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The Future of Liberal World Order

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As these essays show, there is a lively debate over the future of world order. Sergey Chugrow offers a dark portrait of the breakdown of what he calls Western hegemony, driven in part by Russia's grievances and aggression in Ukraine. He points to a future where international order will have a mix of realist geopolitics and post-modern diversity. Keisuke Iida sees the debate over liberal international order as a return to older debates about the viability of hegemonic order and the role of regions and non-Western values in a post-hegemonic global system. Peter Haas sees the debate over liberal international order as a window onto various new forms of global governance. Behind these important observations is Amitav Acharya's vision of a post-American global order marked by diverse regional sub-systems; a world that is globalized, diversified, and localized. These developments lead Acharya to announce the 'end' of the American-led liberal international order.

In *Liberal Leviathan*, I argue that the American-led international order is in crisis.[1] In the decades after World War II, the United States and other liberal democratic states built a distinctive type of order – initially in the shadow of the Cold War. I call it a liberal hegemonic order. It was an order organized around big ideas and big institutions. Open trade, multilateralism, alliances, partnerships, democratic solidarity, human rights, and American hegemonic leadership – these were all ideas enshrined in this order. This was a postwar order that reflected what David Kennedy has called the 'move to institutions'.[2] To an extraordinary degree, the American-led world order was built around institutions, including the 'old dinosaurs' that still exist today: the United Nations, IMF, GATT (later the WTO), and the World Bank. A wide variety of regional institutions and far-flung security alliances were also established. Over the last sixty years, the global system has shifted dramatically: the Cold War came and went,

[1] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.
[2] David Kennedy, 'The Move to Institutions', *Cardozo Law Review*, 8 (1987): 841.

American unipolar power has risen and declined, and today, non-Western developing states are gaining in power and influence. Yet, across these decades, this global system of institutions, alliances, and partnerships remain. Indeed, institutionalized cooperation among states – Western and non-Western – has deepened in the last two decades. In the decades since the end of the Cold War, a small library of books have been written about the 'end of the American world order', and yet the most striking features of the modern global order – reflected in these big ideas and big institutions – still remain at its core.

If this is true, what is in 'crisis?' The crisis of the American-led international order is a crisis of authority. It is not a crisis of liberal internationalism. This is an important distinction, and it needs to be clearly spelled out. Liberal international order is order that is built around open and at least loosely rule-based relations. These are the sort of minimum requirements for liberal internationalism. Openness refers to the ability of states to have access to each other's societies – it is the ability to engage in exchange and trade – of goods, capital, ideas, and so forth. Rule-based relations refer to relations between states that are ordered according to general principles and arrangements. Rules and institutions take on a multilateral form. As John Ruggie argues, 'What distinguishes the multilateral form from others is that it coordinates behavior among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct.'[3] An open and loosely rule-based international order can be contrasted with alternative types of order, such as order built around regional blocs, spheres of influence, and imperial zones. Of course, the postwar American-led international order was not completely open and multilateral in form. But it has had these essential features – features that did not exist as fully in past international orders. On 'top' of this postwar liberal-style order was American hegemonic leadership. My argument is that this hegemonic organization of liberal order is in crisis. The deep principles of liberal order are not being contested; what is being contested is the old 'authority relations' that have guided liberal international order over the decades.

Seen in this way, the 'crisis' of the American-led international order is a crisis of success. Over the last 60 years, this order has facilitated a wide array of regional and global transformations. The world economy was opened up and the 'golden years' of growth and development were ushered in. The project of European union was launched. Germany and Japan were brought into the liberal democratic world, becoming leading partners in managing the world economy. Countries in Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia made democratic transitions and joined the global trading system. More recently, countries such as Brazil, India, and China have experienced their most successful decades of economic growth and social advancement. My argument is that these global transformations were facilitated by the American-led

[3] John Ruggie, 'Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution', in John Ruggie (ed.), *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an International Order*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 14.

liberal international order, but now they are also eroding the governing relations of that order. This is the crisis of authority. These globe-spanning transformations of states and peoples have 'overrun' its governance arrangements. Put differently, liberal internationalism has outgrown American hegemony.

So we need to ask two separate questions about world order today. Are there constituencies – rising, declining, or otherwise – for international order that is organized around openness and multilateral-style rules and institutions? And are there constituencies – rising, declining, or otherwise – for American leadership? With the global shifts in power and influence, it is clear that more states are seeking voice and authority in the operation of the system. This is true, even if there is still a surprising resilience to American global leadership. No other state or coalition of states has really stepped forward to offer alternative governance arrangements. Nonetheless, in a multitude of ways, the global system is groping toward some sort of post-hegemonic system of global governance.

What is striking is that despite this crisis of authority, there is a great deal of support for liberal international types of order. As I argue in *Liberal Leviathan*, the power transition today is not triggering a fundamental struggle over the deep principles of order, even as it diffuses power and authority away from the West. China and other non-Western developing states are rising up within rather than seeking to work around the rules and institutions over the last sixty years. Most of the modernizing elites in these countries are what Miles Kahler calls 'conservative globalizers'.[4] They are using the open and loosely rule-based system to their advantage, seeking to advance themselves and their societies through trade and engagement with global rules and institutions. They are not seeking a 'post-liberal' order based on closed blocs, economic spheres of influence, or neo-imperial groupings. Putin's Russia is perhaps an exception – one that helps prove the rule. Taking a global view, what is most interesting is that the constituencies for liberal internationalism are growing.

