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**Before and After the Liberal International Order.
Overlapping and Diverging Trajectories of the
International Society and the Liberal Order**

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Before and After the Liberal International Order

Overlapping and Diverging Trajectories of International Society and the Liberal Order

Arie M. Kacowicz

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I emphasise the need to disaggregate the rise and current decline of the Liberal International Order (LIO) from the emergence, evolution, and changing dynamics of international society (IS). The differentiation between the IS and the LIO has caused confusion yet holds significant normative and policy implications regarding the current and future international order. I start with a conceptual distinction between the IS and the LIO, emphasising their commonalities and differences, followed by a brief historical review of their emergence and evolution over the last two centuries. A discussion of the contemporary challenges posed to both the IS and the LIO addresses both challenges that overlap and are distinctive in each domain. Finally, I speculate about the practical and policy implications of drawing this distinction by referring to the role of China, the role of the Global South, and the future of the international order.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

In this paper, I make the conceptual, historical, and normative claim that *there is a need to disaggregate the rise and current decline of the Liberal International Order from the emergence, evolution, and changing dynamics of the international society*. With a few exceptions (Hurrell 2023; Ikenberry 2014; Lake et al. 2021: 229; Tourinho 2021), there seems to be quite some confusion regarding the overlapping of International

Society (IS) and the Liberal International Order (LIO). Although these two have co-constituted each other and co-evolved historically, there is a need to emphasise their different trajectories and divergences, extrapolating into the future of the emerging world order of the post-post-Cold War era and its concomitant challenges and contestations. This distinction is crucial since it holds normative and policy implications for how the (Liberal) West deals with China, Russia, and the Global South. As we show, the challenges faced by the IS might overlap but are far from identical to those encountered by the LIO. For instance, framing the Russian war on Ukraine in terms of a democratic-autocratic schism (according to the LIO) is radically different from emphasising the Russian violation of the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty (according to the IS).

In analytical and normative terms, the Liberal International Order is just one possible order within the international society grand scheme and not the only and exclusive one that keeps humanity from the abyss of disorder and chaos. In historical terms, the Westphalian order of international society *preceded* the LIO; it is more minimalist and modest in its claims, and it might persist after the potential shrinking of the LIO back to a bounded order of international society in the near future. The resilience of the current Global International Society (GIS) is premised upon a plurality of independent and interdependent nation-states, even when moving away from its Western and Liberal orbit (Buzan 2020; Buzan/Schouenborg 2018).

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In *historical terms*, I concur with G. John Ikenberry (2014), Beth A. Simmons, and Hein E. Goemans (2021: 387) that the contemporary international order is the product of two different order-building projects, which began several centuries ago. One was the creation and expansion of the modern state system, a project formally dating back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which emphasised norms, rules, and principles associated with territorial borders and state sovereignty. The second project, which evolved later, had been the construction of the Liberal International Order, promoted by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, though it consolidated only in the second half of the 20th century and became ideologically hegemonic for the brief period of the “unipolar moment” after the end of the Cold War. A rudimentary LIO was led by the United Kingdom from the 19th century until World War I and a more institutionalised one by the United States from 1945 until the present. The LIO continued promoting the universal norms of democracy and human rights, at times contradicting the principles of the Westphalian territorial order.

The Westphalian system of sovereign states that emerged after 1648 embodied the basic tenets of international society, including the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and nonintervention, and a rudimentary, limited version of self-determination (Bull 1977: 33–34; Ikenberry 2014: 92). Chronologically, the European International Society of the 18th and 19th centuries partially overlapped with the diffusion of the Liberal principles during the 19th century and the “liberal ascendancy” promoted by the United Kingdom in the 19th century, and especially by the United States in the aftermath of World War II, as related to the principle of national self-determination. Moreover, the European international society of the 19th and early 20th century expanded and evolved into a broader, global international society following decolonisation after World War II

and leading into our contemporary Global International Society (Buzan/Schouenborg 2018).

In *practical (policy-oriented)* terms, disaggregating the LIO from the GIS is relevant to speculating and extrapolating about the future of international relations. In this context, we can all agree that the brutal behaviour of Russia in its invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 disqualifies it from a possible blueprint to recreate a “Global Concert” to manage global governance sensibly in the foreseeable future (Haass/Kupchan 2021). Yet, the puzzling question with an unclear answer refers to the role of China in keeping the current and future international order stable. It might well be the case that China undermines the LIO (especially related to its political rather than economic principles) while advocating the return to a more minimalist Westphalian international order based on national sovereignty rather than promoting democracy and human rights. Moreover, an important related issue refers to the possible role to be played by some preeminent Global South countries in the architecture of the post-post-Cold War order.

The paper includes the following sections. The next section presents a conceptual clarification drawing the distinctions between the IS and the LIO, followed by a brief historical review of the emergence and evolution of the IS and the LIO in the last two centuries. Next is a discussion of the contemporary challenges confronting both the IS and the LIO. Certain challenges overlap the two, while others are unique to each domain. Finally, I speculate about the practical and policy implications of drawing the distinction between the GIS and the LIO by referring to three paramount themes of international relations: the role of China, the role of the Global South, and the future of the international order.

2 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS: “INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY” AND THE “LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER”

2.1 INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY: CONCEPT AND PRACTICES

The concept of “international society” is directly related to the Grotian tradition of international politics, carving a middle ground between the Realist conception of a mere system of states and the universalistic/idealistic Liberal (Kantian) view of a potential community of humankind. According to Bull,

[a] *society of states* (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions. If states today form an international society, this is because recognizing certain common interests and perhaps some common values, they regard themselves as bound by certain rules in their dealings with one another, such as they should respect one another’s claim to independence, that they should honor agreements into which they enter, and that they should be subject to certain limitations in exercising force against one another. At the same time, they cooperate in the working of institutions such as the forms of procedures of international law, the machinery of diplomacy and general international organization, and the customs and conventions of war (Bull 1977: 13).

