order to be successful in its attempt to change the normative foundations of the liberal international order, China has been seeking to maximize its discursive power, specifically through the use of "strategic narratives," which are broad, unifying stories that aim to achieve specific political objectives.[273] In order to support their calls for adjustments to the liberal international order, Xi Jinping and others have been attempting to create such a narrative of a "community of common destiny for mankind" based on the stated ideals of fairness, equality, and respect of countries.[274] In so doing, the goal has been to secure some measure of rhetorical moral high ground to dislodge the hegemonic discursive power of the United States.[275]

Buttressing official rhetoric about China's role in the world, Chinese academia is also striving to reshape dominant Western understandings of international order. In particular, Chinese political scientists have been working to propose alternative models of international relations theory to overturn Western orthodoxies.[276] New Chinese approaches to IR include *Tianxia* theory, which ostensibly presents a model for Chinese-led order in "a 'harmonious' and loose system, allowing cultural diversity within its domain."[277] Further, *Tianxia* theory aims to critique the liberal international order and specifically the claimed universality of its concepts.[278] As Matti Puranen observes, these

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[272] Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives," 11.
[273] *Ibid*., 1-6.
[274] *Ibid*., 8-9.
[275] Li, "Contending Narratives," 366.
[276] Matti Puranen, "A Non-World: Chinese Perceptions of the Western International Order," in *Contestations of Liberal Order: The West in Crisis?* ed. Marki Lehti, Henna-Riikka Pennanen, and Jukka Jouhki (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020): 316.
[277] *Ibid*., 320.
[278] *Ibid*., 327.

strains of Chinese scholarship may even be seen as an extension of official state policy by other means, given the tight degree of state control over academic institutions in China.[279] China may thus be seeking to leverage "epistemic communities" of scholars and practitioners in order to contribute to the shaping of state behaviour and international norms over the long run in accordance with constructivist insights.[280]

Overall, according to Rex Li, Chinese discursive attempts to reshape international order have met with some success,[281] but it may still be too early to tell what the longstanding effects of these efforts will be. Suisheng Zhao cautions that the drive by China to spread ideas supportive to the state through the funding of Confucius Institutes around the world have met with suspicion, and in fact counteract Chinese aims to achieve narrative moral high ground.[282] Furthermore, even China's emphatic defense of state sovereignty—the conceptual bedrock of its multilateralism—invites criticism on the grounds that China's position actually springs from anxieties about secessionist movements within its territorial borders as much as from its support for the concept in theoretical terms.[283] Nonetheless, increasingly bold Chinese efforts in the discursive realm during the Xi Jinping era, coupled with China's rising material capacity and practical actions to alter the foundations of the international order, can be seen as indicative of the rising ambition of China to play a key role in determining the rules of the game going forward.[284]

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[279] *Ibid.*, 316.
[280] Kim, "Is China Spoiling," 6.
[281] Li, "Contending Narratives," 366.
[282] Zhao, "A Revisionist Stakeholder," 652.
[283] Boyle, "The Coming Illiberal Order," 45.
[284] Li, "Contending Narratives," 374.

Russia and International Order

Though China may be classified as a revisionist "stakeholder" within the contemporary international order, the same is not true of Russia, whose recent actions have been decidedly more confrontational to the Western-inclined status quo. The end of the Cold War presented an opportunity for comprehensive rapprochement between both sides of the former bipolar divide, and as such the period of the Yeltsin and Clinton administrations of the 1990s was brimming with optimism for the integration of post-Soviet states—including Russia—into the liberal international order.[285] Though easy to criticize with the benefit of hindsight, Fukuyaman rhetoric about the "end of history"[286] and the triumph of liberalism and democracy was powerful at the time.[287]

The 1990s witnessed the rapid expansion of multilateral institutions into Eastern Europe,[288] an ostensible victory of liberal internationalism. In retrospect, this expansion appears to have exposed a hubristic misunderstanding on the part of the West of the appetite for Western reforms in these formerly Communist societies in transition.[289] After the brief but difficult dalliance with the liberal international order eventually peaked in the early 2000s,[290] optimism was eventually overcome by disillusionment both in Russia and in the broader post-Soviet space.[291] Even Vladimir Putin held the view early on that post-Cold War Russia may have a place within a "Greater West," but his perspective has since pivoted sharply to a confrontational, competition-based mindset.[292]

[285] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 112-114.