The struggle today is about authority and voice. It is about who sits at the table and over how to reorganize the platforms of authority. It is about revising the 'political hierarchy' of states. Revising the global political hierarchy is not necessarily as easy task. It is a struggle, and it is playing itself out within regions and within the various global institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank. China and other rising non-Western developing states are seeking a greater voice in these old multilateral institutions and simultaneously working to establish some new development-oriented institutions, such as the BRICS Bank. There is contestation across these various old and new institutions. But the struggle is not about rival models of modernity or even revisionist ideologies of order.

The most dramatic vision of a shift in global order is advanced by realist theorists of power transition. These authors – such as Robert Gilpin, Paul Kennedy, Organski, and

[4] Miles Kahler, 'Rising Powers and Global Governance: Negotiating Change in a Resilent Status Quo', *International Affairs* (2013): 711–29.

E.H. Carr – offer structural theories of order and change in world politics.[5] A powerful state rises up, often after a hegemonic war, and organizes the rules and institutions of the global system. Over time, the power of the leading state weakens, and a new cycle of struggle over order is initiated. The old rules and institutions of order enter into crisis. Their legitimacy is questioned, and the old leading state finds it increasingly difficult to defend them. Out of this crisis, new leading states emerge and a new set of global rules and institutions are forged. If no new leader emerges, the overall coherence of order declines as spoilers and free riders undermine the old arrangements.

There are various reasons for why, despite the power transformations, that we are seeing more continuity, integration, and evolution in the existing order – rather than abrupt upheavals, revisionist agendas, and deep struggles over principles. First, the 'old order' is different than past orders. It is 'easier to join and harder to overturn'. This is a critical point that is often missed. The existing international order is not just an 'American order'. It is a wider and deeper system of relations, built on deeply rooted and much older sets of organizing principles and political foundations. The liberal international order has various characteristics that set it apart from other types of order – those in earlier eras or those that might be proposed. The historical record shows that the postwar international order has been quite adaptive and expansive. It has facilitated the integration of a wide range of states, as I noted earlier, including Germany, Japan, and other states across all the regions of the world. It also has a capacity for shared leadership. The very notion of an 'American-led' order misses the more accurate notion that there is a wider array of institutions that manifest shared forms of leadership – the G7, G20, the UN Security Council, and numerous other leadership groupings. The existing order also is one where the 'profits' of participation within in are shared widely. China, India, and other rising non-Wester developing states have reaped massive economic gains from their participation within the liberal international system. Finally, this existing order appears to accommodate a variety of 'ideologies' of development and politics. There is the neo-liberal ideology of the Anglo-American world. But there is also the social democratic model and the state-led developmental model. They have all coexisted within the wider system. Together these features of the modern international system give it unusual capacities for adaptation, expansion, integration, and evolution.

Second, liberal internationalism is not a Western idea. It is ultimately one with global appeal. Rising non-Western states are advantaged by an open and loosely rule-based system as much as old Western states. Openness created opportunities to gain access to other societies – for trade, capital, knowledge, and technology. Multilateral rules create tools for these states to operate at the global level on a more equal footing. Rules provide protections for rising states as much as they do for declining

[5] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, New York: Knopf, 1958; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York: Knopf, 1987; and E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

Western powers. There are struggles within and between states in the global system over the merits of specific rules and institutions. States continuously make trade-offs between sovereignty and interdependence. But these struggles and trade-offs are not fundamentally ones that divide East and West. Liberal internationalism has its supporters and detractors in Europe and the United States, but the same is true in Asia and other regions of the non-West. Liberal internationalism is a way of organizing the world. It is not a cultural, civilizational, or hegemonic artifact.

Finally, in looking at the current 'crisis' of the American-led liberal international order, it is important to use a wide-angle lense. The focus is typically on China. But there are a wider array of states that are rising up and seeking a role in this evolving system. These include what might be called the great 'middle class' of states – which includes Mexico, South Korea, Indonesia, Turkey, Australia, Canada, as well as Brazil, India, and many others. These are states that are pursuing various sorts of 'stakeholder' strategies: pushing for more multilateralism, influencing world politics through agenda setting, bridge building, and coalition diplomacy. Seen from this wider angle, the global order is witnessing an expansion in the constituencies and supports for a reformed and updated liberal international order.

In his lively polemic, Acharya forecasts the unraveling of the American-led global order, taking aim at American thinkers who naively believe that rising non-Western states – such as China, India, and Brazil can be brought into the existing international order as stakeholders.[6] The problem he sees is that they simply have different values and orientations than Western states, and they resist the special privileges that the United States retains as the liberal hegemonic leader. Making matters worse, these rising states do not have a coherent or agreed upon vision of a post-American order. So Acharya sees the emergence of a 'multiplex' world in which countries and regions go their own way, each producing and watching their own shows concurrently in different theaters. The book is an imaginative effort to depict a more decentralized and pluralistic world. But the vision of increasingly distinct regional orders misses the deeper forces of global integration that have propelled non-Western states upward in the first place. The book also confuses non-Western discomfort with American dominance in governance institutions with their more sympathetic views of the underlying principles of open, rule-based international order. Indeed, Acharya seems to admit this when he observes that the existing governance system is not just an 'American order' but one that has been built over the decades by the push and pull of many states, ideologies, and agendas. The future will not be a multiplex but something more like the Agra Sophia in Istanbul, which is one large complex but bears the architectural markings of various cultures and religions.

[6] Amitav Acharya, *The End of the American World Order*, London: Polity Press, 2014.

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