Any international society has three basic elements: common interests, common norms and rules, and common institutions. Like any other society, an *international society* includes a set of actors who share *common interests* in the elementary goals of social interaction, including preserving life and freedom and limiting violence. At the level of international society, we can identify four such goals: (1) preserving the system and the

society of states themselves; (2) maintaining the independence and sovereignty of the individual member-states; (3) maintaining peace, defined as the normal absence of war among the members of the international society; and (4) limiting violence resulting in death or bodily harm, keeping promises, and stabilising possession by rules of property (Bull 1977: 16–19; Kacowicz 2005: 44–46; Press-Barnathan 2004: 196–197).

Among many other possibilities, norms can be defined as standards of behaviour spelled out in terms of rights and obligations (Krasner 1982: 186). Similarly, rules are general imperative principles that require or authorise prescribed classes of persons or groups to behave in prescribed ways (Bull 1977: 54–55). The essential norm of the international society is the principle of state sovereignty. This norm includes the principles of territorial integrity, political independence of existing states, legal equality, and nonintervention as its corollary. Additional norms of this “Westphalian order” might include the peaceful settlement of international disputes and the prohibition and regulation of military force (Buzan 2004: 7; Ikenberry 2011; Tourinho 2021: 267).

Common interests, values, norms, and rules have a certain impact on the member-states of international society through their articulation, formulation, and formalisation into common *institutions*. Institutions can be considered a set of habits and practices shaped toward realising common goals (Bull 1977: 74).

According to Bull, the major institutions of the international society are the nation-states themselves. In the absence of a recognised supranational authority, states cooperate and collaborate, shaping institutions such as the balance of power, international law, diplomatic mechanisms, great power management, and even the regulation of (just) war. Several authors add to this list of “primary institutions” trade and other mechanisms

of the international political economy in the context of interdependence and globalisation (Buzan 2004, 2014; Holsti 2004; Terradas 2020: 113–114). Institutions might sustain several dynamic degrees of formalisation and institutionalisation, ranging from informal diplomatic contacts through elaborate schemes of economic and political integration (Kacowicz 2005: 46). These major institutions actually embody the main practices of international society within the framework of a pluralist and “thin” approach based on the logic of sovereign independent states (Buzan 2004: 7; Hurrell 2007: 298).

2.2 INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY, WORLD SOCIETY, AND THE CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Unlike the concept of “international society”, the loose and ambiguous idea of *world society* takes individuals, non-state actors and organisations, and ultimately humankind as a whole as the focus of global societal identities and arrangements, transcending the state system that stays at the centre of the “pluralist” version of international society (Buzan 2004: 7). According to the “world society” approach, there is a dense network of state and non-state actors involved in the production of multi-layered governance structures in the context of globalisation, identifying shared values of “humankind” rather than “independent sovereign states” (Barnett/Sikkink 2011: 750; Buzan 2004; Linklater/Suganami 2006). The “world society” approach conceptually and normatively overlaps with many elements of a cosmopolitan, universalistic, Liberal (Kantian) perspective. In that sense, it also overlaps with many tenets of the LIO.

Our contemporary international society can be characterised as a *Global International Society* (GIS), resulting from the expansion of the European international society into a broader, global international society after World War II. What

started and evolved as a peculiar European political and social form underwent global expansion through processes of colonisation and decolonisation *vis-à-vis* the Americas, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. In addition, there were processes of socialisation and competition *vis-à-vis* Russia and the Ottoman Empire and processes of encounter and reform with Japan, China, and Iran (Bull/Watson 1984; Buzan/Schouenborg 2018: 2,11). Moreover, non-state actors such as benign and malign nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and less organised groups have become crucial components of the GIS, in addition to its essential inter-state dimension (Keohane 2005: 123).

This contemporary GIS is characterised by being less Western-dominated, lacking a clear Western hegemonic dominance. Instead, its major feature is that of a “deep pluralism”, according to which the Great Powers are mostly motivated by narrow domestic interests rather than caring about providing essential mechanisms of global governance to preserve the international society (Acharya/Buzan 2019: 282; Buzan 2020: 8). This implies a great diffusion of power, ideas, norms, cultural values, and wealth (Hurrell 2023).

2.3 THE CONCEPT AND MEANING OF THE “LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER”

The “Liberal International Order” (LIO) is a particular philosophical and practical approach to promoting order in international relations derived from the European Westphalian system in conjunction with Liberal ideas. It is historically embedded in the international order sponsored by the hegemonic actions of the United Kingdom in the 19th century, and especially by the United States since the end of World War II, first in the context of the Cold War and later during the post-Cold War period. At the same time, we should keep in mind that the liberalism of the 19th century was very different from the liberalism of the

20th and early 21st centuries. Liberalism has always been a contested and fluid discourse, not homogeneous. Thus, conceptualising the LIO as a coherent and unified order in the singular form disguises the tensions and contradictions it experienced over time (Shu 2023: 7).

In philosophical and conceptual terms, the LIO is related to the intellectual and philosophical tenets of Liberal Internationalism, as presented in the writings of Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham. Kant's *Perpetual Peace* heralded three "definitive articles of peace" through the components of "republicanism" (liberal democracies), a pacific union of Liberal states through international law and institutions, and the promotion of free trade and cosmopolitanism. Similarly, Bentham coined the term "internationalism" with reference to international law and international institutions and cooperation. The League of Nations and the principle of collective security during the interwar period (from 1919 to 1939), and the Charter of the United Nations institutionally embody some of the principles of Liberal Internationalism (Burchill 1996; Chan 2021; Doyle 1986; Dunne 2020; Kant (1795) 2021).

The LIO emphasises the possibility of individual liberty and national self-determination, progress, and morality in international relations, peace through law and international institutions, free trade and economic interdependence, and the promotion of democracy and human rights. Thus, it includes three major dimensions: *political* (the rule of law and promotion of *democracy* and human rights), *economic* (open markets, exchanges, and trade), and *intergovernmental* (multilateralism and international relations that might enable the possibility of peaceful change)².