[286] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

[287] Patman, "The Liberal International Order and Its Populist Adversaries," 280.

[288] Alexander Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia: The Rise and Decline of Liberal Internationalism in the Post-Communist Space," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 593.

[289] *Ibid.*, 591.

[290] Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia," 604.

[291] Richard Sakwa, "Russian Neo-Revisionism," *Russian Politics* 4 (2019): 5-7.

[292] *Ibid.*, 7.

Russian disenchantment can perhaps best be explained as a response to the evident overreach of NATO and the United States following end of Cold War.[293] Though not necessarily ill-intentioned, NATO's rapid expansion to former Soviet states was broadly perceived as an attempt to expand Western—and particularly American—influence in a region that was undergoing a period of tumult.[294] As such, it has left a lingering feeling on the part of Russia of having been disrespected and taken advantage of during its moment of weakness.[295] This lingering suspicion has continued to shape Russian responses to Western actions in the area of the world that Russia considers, in realist terms, to be its distinct sphere of influence.

On that note, NATO-led humanitarian intervention throughout the 1990s, particularly the case of Kosovo, contributed to a general decline in mutual trust, and an ongoing resentment of continued Western meddling in the region despite the Cold War having long since ended.[296] The various "colour revolutions" that swept through former Soviet republics in the mid-2000s, including Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, were generally lauded in the West "as successful examples of externally supported civic engagement and activism."[297] Within Russia and in the region more broadly, on the other hand, they were interpreted by governments as foreign "political destabilization and as a national security threat."[298] For his part, Putin "blamed" the colour revolutions on the

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[293] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 115.

[294] Tatiana Romanova, "Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge to the Liberal International Order," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 1 (2018): 83; see also Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia," 598.

[295] Anne L. Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 50.

[296] Sakwa, "Russian Neo-Revisionism," 7.

[297] Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia," 598-599.

[298] *Ibid.*, 599.

United States.[299] In the aftermath of the colour revolutions, Russia clamped down on

activism in Eastern Europe that Russia deemed to have been supported by the West:

Russia made strides to hinder the activities of international non-governmental

organizations in the region while concurrently propping up pro-Russian organizations,[300]

and also successfully campaigned to water down electoral observation activities of the

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).[301]

While the Russian hard line could be seen as a simple return to Cold War patterns

of opposition, Russia's response has gone beyond mere antagonism toward its historical

adversary, NATO. Rather, it has reached the point of manifesting a practical and

rhetorical rebuff of the liberal international order as a whole. While Russian misgivings

about NATO returned relatively early after the brief reprieve following the end of the

Cold War, the EU was, for the most part, seen by Russian leadership and foreign policy

practitioners as a benign influence until around 2009.[302] Since then, Russia has

understood the EU to be a strategic competitor and even a front for NATO due to the

perception of its "increasing convergence with NATO in ideological, political, and

operational terms."[303]

At least partly in response to Western aggression, Russia's 2008 incursion into

Georgia and 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea had a "demonstrative" purpose as a

warning sign to NATO and the West more broadly about the risks of expansion into the

Russian sphere.[304] Indeed, the Putin government was careful to frame the annexation as a

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[299] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 126.
[300] Cooley, "Ordering Eurasia," 598.
[301] *Ibid*., 610-611.
[302] *Ibid*., 605.
[303] Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, "Russia and the Question of World Order," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2019): 138.
[304] Sakwa, "Russian Neo-Revisionism," 10.