2.4 COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE GIS AND THE LIO

There is a significant overlap between the tenets of the IS and the principles of the LIO. In essence, we can argue that both the IS and the LIO promote and enhance the sovereign principle of the legal equality of states, the peaceful resolution of international disputes, and the pre-eminence of international institutions and international law within the framework of multilateralism. Several scholars have argued that the Westphalian order and the LIO have historically "co-constituted each other over time" (see, for instance, Ikenberry 2011, 2014, 2023; Lake et al. 2022: 225; Tourinho 2021). In my assessment, the LIO derived from the Westphalian order, but over time, especially since the end of the Cold War in 1991, their trajectories have diverged and even contradicted each other. This setting carries paramount implications for the future of the international order.

In conceptual terms, although the LIO does not contradict many of the basic principles of the Westphalian order, there are major points of tension and dissent between the IS and the LIO. First, the logic of LIO might suggest the preference for a Cosmopolitan logic of transcending the state system over the pluralist logic of an international society of member states (Lake et al. 2021: 232). Thus, the LIO might enhance the prominence of international institutions in a supra-national direction at the cost of national sovereignty. Second, as Simmons and Goemans (2021: 392) argue, whereas the LIO and Liberalism, in general, are committed to universalism, aggregate welfare, and individual utility, the "pluralist" international society proponents, like their Realist counterparts, emphasise territorial borders, groups, locale, and national allegiances. Third, the post-national Liberal credo of the post-Cold War era has frequently overruled the principle of nonintervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states by endorsing universal principles such as the "Responsibility

² Dunne (2020: 104–109); Cooley/Nexon (2022); Finnemore et al. (2021: iii); Ikenberry (2020: 17–18); Lake et al. (2021: 228); Paul (2021: 1604, 1618).

to Protect” (R2P) through humanitarian intervention (Weiss/Wallace 2021: 637; Börzel/Zürn 2021). Fourth, we should differentiate between the functional logic of territorial sovereignty, considered one of the basic tenets of the IS, and the moral principle of national self-determination, traditionally endorsed, at least in rhetorical terms, within the LIO. In contrast to the tendency to bundle these two principles, there is an incongruence and incompatibility between territorial sovereignty and national self-determination for a myriad of reasons. They include the inherent difficulty of adjusting political to national borders; Realpolitik considerations, which led to the partition of nations across different states (especially during the Cold War); the lingering effects of *uti possidetis*, turning the post-colonial borders into official borders; and the occupation and annexation of territories populated by other national groups, potentially leading to civil and international wars (Heimann et al. 2023).

The points of agreement and divergence between the international society and the LIO are summarised in Table 1.

3 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION: FROM COMMON ROOTS TO DIVERGING CONTEMPORARY TRAJECTORIES

There have been two major macro-historical order-building projects that developed in Europe since the end of the 17th century: first, the Westphalian state system, which focused on the management of the European international society by the great powers, and second, the period of “Liberal ascendancy” under the aegis of the United Kingdom (*Pax Britannica*) since 1815 until 1914, and more strikingly under the United States, since the end of World War II until recent days (*Pax Americana*) (Ikenberry 2014: 91).

The Westphalian system was formally established in Europe in 1648 in the aftermath of the Thirty Years’ War (from 1618 to 1648). In the 18th and 19th centuries, when Western Christendom declined and the state became fully articulated, international society became secular rather than Christian in its values or culture (Bull 1977: 33). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the impact of the Liberal revolutions in the United States (1776) and France (1789), led to the principle of

Table 1: Conceptual Commonalities and Differences between the IS and the LIO

Commonalities	
Sovereignty and legal equality of states	
Peaceful resolution of international disputes	
Role of international institutions, international law (multilateralism)	
Order and justice as paramount values	
Differences	
IS	LIO
Pluralist	Universalistic/cosmopolitan
Territorial borders, groups, locale	Universalism, individualism
Sovereignty	National self-determination
Sovereignty	Humanitarian intervention
Sovereignty	Supra-national authority
Nonintervention	Democracy and human rights
Order and justice	Justice trumps order

international legitimacy becoming national and popular, rather than dynastic (Bull 1977: 35). The French Revolution was followed by the Napoleonic Wars, which spread Liberal along nationalist ideas. At this point during the 19th century, liberalism and nationalism coexisted peacefully, so the principles of territorial sovereignty and national self-determination partially converged and overlapped.

The early 19th century also witnessed the independence of Latin American states after their war of independence from Spain (except for the peaceful transition in Brazil). Although not commonly recognised, Latin American countries played a significant role in promoting the norms and rules of the IS and the LIO (Kacowicz 2005; Tourinho 2021;). In Europe, the “European Concert” of 1815 to 1851 epitomised the rules and norms of international society along the Liberal principles of the United Kingdom as the economic hegemon who provided an open trade Liberal economic order under the aegis of *Pax Britannica*. Moreover, during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the Westphalian form of international society, or at least the core of Western states embodying it, became globally dominant through processes of colonisation and imperialism in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Thus, the Liberal project championed by the United Kingdom coexisted with imperialism and colonialism. It was enabled by the racist contours facilitated by the same Liberal principles that endorsed national self-determination in Europe but not in its African and Asian peripheries (Buzan/Schouenburg 2018: 16; Ikenberry 2014: 93). In the 20th century, international society expanded from its European core to the periphery, becoming global, especially with processes of decolonisation in the aftermath of World War II, leading to anti-colonial self-determination (but not necessarily along national lines) (Watson 2009).

The period between the two world wars, characterised pointedly by Edward H. Carr (1939) as

the “Twenty Years’ Crisis”, marked contradictory trends of Liberal ascendancy and crisis in managing international society. On the one hand, Woodrow Wilson promulgated a Liberal Order predicated upon self-determination, collective security, and the creation of the League of Nations. On the other hand, the LIO never materialised in practice due to the absence of a (Liberal) effective hegemon, as the United States took a leave of absence from managing international relations during the interwar period.

In ideological and normative terms, the League of Nations embodied the tenets of Liberal idealism, as expressed in Woodrow Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” enacted in January 1918 and later in the Kellogg-Briand Pact that banned war. The logic of collective security was an attempt to operationalise these Liberal tenets. Yet, although the Liberal ideology was enshrined in the League of Nations, there was no longer a normative consensus or cultural and ideological agreement among the great powers that were supposed to manage international society. One might argue that in opposition, and as a reaction to this Liberal ideological eminence (if not hegemony), the victory of Bolshevism that led to the creation of the Soviet Union in 1917, fascism in Italy in 1922, and national socialism in Germany in 1933 ended the “long” European 19th century of accepted norms of behaviour, including its Liberal tenets. This effect had nefarious implications for the rules of the game as enacted in the League’s Covenant, bringing about a striking dissonance between Liberal theory and its chaotic and contradictory practices, damaging the possibility of great powers managing international society (Claude 1971: 255–257; Craig/George 1995: 51; Paul 2021: 1628).

With the end of World War II, the “Liberal ascendancy” of the United States in managing international relations began. The LIO materialised as a partial, bounded order within the broader international order of the Cold War from 1945 to 1989.

There was a minimum agreement among the great powers regarding the contours of the Westphalian system, as enshrined in the UN Charter, including their role in keeping the international order and international society in general. Yet, below this “thin” consensus was a huge ideological gulf that separated two distinct normative orders that coexisted during the Cold War. One was Liberal and Western, led by the United States; the other was non-Liberal, led by the Soviet Union, materialised in the Warsaw Pact alliance and its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This intense ideological bipolarity across a wide range of political, economic, and social issues did not leave much room for cooperation between the two superpowers except for issues regarding nuclear deterrence and proliferation. Thus, the prospect of mutually assured destruction pushed the two superpowers to be pragmatic and moderate in spreading their ideologies overseas (Cui/Buzan 2016: 191; Gaddis 1986; Lascu-rettas 2020: 171; Mearsheimer 2019: 18–20).

During the Cold War, the LIO was bounded, not a truly global order, encompassing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries, most Latin American countries, and the US allies in East Asia and Australasia. This LIO was a kind of “constitutional pact” involving the Western countries under Washington’s leadership, including “secondary institutions” of the international society such as NATO, the Rio Pact, and the Bretton Wood Institutions (i.e. the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). The United Nations could be considered a Liberal institution that reflected a “hybrid” reality of *Realpolitik*. It encompassed the LIO in its Charter and principles, but it also (gradually) included the “rest of the world” that was not part of the LIO, that is, the former Soviet Union, China, and the emerging Third World after decolonisation (now, the Global South) (Börzel/Zürn 2021: 283; Chan 2021: 135). Many of these non-Liberal powers and countries took advantage of the United Nations to promote their national interests (though we could make a similar argument

regarding the United States and its Western Liberal European allies). Thus, paradoxically, the complex reality of the LIO during the Cold War also illustrated the symbiotic relationships between the IS and the Liberal principles of the LIO. As Ikenberry correctly observes, this order was partially built on the balance of power and party-sustained Liberal characteristics based on legitimacy and consent (Ikenberry 2014: 89).

With the end of the Cold War, the peaceful demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the turn to the “unipolar moment” under the hegemonic leadership of the United States, the LIO became the only “ideological game” in town. Hence, it seemed that it overlapped with the global scope of international society, at least for a couple of decades in the 1990s and into the early 2000s.

The 1990s witnessed a systemic shift from the previously bounded LIO based on multilateralism to a different and “thick” type of Liberal Order, what Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn called “*post-national liberalism*”. In this enhanced version of LIO, international institutions became empowered in a supra-national direction, raising problems of international and domestic legitimacy over time. Moreover, this period of globalisation and even hyper-globalisation provoked possible backlash and criticism regarding its winners and losers (Kacowicz 2013). In economic terms, LIO enhanced the ideology of “neo-liberalism” as embedded in the Washington Consensus. As for the management of international relations, some scholars have argued that the United States actively engaged in a kind of “offensive Liberalism”, a revisionist programme of regime change and democratic promotion *vis-à-vis* China, Russia, and the Middle East, which undermined the conservative principles of the IS and eventually backfired (Miller 2021: 1354; Paul 2021: 1618).

As could be expected, in the period since the 1990s and especially in the last decade, we have

witnessed a clear divergence between the IS and the LIO, with the prospects of the LIO being at the defensive or in decay pace (Ikenberry 2022). The Liberal tenets of the LIO since 1990 reproduced but also distanced themselves from the more bounded LIO of the Cold War by promoting the expansion of its membership, a hyper-globalised economy, the spread of democracy, and liberal institutionalism coupled with economic interdependence and democratic peace. Eventually, the post-Cold War LIO distanced itself and became even antagonistic to some of the basic principles of the IS. As John J. Mearsheimer (2019: 8) argued, spreading liberal democracy around the world resulted in backlash due to the reaction and resilience of nationalism, whereas hyper-globalisation also produced significant economic and political costs in terms of grievances and resentment. These consequences led to the current challenges and contestations to the LIO, which overlap but are not identical to the challenges to the IS.

The historical evolution and divergent trajectories of international society and the LIO are summarised in Table 2.

4 CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND CONTESTATIONS TO THE GIS AND TO THE LIO

Following the main argument of this paper, I distinguish between the challenges and contestations to the GIS and those to the LIO. Thus, we can compile a relatively long list of significant challenges and contestations to the GIS, which overlap but are not identical to the more specific challenges to the LIO, which usually focus upon threats and contestations from within (Börzel/Zürn 2021; Cooley/Nexon 2022).