defensive reaction to the fact that "the United States and EU had deliberately destabilized Ukraine."[305] In demonstrating such palpable contempt for the core elements of the liberal international order, some observers label Russia as not merely a revisionist or neo-revisionist power, but rather a revanchist power seeking to overthrow the liberal order in its entirety.[306] However, even more so than China, Russia lacks the economic and political heft to pose a credible threat of actually establishing an alternative system.[307]

Not necessarily seeking to overthrow the liberal international order as a whole, Russia's ambitions appear rather more circumspect. Overall, Russia's foreign policy actions seems to assert a realist perspective based upon regional spheres of influence and great power management. Indeed, according to Richard Sakwa, Russia intends to pursue and solidify a world order based upon multipolarity as a means of restoring balance after the unipolar moment of US dominance following the end of the Cold War.[308] Russian cooperation with China supports such a view, wherein Russia's objectives are to conduct balancing against US power through "anti-hegemonic alignment" with China.[309] However, the Russian preference for a world order based upon regional spheres of influence and a balance of power mechanism is not only implied by Russia's actions; it is also an expressly stated aim. Indeed, the 2015 Russian *National Security Strategy* identifies the emergence of a "polycentric world order" to displace US unipolarity as an explicit objective.[310] Furthermore, Russia's *Foreign Policy Concept* (FPC), approved by

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[305] Patman, "The Liberal International Order and Its Populist Adversaries," 283.
[306] For example, Götz and Merlen, "Russia and the Question of World Order," 135.
[307] Sakwa, "Russian Neo-Revisionism," 2.
[308] *Ibid.*, 3.
[309] *Ibid.*, 2.
[310] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 128.

Putin in 2016, similarly both acknowledges an ongoing shift to a multipolar world order

and advocates for a Russian "balancing" role in such an order.[311]

In general terms, while Russia has repeatedly opposed the leaders, institutions and

norms of the liberal international order through its real-world actions, Russia has sought

to tear apart at the seams of the order in discursive terms as well. Nominally, Russia has

routinely made the case that it favours an international order based on at least some

semblance of rules. In terms of official policy and communication, Russia has routinely

voiced a forceful case for sovereignty—and, concomitantly, non-intervention in domestic

affairs—to be considered as the overriding norm in the international order. Indeed,

Russia's 2016 FPC outlines an avowed objective of a "stable and sustainable system of

international relations" based upon the UN, the UNSC, and international law.[312] Further,

Russian officials including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have sought to act as

defenders of international order, expressing official "concern over the destructive line of

a number of states which is aimed at dismantling the architecture of global security

created in the postwar years on the basis of the UN Charter."[313] Speaking to the Valdai

Discussion Club in October 2020, President Putin stressed the central role of states as the

primary actors in international affairs, highlighting sovereignty and an international order

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[311] Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016 (Moscow: Ministry of Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016), last accessed 17 March 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248FPC. On this point, see Sakwa, "Russian Neo-Revisionism," 19.

[312] Russian Federation, Foreign Policy Concept.

[313] Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions During a News Conference Following the Video Conference of Foreign Ministers of Russia, India, and China, (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 23 June 2020), last accessed 16 March 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/4171520.

built especially upon the veto power of the P5 members of the UNSC,[314] highlighting the

fact that the Russian vision of international order is one in which the "concert" function

of great power management within such an order outweighs the roles of institutional or

normative constraints.[315]

Russia has used a variety of rhetorical means to craft its normative assault on the

liberal international order, seeking to specifically undermine the legitimacy of its

institutions and norms.[316] In particular, Russia has (a) highlighted areas of hypocrisy or

contradiction; (b) co-opted the language of the liberal international order to advance

alternative goals; and (c) displayed classic revisionist tendencies by building upon a

narrative of Russia as a great power. First, playing upon its role as aggrieved outcast,

Russia has sought to expose Western hypocrisy and undermine the foundations of the

liberal international order by using the internal logic and contradictions of the order

against itself.[317] Russia is quick to point out any appearance of unfairness in the

treatment of Russia by the institutions and rules of the liberal international order, and

uses the sentiment of grievance to capitalize upon Russian nationalist sentiment at

home.[318] Furthermore, Russia seizes opportunities to undermine the foundations of

international order by pointing out hypocritical or self-serving actions on the part of the

United States or other supporters or beneficiaries of the current order.[319] Along these

lines, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has recently criticized Western countries for

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[314] Vladimir Putin, Remarks in the Final Plenary Session of the 17th Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club (Moscow: The Kremlin, 22 October 2020), last accessed 17 March 2021, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261.

[315] Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," 52; Romanova, "Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge," 79-80.

[316] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 128-129.

[317] Parchami, "Imperial Projections & Crisis," 1052.

[318] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 119; see also Romanova, "Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge, 77.

[319] Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," 45.

adopting the phrase "rules-based international order," outlining Russian opposition on the grounds that the "rules-based" moniker connotes a Western effort to undermine international law and diminish the importance of the UN Charter's foundation of sovereignty and non-intervention.[320]

Second, Russia has tried to challenge the normative foundation of the liberal international order by co-opting various strains of discourse so as to weaken the cohesiveness of the order as a whole. In response to worldwide condemnation for its violation of sovereignty in Ukraine and Georgia, Putin was careful to defend Russian actions by drawing upon the concepts of sovereignty, self-determination and human rights, justifying Russia's apparent belligerence on the basis of protecting ethnic Russians living in those countries.[321] Indeed, the Russian FPC, which was released just over a year after Crimea, seeks to buttress Putin's initial arguments by stressing an explicit Russian Foreign policy objective protecting "the rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad."[322] As Anne Clunan has observed, the Georgia and Crimea case demonstrate how Russia uses the concepts of sovereignty and self-determination in a selective fashion, effectively co-opting the language of human rights discourse to justifying its flagrant violations of international law.[323] Clearly, there is a disconnect between Russia's rhetoric surrounding sovereignty and its demonstrated propensity to interfere in the domestic affairs of countries it believes to be within its sphere of influence,[324] which undercuts the effectiveness of their normative arguments.

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[320] Lavrov, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks, 23 June 2020.
[321] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 123.
[322] Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept*.
[323] Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," 51.
[324] Götz and Merlen, "Russia and the Question of World Order," 144.

Third, the "Great Power Narrative" is fundamental to a revisionist Russian foreign policy.[325] Seeking to bring Russia back to its former Cold War glory as one of the major movers of world events, Russia's 2016 FPC declares that "consolidating the Russian Federation's position as a centre of influence in today's world" is a key strategic objective for Russia.[326] While there is still considerable ambivalence within Russia about the position of Russia globally and vis-à-vis the West,[327] Tatiana Romanova posits that notions of a return to great power status underpin domestic public support for Russia's foreign policy intransigence.[328] Further, Putin's actions and rhetoric challenging the liberal international order may be emblematic of a recent Russian nationalist resurgence.[329]

All in all, Russian foreign policy toward the West under Putin has shifted in recent years from hesitant cooperation to a posture that has become "openly hostile to and combative with the West."[330] In terms of the liberal international order, Russia has clearly played a more confrontational role than China's stakeholder revisionism. Unlike China, it must be remembered that Russia is ultimately functioning as an outsider, operating from a position of weakness in its attempts to oppose or reshape the US-led order.[331] Accordingly, Putin has sought "to avoid direct conflict," while operating through the cyber and domestic-political domains to weaken support for the liberal

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[325] Joseph Roger Clark, "Russia's Indirect Grand Strategy," *Orbis* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 230-231; see also Akin, "Role Conceptions," 121.
[326] Russian Federation, Foreign Policy Concept.
[327] Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," 49, 56.
[328] Romanova, "Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge," 86.
[329] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 119.
[330] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 131.
[331] Clark, "Russia's Indirect Grand Strategy," 231; Chris Brown, "The Promise and Record of International Institutions," 151.

international order from within the United States and other Western nations.[332] Indeed,