4.1 CHALLENGES AND CONTESTATIONS TO THE GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

The major challenges and contestations to the GIS include the rise of non-state actors and the challenge to the centrality of the state, the impact of globalisation and preponderance of global issues, and the lack of shared global, universal norms in both cultural and normative terms.

One of the major challenges posed to contemporary international society is the *rise of non-state*

Table 2: Historical Evolution and Divergent Trajectories of the IS and the LIO

Year/Period	IS	LIO
1648 –	Westphalian system	
late 18th century	Westphalian system with national legitimacy	Liberal revolutions
19th century	European Concert	<i>Pax Britannica</i> (1815–1914)
1919-1939	„Twenty-Years’ Crisis“	League of Nations
1945-1989	Cold War (great power management) United Nations GIS	<i>Pax Americana</i> (bounded LIO)
1991-2010	Unipolar moment US hegemony GIS	<i>Pax Americana</i> US hegemony global LIO
2010- future	erosion of unipolarity GIS Return of Cold War logic?	Bounded again?

actors, both benign and malign, which present a significant threat to the state's reign as the main actor in the international arena (see Press-Barnathan 2004: 198). As Michael N. Barnett and Kathryn Sikkink argue (2011: 750), "the ecology of international politics is no longer dominated by states", so it increasingly includes non-state actors such as (NGOs), transnational corporations, international organisations (IOs), and transnational networks operating in a global public domain. For instance, we can briefly refer to 'malign' non-state actors in the security realm. Across the globe, the terms of the security debate have shifted dramatically over the last thirty years. Since the end of the Cold War, many countries in different regions have confronted new security challenges that they have been hard-pressed to tackle effectively. The end of the Cold War brought with it a more permissive strategic environment, leading new non-state actors into the forefront of the security environment, including the proliferation of violent non-state actors. At the same time, this new post-Cold War era exposed the fragility and institutional underdevelopment of many Global South states, such as feeble governance or failure to address issues of human security, crime, and domestic violence (Felbab-Brown 2017: 2; Kacowicz et al. 2021; Shelley 2014, 2018).

In more benign terms, we can argue that before the advent of the GIS, traditional concepts and practices of international society overlooked the possible influence of non-state actors and societies, including local and transnational NGOs, which might constitute part of a local – or even global – transnational civil society. As Mor Mitrani argues, international political institutions within global international society have become more open and responsive to the impact and influence of these non-state actors, partly through mechanisms of public opinion, broadening the scope of the global international society to cope with the challenges posed by these non-state actors (Mitrani 2013: 183).

Second, the *effects of globalisation* on the international order and international society pose intriguing challenges to the current and future resilience of the GIS. There is no simple zero-sum game between globalisation and the international system and societies; they might coexist simultaneously. More specifically, Buzan distinguishes between international and world society by their respective composition of actors – territorial (states) and nonterritorial (non-state) actors (Kacowicz/Mitrani 2016: 205). As mentioned previously, more recently, Buzan emphasises the particular characteristics of the GIS, coping with processes of globalisation and the need for providing global governance, despite the inability of the current Great Powers to provide collective goods (Acharya/Buzan 2019; Buzan 2020; Buzan/Schauenburg 2018).

Unresolved ideological and normative debate is plentiful regarding the complex relationship between the phenomenon of globalisation and the distribution of wealth, analysed through the prisms of poverty and inequality (Kacowicz 2013). There are myriad analyses that "blame" the uneven and unjust effects of economic globalisation as one of the main causes for the democratic backlash and the current contestations to the LIO (see, for instance, Kornprobst/Paul 2021; Miller 2021; Paul 2021). In my view, the effects of globalisation are more nuanced, as they are usually mediated through the actions of national governments and their civil societies.

In the third place, and against the backdrop of the recent global crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, entering its fourth year and becoming endemic, we can refer to the relevance and salience of *global issues*, including the proliferation of nuclear weapons, climate change, and poverty and inequality gaps, all challenges that are very difficult to accommodate within a sovereign-based international society. Global issues, such as the environment and climate change, as well as poverty

and underdevelopment, demand global solutions and effective mechanisms of global governance to cope with them. These mechanisms of global governance are rather inexistent, dysfunctional, or under-performing due to the continuing reluctance of states to give up their sovereign rights (Armstrong 2011: 47). Thus, global challenges impinge on the efficacy and functionality of both the primary and secondary institutions of international society, so we should endeavour to unpack their effects and think positively about the revision and adaptation of these institutions to improve their deliverability and effectiveness.

Fourth, and in juxtaposition to the argument about the solidaristic values of humankind in a dialectical fashion, today, we experience a *remarkable withdrawal from a solidaristic, cosmopolitan normative common framework back to nationalism and particularism*, which results in the erosion of the secondary institutions of the GIS. In this sense, nationalism might become a nefarious dynamic leading to actual wars, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, or potential conflicts, such as the possible invasion of Taiwan by China. By way of comparison and contrast, we have to keep in mind that earlier European international societies were always characterised by a common culture and shared ideological values and norms (Armstrong 2011: 47). In principle, although all states in the United Nations have formally agreed to what Robert Jackson coined as a *global covenant*, based on the mutual respect for sovereignty and self-determination, as well as in the (at least formal) promotion of democracy and human rights, we know that this has not happened in practice (Armstrong 2011: 46; Jackson 2000).

The lack of a normative and cultural consensus in the GIS poses a significant challenge when we have to confront two predominant values and norms of the international society, which might clash with each other – preserving the international *order* versus promoting *justice*. Since the end of

the Cold War, the research agenda, as well as the reality of the GIS, has expanded and changed to a certain degree, moving from an agenda of order towards enhancing justice in world politics (see, for instance, Foot et al. 2003; Hurrell 2007: 11; Jackson/Sorensen 2003: 170). Issues of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment, exacerbated by global challenges such as Covid-19 and climate change, have revealed the inner contradictions of the GIS. As Hurrell argues,

many moral ideas and norms are now embedded within the institutions and practices of international society, but the plurality of views, values, and identities cannot be reconciled on the basis of any straightforward appeal to shared moral principles (Hurrell 2007: 287).