Russia has been active conducting various sorts of interference in foreign elections and

supporting anti-establishment political movements throughout the West.[333] Doing so, he

is striving to marshal the forces of populism against the elite consensus underpinning the

liberal international order, deliberately weakening any truly meaningful sense of order

beyond nation-states and regional spheres of influence.[334] The lack of credible

international response to Putin's direct and indirect violations of sovereignty has

important normative consequences for the liberal international order, as inaction or

silence in the face of the violation of key norms can mean as much in the interpretation

and construction of those norms as action or lofty speeches of condemnation.[335]

Sino-Russian Cooperation and International Order

Some observers suggest that the United States and its allies are going to be

engaged in intense and near-constant strategic competition with China and Russia in the

years to come.[336] While a certain degree of competition is inevitable, the nature and

extent of that competition is not preordained, nor does competition imply the end of the

liberal international order is a foregone conclusion.[337] To be sure, both Russia and China

are seeking to increase their material capacity, which poses security challenges to

Western powers,[338] but stressing a zero-sum, competition mindset risks to the exclusion

of real areas of convergence and potential cooperation risks creating a self-fulfilling

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[332] Clark, "Russia's Indirect Grand Strategy," 226-233.
[333] Brown, "The Promise and Record of International Institutions," 151; Patman, "The Liberal International Order and Its Populist Adversaries," 283.
[334] Clark, "Russia's Indirect Grand Strategy," 236.
[335] Akin, "Role Conceptions," 133.
[336] Boyle, "The Coming Illiberal Order," 57; Glaser, "A Flawed Framework."
[337] Ikenberry, "The Liberal International Order and its Discontents," 511.
[338] Glaser, "A Flawed Framework," 76.

prophecy of ever more intense competition and conflict. The continued participation in and commitment to the liberal international order on the part of China, coupled with the relative inability of Russia to mount a potent challenge to the order, suggests that the order's prophesied demise will not soon come to pass.

Despite some misalignment of objectives and status, not to mention material capacity, there are significant areas of potential Sino-Russian convergence in terms of their attempts to reshape the future of international order. The two countries concur about the primacy of sovereignty as an ordering principle of international relations, they both favour a state-based pluralism in opposition to the universalist and individualist approach that has been advanced by many Western powers, and they both see their interests being best served in a polycentric world order.[339] At the end of the day, however, neither country seems intent on creating an entirely separate order to compete with the main elements of the liberal international order in the near future. Rather, China and Russia both seek to increase their regional and global influence both through and in parallel with the rules and institutions of the order itself. Over the long term, through their actions and words, they are striving to alter some of the core norms and definitions that underpin the liberal international order to better suit their interests.

The extent to which China and Russia will be able to win other countries over to their interpretations and establish new norms ultimately "depends in part on how trustworthy middling and smaller states find China [and Russia],"[340] a potentially challenging objective for either state. Regardless, it is clear that the liberal international

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[339] Bobo Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order," *China International Strategy Review* 2 (2020): 309-313.
[340] Owen, "Ikenberry," 60.

order is being challenged by both countries, along with a swath of other countries that have not been the historical leaders and beneficiaries of the post-1945 order. Whereas Russia is more tainted by its Cold War legacy in some respects, China has long emphasized its support for and affinity with developing countries.[341] With that in mind, China may be able to leverage its leadership within BRICS to gather broad-based support to effect change regarding the structure and meaning of the international order better than it would via Sino-Russian cooperation.

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[341] Kim, "Is China Spoiling," 15.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA

Though the current liberal international order does not appear to be in an irreversible decline, it is under considerable pressure emanating from internal and external sources. These stresses may well constitute a crisis, but in such a crisis, opportunities for reform coexist with uncertainty and risk. The liberal international order has been becoming broader and more diverse, politically as well as conceptually, as states that previously existed on its periphery have been increasingly brought into its core. As this process continues, emerging trends suggest that the present order could morph into something that bears little resemblance to the order that was constructed in the aftermath of the Second World War. In particular, hitherto central aspects of the liberal international order—namely economic and political openness—risk gradually losing their relevance as the system evolves, leaving the states that have supported and benefitted most from the American-led order of the last 70 years with some concerning implications that must be addressed. As Andrea Pareschi warns, contestation surrounding the meaning of contemporary international order may be settled "in directions that render the international system less 'liberal' though still 'rules-based.'"[342]

Prior to Ikenberry's popularization of the term, few spoke of the "liberal international order" as a means to describe the network of multilateral institutions and arrangements that constitute the post-1945 world order.[343] Presumably as Ikenberry originally intended, the phrase does not evoke a parsimonious, loosely rule-based international order based on state sovereignty and great power management. Rather, the

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[342] Pareschi, "At a Crossroads," 135.
[343] Flockhart, "Is this the End," 225.

concept capitalizes on preexisting connotations to suggest an order that is fundamentally "liberal" in other ways, encompassing a comprehensive framework of international law with an emphasis on democratic self-determination and human rights. In other words, it is not simply a descriptive concept, but also a normative goal, which also makes it inherently suspect from the standpoint of states like China and Russia that take issue with its apparent focus on individual rights rather than the rights of states. As such, as Canadian scholar and former diplomat Leigh Sarty has recently remarked, the concept is "at best analytically slippery and at worst dismayingly Western-centric."[344]

Perhaps in response to suspicion on the part of rising powers, world leaders of many stripes have begun to speak with increasing frequency of a "rules-based" order that must be defended against those states that seek to operate outside the bounds of expected behaviour. Chrystia Freeland's speech to the Canadian House of Commons in 2017, following the lead of the "rules-based" language used by the US and the UK from at least 2015, may be seen as but one example of an attempt to make the contemporary international order sound more inclusive to appeal to countries that have long stood outside its corridors of power. For China's part, Xi Jinping has recently begun advocating for "a peaceful international environment and a stable international order" as an alternative.[345] Under President Joe Biden, the United States has also been altering its language surrounding the contemporary international order. Rather than advocating the liberal or even rules-based international order as had been the practice of previous US administrations, the Biden administration's recent *Interim National Security Guidance*

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[344] Sarty, "The Fragile Authoritarians," 616.
[345] Xi Jinping, "His Own Words."

instead refers to the need for a "stable and open international system."[346] However, such attempts at broadening the understanding of the post-1945 international order risk becoming counterproductive in the long run through their watering down of the more objectionable "liberal" elements of the order. At the same time, as noted above, even the "rules-based" phraseology has aroused opposition and suspicion from Russia.[347]

In any case, the recent challenges facing the contemporary international order have been substantial, and a return to the heady days of multilateral exuberance accompanying American preeminence in the aftermath of the Cold War is almost inconceivable. That being said, the challenges facing the international order at present are not monolithic; rather, they vary in form and quality depending upon their source and context. In all four of the countries studied in this paper—the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and Russia—there are both practical and discursive factors that are collectively chipping away at the foundations of the liberal international order. While some of the more direct challenges, like Russia's annexation of Crimea or Trump's trade wars, are immediately apparent and have been amply captured by observers, many of the challenges facing the international order are more abstract and ideational in character.

In all four of the countries in question, the construction of narratives about the international order have been based upon notions of how the country in question sees itself in the world. In essence, this observation serves as a clear reminder of the enduring importance of domestic politics—including aspirations of great power status or revisionist dreams of resurgence—to the conduct of international relations. However, as political theorist Robert Putnam cautions, the interaction between the domestic and the

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[346] United States of America, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*.
[347] Lavrov, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks, 23 June 2020.

international is a two-way street: "given the pervasive uncertainty that surrounds many international issues, messages from abroad can change minds, move the undecided, and hearten those in a domestic minority,"[348] so the ability to shape global narratives assumes structural power of its own. In other words, narrative contests within and between states, about their roles, how they fit into the broader international order, and about that order itself, can serve to shape the range of possible and likely actions of states in the international system.