Moreover, from a pluralist perspective, there remains a clear and healthy scepticism regarding the possibility of the complete homogenisation of values and cultures from the perspective of a Western LIO position (Acharya/Buzan 2019; Hurrell 2007: 291).

We have recently witnessed a global decline in ideologies and party politics (Adler-Nissen/Zarakol 2021: 623). Moreover, two of the great world powers, China and Russia, directly and openly challenge some of the norms, values, and tenets of the LIO, including the promotion of democracy and human rights, which are part of the ideological unipolar system that reigned in the international order between 1991 and the first decade of the twenty-first century, under US supremacy. At the same time, they have used and abused some of the Liberal principles to promote their national goals: Russia justifies its invasion of Ukraine on the basis of national self-determination for the Russian population in Eastern Ukraine; China uses the Liberal economic order to expand its economic clout. Currently, Russia stands out for its flagrant violation not just of the principles of the LIO but also of the fundamental tenets of the territorial order and the basic tenets of international

society – sovereignty and territorial integrity – due to its illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As we examine next, China might be a different case from Russia.

Facing these four intertwined challenges to international society – the rise of non-state actors, globalisation, the salience of global issues, and the lack of a common normative and cultural framework – the GIS has to adapt itself to the uncertainties of the post-post-Cold War era, proving itself resilient. Its resilience is a function of the existence and proliferation of regional and global governance mechanisms within a complex reality, already envisioned by Bull in 1977, of a “New Medievalism”. Concomitantly, the challenges to the LIO are similar but retain differences of a more specific nature.

4.2 CHALLENGES AND CONTESTATIONS TO THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The challenges and contestations to the LIO partially overlap with those of the GIS, though they are not identical. The LIO confronts other challenges that do not necessarily pose a threat to the GIS, like the erosion of Liberal consensus, domestic challenges, and the rise of illiberal regimes. The short normative consensus of the post-Cold War era was premised upon the US normative and physical hegemony, based upon the unipolar moment and context (Casey/Dolan 2023: 6). Instead, we need today a more pluralistic and modest approach to navigate the uncharted waters of the post-post-Cold War era under conditions of bipolarity or multipolarity, with a larger menu of ideologies and political ideas beyond the LIO. Today, confidence in the LIO has ebbed, and Liberalism is questioned in both conceptual and practical terms (Dunne 2020: 109–110).

Since its beginning in the post-World War II bounded LIO, it was also contested among states internationally and among citizens domestically. Hence, most of the challenges and contestations

to the LIO have come from within, from both the political left and political right, from disenfranchised sectors of the population, and from nationalists and populists, who have contested the domestic political legitimacy of the LIO within the Western Liberal democracies themselves. Paradoxically, the current challenges and contestations are a direct result of the (over-)reach and (over-)expansion of Liberal values since the end of the Cold War in an attempt to overrule national tendencies (Börzel/Zürn 2021: 288; Finnemore et al. 2021: iii; Lake et al. 2021: 235). The age of globalisation and hyper-globalisation has led to boomerang effects and democratic backlash stemming from polarisation between perceived winners and losers of globalisation.³ Thus, the rise and decline of the LIO reminds us of a similar process that involved the Bretton Woods regime in the world political economy from 1944 to the early 1970s. It was doomed to happen inexorably; the Bretton Woods regime created its own discontents, which led to its reform, adaptation, and eventual demise in the 1970s as a victim of its own success. Hence, we could argue in similar terms that the contestations to the LIO have been the inexorable result of its own ephemeral success in the post-Cold War era. This development could be considered a cautionary tale of ideological hubris and over-extension.

In domestic political terms, the rise of nationalist populism in the West, alongside important non-Western democracies such as Brazil and India, has weakened some key tenets of the LIO. This development materialised in opposition to globalisation and free trade, eroding human rights, ignoring climate change, and not yielding to the rules of international institutions. The LIO is currently undermined not only by pariah states like Russia and rising challengers like China but, first and foremost, among voters in the Liberal West,

³ Börzel/Zürn (2021: 284); Kornprobst/Paul (2021: 1312); Lake et al. (2021: 237); Miller (2021, 2023); Ripsman (2021: 1329).

driven by resentment, discontent, and economic and political grievances (Adler-Nissen/Zarakol 2021: 612). Liberals recognise that the former US Trump Administration from 2017 to 2020 eroded major principles of the LIO. Moreover, based on recent developments, this democratic and Liberal backlash has been exacerbated by anti-globalist populism, as well as the twin discourse of authoritarianism and nationalism, which corrode the underpinnings of Liberal internationalism, though not necessarily or not always, the primary institutions of international society. Thus, in dialectic terms and direct ideological opposition to the LIO as a kind of “solidaristic” version of the GIS, populist and nationalist leaders challenge and contest Liberal principles. They include Trump in the USA (from 2017 to 2020), Netanyahu in Israel, Bolsonaro in Brazil between 2019 and 2023, Modi in India, Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, López Obrador in Mexico, and Maduro in Venezuela. These “illiberal democratic” regimes promote populist majoritarianism at the expense of liberal domestic principles, such as protecting minorities and promoting human rights.

The challenges and contestations to the LIO are not just domestic and from within. The LIO is challenged from the outside by populist regimes, great powers like China, and obviously, Putin’s Russia, while using and abusing Liberal norms and rules.