Based on present declared aspirations, the longtime defenders of the liberal international order will be faced with a delicate balancing act as they seek to strengthen a liberal, rules-based international order by broadening its bases of support while simultaneously confronting the rising assertiveness of China and Russia. The advent of an increasingly confrontational competition mindset is already evident in the defence policy establishments of all three countries, as shown in the 2018 US NDSS, the 2021 UK *Integrated Review*, and the 2020 Canadian PFEC. While confronting China may play well to domestic audiences in the US, the UK, and even Canada (especially given recent Chinese retaliatory detentions of Canadians in response to the arrest of Huawei executive Weng Wanzhou),[349] there is a real danger that framing the international environment as an arena of perpetual "dangerous competition"[350] becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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[348] Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 455.

[349] Preston Lim, "Sino-Canadian Relations in the Age of Justin Trudeau," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 26, no. 1 (2020): 25.

[350] Department of National Defence, *Pan-Domain Force Employment Concept*, 12.

Instead, political leaders and foreign and defence policy practitioners need to be clear-eyed, and must strive to grapple with the implications of the manner in which narratives underpinning each country's foreign policy shape the world in which the country operates. For Canada in particular, the country has much to gain by seeking to join the chorus of voices aiming to strengthen the contemporary international order. As Putnam observes, a position in defence of wide-ranging multilateralism is generally beneficial for, and better supported by the public in, "smaller, more open economies, as opposed to more self-sufficient countries, like the United States."[351] While a return to a golden age of oversized Canadian multilateral influence is not grounded in reality, there are clear interests-based reasons for Canada to continue attempting the shape the global narrative about the overall benefits of a liberal international order. Indeed, as Sarty posits, "calls to reinforce the RBIO [rules-based international order] by doubling down on Canada's traditional commitment to multilateralism can best advance Canadian interests if they are grounded in a broader appreciation of how the structure of world politics may be changing and what this may mean for Canada."[352] Going beyond Sarty's understanding of the effects of material structure on Canada's engagement with multilateralism, though, an interests-based approach to advancing Canadian interests in the international order must recognize the power of narratives in constructing the norms that serve as quasi-structural motivators and constraints shaping the actions of states.

In such a light, pursuing quick wins by increasing collaboration with "like-minded" countries, as favoured by both Canada's defence policy and the UK's *Integrated Review* along with the "democratic alliances" approach favoured by Biden, may appear to

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[351] Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics," 443.
[352] Sarty, "The Fragile Authoritarians," 617.

be a promising avenue to bolster the liberal international order. As political scientists

Jamies Gillies and Shaun Narine caution, however, such a strategy "privileges a narrow

understanding of sovereignty, and assumes a distinct ethnocentric bias" that could have

corrosive long-term effects in normative terms regarding the inclusiveness of the

international order.[353] Thus, Canada must be careful to nurture relationships with allies

and partners for the sake of sustaining a parallel system wherein traditional status is

perpetuated into the future, but rather with an underlying goal of strengthening a

comprehensive liberal international order that is "less dependent upon US leadership and

more resilient against attempts to undermine it"[354] over the long run. This will require

being careful to avoid compromising the current order by constructing further

arrangements that might be perceived in the global South as exclusionary or parallel.

Taking such an approach does not necessarily mean a return to Pollyanna-esque

engagement with China and Russia, however. Standing up to China (and Russia) while

concurrently bolstering the liberal international order could involve seeking to shape the

strategic narrative by highlighting the disconnect between China's rhetoric in support of

the international order and its actions that clearly contravene international law.[355] At the

same time, Canada will need to work to ensure maximum Canadian alignment with the

core principles underpinning the liberal international order to avoid charges of

hypocrisy.[356] Instead of spouting (largely US) rhetoric about an almost inescapable

return to strategic competition between "peer" adversaries, the real competition over

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[353] Jamie Gillies and Shaun Narine, "The Trudeau Government and the Case for Multilateralism in an Uncertain World," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 26, no. 3 (2020): 258-259.

[354] Fehl and Thimm, "Dispensing with the Indispensable Nation," 41.

[355] Lim, "Sino-Canadian Relations," 27.

[356] *Ibid.*, 36.

which Canada may hope to have meaningful influence is in the discursive realm. In the realm of ideas, Canada can continue to exert influence in small yet cumulative steps by consistently reinforcing core norms and narratives of the liberal international order.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic just over a year ago, the trends collectively tugging at the loose threads of the liberal international order in recent years have generally accelerated. As Bobo Lo has outlined, the pandemic "has dramatized the extent of the new world disorder. It has exposed the feebleness of global governance and its institutions; highlighted profound failings of leadership; exacerbated US-China confrontation; and widened divisions over ideology and identity."[357] For Canada, Donald Trump's threat early in the pandemic to prevent the cross-border shipment of critical Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were a particularly shocking reminder of the precariousness of international cooperation.[358] Around the world, the pandemic has precipitated widespread calls for policies of autarky,[359] and levels of cooperation and trust between even liberal democratic states have been tested to the point of near breakdown.[360] While Boyle's recent proclamation of the death of the liberal international order[361] is perhaps sensationalistic, the events of the past year or so have served as a pressure cooker of sorts for the international order, amplifying existing tensions and accelerating calls for change.

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[357] Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership," 312.

[358] Alex Balingall and Robert Benzie, "Critical COVID-19 Masks Heading to Canada after Trump and 3M Reach Deal," *Toronto Star*, 6 April 2020, last accessed 18 April 2021, https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2020/04/06/chrystia-freeland-says-canada-is-pushing-for-an-exemption-on-donald-trumps-order-to-withhold-medical-gear.html.

[359] Krzysztof Pelc, "Can COVID-Era Export Restrictions be Deterred?" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53 (2020): 354.

[360] Michael J. Boyle, "America and the Illiberal Order After Trump," *Survival* 62, no. 6 (December 2020-January 2021): 51.

[361] *Ibid*.

Among such upheaval, it may be helpful to recall Royer's insight that times of crisis for the international order can also be seen as times of opportunity.[362] Whether the liberal international order survives relatively intact or is transformed by the confluence of pressures acting upon it, the present perceived crisis in the international order may come to be seen as a pivotal moment. Indeed, as Thomas Volgy and Kelly Marie Gordell submit, substantial changes in the architecture of international relations "is relatively rare, [but] typically comes on the heels of tumultuous events that make extant architecture useless, such as in the aftermath of the First and Second world wars."[363] The present layered challenges of Trump, Brexit, Chinese ascendance and Russian disruption, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, indeed pose critical questions about the enduring relevance and utility of the contemporary international order as it now exists, but perhaps does not go so far as to pronounce the order "useless" overall.

In sum, the path forward for the liberal international order is far from self-evident. Miles Kahler, writing in 2018, suggested that the post-Cold War international order was approaching an inflection point, whereby three possible futures could be foreseen: (a) fragmentation accompanied by the rise of regionalism and bilateralism; (b) stagnation and gradually decreasing utility; and (c) transformation, involving the more extensive inclusion of non-traditional actors and models of interaction into global governance writ large.[364] As of 2021, any of these three futures is still possible, but more likely various elements of the international order will adapt as the normative and material contests

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[362] Royer, "On World Order."

[363] Thomas J. Volgy and Kelly Marie Gordell, "Rising Powers, Status Competition, and Global Governance: A Closer Look at Three Contested Concepts for Analyzing Status Dynamics in International Politics," *Contemporary Politics* 25, no. 5 (2019): 525.

[364] Miles Kahler, "Global Governance: Three Futures," *International Studies Review* 20 (2018), 239-246.

between states and non-state actors forges a realization of an amalgam of these possible futures. For the liberal international order and for Canada, the implications of these shifts are not yet fully apparent. The outcome of the contestation in the order is not preordained, as Canada and other countries will continue to contribute to shaping both the discourse and practice of international relations. In so doing, Canadian policymakers will need to be clear-eyed in their assessment of the character of the international order that emerges from contemporary crises, to ensure that Canada is able to advance its interests in a way that is prudent and principled rather than being swept along in the wake of more powerful actors.

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