In terms of normative consensus, our current era shows a great anomaly compared to previous historical periods. The United States attempted, with some degree of success from the early 1990s until the 2010s, to turn its Western-led LIO into a *global* hegemonic ideology, the only ideological game in town. The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, now considered a trigger (or pretext) for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, was a good example (or was it pernicious?) of the United States and its allies in unbinding the LIO from its Western roots into an international or global order. This step was contested from the beginning by other great powers, first with inefficient mechanisms of “soft balancing” by China and Russia through the United Nations framework, and more recently by mechanisms of “hard balancing”, including the brutal turn to force by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, and the economic power contestation by China. Now, the GIS is moving away from the Western Liberal ideological hegemony in the direction of an alternative normative but contested “deep pluralism”. This shift is happening in tandem with a new ideological bipolarity, as suggested by US President Biden, as a struggle between democratic and autocratic regimes, which might exacerbate the transactional and non-aligned posture of many emerging powers in the Global South (Acharya/Buzan 2019: 278–279; Mearsheimer 2019: 23; Miliband 2023; Paul 2018; Spektor 2023).

Table 3: Contemporary Challenges and Contestations to the GIS and the LIO

Challenges to the GIS	Challenges to the LIO
Rise of non-state actors	Rise of non-liberal non-state actors
Globalisation	Globalisation (boomerang effects and democratic backlash)
Global issues (order vs. justice)	Global issues (contestation of the LIO)
Lack of normative/cultural consensus	Erosion of liberal consensus
Demands for justice against order	Demands for justice
Russia (after invading Ukraine) and maybe China	Russia and China
Nationalism	Illiberal regimes, domestic contestations within liberal regimes, nationalism, and populism

Facing these formidable challenges, it might well be that neither the GIS nor the LIO are well-suited to cope with them properly. The overlapping and different challenges to the GIS and the LIO are summarised in Table 3.

5 NORMATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF DISAGGREGATING THE LIO FROM THE GIS

This intellectual exercise of disaggregating the LIO from the broader context of the IS carries important normative and policy implications as we dwell with the present, extrapolate into the future, and aim to make recommendations to policymakers about how to navigate the vessel of the international order in our uncertain world. Hence, I discuss three important and interrelated issues: the role of China in the current and future international order, the role of the Global South, and the future of the international order.

5.1 THE ROLE OF CHINA IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

One of the most puzzling and open-ended questions regarding the current and future world orders refers to the role of China and its approach to the GIS and the LIO. How will China's growing power and influence reshape world politics (Weiss/Wallace 2021: 635)? As David Rennie from *The Economist* (2022) suggests, "China's challenge to the post-war order [...] is more subtle than Russia's brazen defiance" since it aims to reshape the world order from within. It might well be the case that China openly undermines the current LIO (especially as related to its political principles over economic considerations) while sponsoring the return, or better, the resilience, of a more modest, minimalist, and pluralist GIS that sustains the old Westphalian territorial order based on national sovereignty, rather than promoting democracy and human rights.

Regarding this question, there are opposing arguments on the role of China in the international order. Some analysts argue that China prefers the status quo and does not aim to radically change the international system. China does not reject the international order per se; it opposes all the processes and trends that might challenge its own sovereignty and national interests. China, indeed, erodes the principles of the LIO, but it is not interested in openly challenging or overtaking democracies (except for Hong Kong and Taiwan, which it considers Chinese sovereign territory). Moreover, since most of its trade is conducted with Liberal democracies, China does not intend to destroy the GIS and the economic tenets of the LIO, from which it has greatly benefitted in the last few decades (Christensen 2023; Fung/Lam 2022; Tang 2018). Hence, China might be ready for a (limited) dialogue about managing the GIS. Moreover, one could argue that the "offensive Liberalism" of the United States since the end of the Cold War and its zeal to promote democracy around the world has become a revisionist position that is a greater threat to the GIS than China (Chan 2021).

Other scholars argue that China's vision of a "Community of Shared Destiny" directly opposes the logic of the LIO and might include some imperial goals built around its erstwhile imperial model of the tributary system (Paul 2021: 1613). Moreover, like Russia, China also undermines the notion of a rule-guided order, claiming ninety per cent of the South China Sea, contrary to international law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Larson 2023). Hence, China adopts an extreme version of the "deep pluralism" in the GIS, taking a confrontational approach towards the United States and the LIO.

By clearly disaggregating the LIO from the GIS, we might conclude that China undermines the LIO in its political dimension while adopting its economic and multilateral dimensions. Thus, it could still

play a positive and essential role in running the GIS. In that sense, China challenges the LIO and is working toward building an alternative illiberal model to safeguard its own domestic regime. Welcome back to the Cold War ideological bipolarity as an unintended consequence of Chinese domestic motivations (Owen 2021: 1418; Weiss/Wallace 2021).

5.2 THE ROLE OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH IN THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

When we disaggregate the LIO from the GIS, we can also discuss in clearer terms the possible relevant role of the Global South in the current and future international order. It should be emphasised that some nations of the Global South (especially in Latin America) have been part and parcel of the formation of *both* the GIS and the LIO by contributing important norms and principles such as *uti possidetis*, peaceful resolution of disputes, rights of political asylum, and nonintervention (Hurrell 2023; Kacowicz 2005; Long 2018; Long/Schulz 2021; Rodriguez/Thornton 2022; Tourinho 2021). At the same time, in many parts of the Global South, there is an embedded reluctance to follow the US and European lead in promoting and sustaining the LIO (Hurrell 2023: 2).

Internationalist-oriented elites in Brazil, China, Indonesia, South Africa, and India seek protection and rights from the Westphalian order, but not necessarily from a “thick” and intrusive LIO, with its tendency to overrule national sovereignty. For the decolonised world of the Global South, the basic Westphalian norms for non-Western people served them to reach independence and statehood. Hence, they tend to defend the norms of sovereignty and nonintervention as a viable political project rather than transnational and global processes that might undermine them. Moreover, they see the LIO as yet another Western club privileging its members in the best case and as a neo-colonial project in the worst case

(Adler-Nissen/Zarakol 2021: 619; see also Barnett/Sikkink 2011: 753; Miliband 2023; Spektor 2023).

By framing the current Russian war on Ukraine in terms of challenges and contestations to the LIO (i.e. “democracies vs. autocracies”) instead of GIS (respecting the consensual principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian impunity), the United States and its European allies perhaps unintentionally have contributed to the “non-aligned” position taken by most of the Global South in the current armed conflict (Miliband 2023: 42–43). Many important Global South countries, including Mexico, Brazil, India, and South Africa, literally “sit on the fence”, not taking sides for or against Russia or Ukraine, for a myriad of economic, political, and military reasons (Spektor 2023). In the words of Angela Stent,

they view the war as a local European affair with limited relevance for their interests and many continue to see the United States as an imperialist power whose actions in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan differ little from what Russia is doing in Ukraine (Stent 2023).

Welcome back to the Cold War and the recreation of the Global South as a renewed “Third World”, a non-aligned limbo zone between the great powers that includes most of the world population, adopting a transactional rather than ideological approach.

5.3 THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The Westphalian order of the IS and the LIO have co-constituted each other historically and coexisted until recently in a symbiotic way. While they share common norms such as sovereignty, national self-determination, and the peaceful settlement of international disputes, they differ, among other principles, regarding the universal promotion of democracy and human rights. Whereas the

Westphalian order (including the latest version of the GIS) is based on the premise of territorial sovereign nation-states, the LIO has moved, especially since the end of the Cold War, into a solidaristic and universalistic (Cosmopolitan) direction of promoting human rights, democracy, and over-ruling (transcending) the authority of the nation-state, when and if necessary. Thus, their practical decoupling might open new opportunities for the GIS to remain relevant, even after the probable shrinking of the LIO to a limited “zone of peace” among Western Liberal countries, similar to the 1945 to 1989 period.

From a Liberal standpoint, a future resilient international order, as embodied in the GIS, might be a “degraded” order in normative terms, though it could persist and thrive nonetheless. In the post-post-Cold War era, we might have one GIS divided into two bounded international orders, one Liberal (led by the United States and its Liberal democratic allies) and another non-Liberal (led by China) (Mearsheimer 2019; Owen 2021). We might even have a third non-aligned zone for the Global South regional powers who avoid identifying, in ideological terms, with the United States, China or Russia. This emerging post-Liberal GIS will no longer be a US-led Western-dominated order but reflect a contested and “deep” pluralism, with great powers occasionally competing and cooperating among themselves, their behaviour driven essentially by domestic politics while keeping in place the basic contours of international society. This GIS will reflect a multilateral, polycentric, and fluid world order (Acharya/Buzan 2019; Buzan 2020; see also Casey/Dolan 2023: 11).

In this future international order, the balance between international institutions and national sovereignty might shift back towards the nation-state at the expense of elaborated mechanisms of global governance. Yet, the return of geopolitics and great power competition should not rule out the need for cooperation to deal with global issues

and challenges, as geopolitics and global governance cannot mutually exclude each other when facing existential global challenges such as climate change (and to a lesser extent, pandemics) (Hurrell 2023; Miller 2021). The fascinating question is whether only Liberals and their LIO project can offer a convincing alternative to the challenges posed by illiberal powers such as China and Russia. The evidence from the current Russian war on Ukraine is that, indeed, so far, only the Western Liberal countries have come to the rescue of Ukraine to oppose the Russian aggression, thus defending *both* the principles of the LIO and the GIS (Ikenberry 2023). At the same time, I concur with Andrew Hurrell about the need to oppose the simplistic and binary choice “between upholding or recreating the global liberal order of the post-Cold War period and the breakdown of any kind of order whatsoever” (Hurrell 2023: 1).

The future of the international order leaves open alternative scenarios. The LIO represents only one possibility and is not necessarily the most exclusive or paramount. There are (or there should be in normative terms) alternatives to a hegemonic LIO that should allow for a more pluralist order in the 21st century distinct from a Hobbesian world. Thus, any future international order should still be a rule-based order, but not necessarily a hegemonic order led by the United States and the West (Tang 2018: 42).

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have distinguished, in clear conceptual, historical, and practical terms, between the Liberal principles of international society (the LIO) and its “Westphalian” elements (which are not always nor necessarily Liberal). The normative consensus of the post-Cold War era from 1991 to 2010 has been premised upon US normative primacy rather than adopting a more modest and pluralist approach, which allows for a myriad of

different ideological and political ideas beyond the LIO.

We are now entering the uncharted territory of the post-post-Cold War, characterised by the possible shrinking of the LIO and the persistence of the GIS, where the LIO is only one of its bounded orders – a single subset of many possible IS orders that coexist in a web of overlapping and complex interdependences in which different issues, actors, and identities coexist. To face the complex and evolving challenges of the 21st century we have to assess the consistent nature of the dynamic relationships among actors within these orders. These dynamics have not changed much for hundreds of years. Back to the future, unanswered questions remain regarding the future of the international order, including the roles of China, the Global South, and even the future integration of Russia in the aftermath of its war on Ukraine. It might well be the case that neither the GIS nor the LIO have adequate tools to cope with the complex challenges of our 21st century. Moreover, it seems that China, as the proponent of the good old-fashioned order of the international society, prioritises predictability and order over justice and change. Hence, it is not clear or evident who the status quo and revisionist powers are in this emerging order of the post-post-Cold War era. In addition, a difficult question we have to pose is that, whereas the GIS might survive without a global LIO, it is not clear whether liberal democracies might thrive without a global LIO.

It is important to disaggregate the tenets of the LIO from the continuing resilience of the GIS. The latter is premised on a plurality of independent and interdependent states and will not necessarily be preponderantly Western or Liberal. Its normative underpinnings might be moving away from its political Liberal principles (such as the universal promotion of democracy) back to the basic tenets of the Westphalian order, challenged by globalisation, global issues, non-state actors, and

the lack of an overall normative consensus. The future remains moot, so any significant forecasting should be left for those who dare or to the fools, as the Scriptures wisely tell us.

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