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Normativity and Power in International Relations:
The Character of the World Order to Come

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the changing logic and character of world order by critically assessing the main scientific contributions to this study area in the field of International Relations. Order is a central concept in political thought. Since ancient times, philosophers, scholars, and policy-makers have investigated the problem of order in a dynamic, often turbulent, and at times even chaotic world. Nowadays the academic debate on this issue is controversial and the political praxis is contradictory.

The theory of International Relations boasts a long-standing tradition of studies on the question of world order. A wide array of different schools of thought have come to diverse conclusions to the problem of whether and how world order is to be attained, managed, and preserved. Liberal Internationalism and Realism are two of the most prominently influential political approaches to the study of International Relations. The question of world order has been addressed both by liberal and realist experts, whose research output is more relevant than ever at a time of sweeping structural change and great political uncertainty.

World order is currently facing major challenges. A profound power shift is bound to have crucial consequences on the distribution of roles, rights, and authority in the international system. Rising powers aspire to be recognized as responsible stakeholders in the international community, but the capacity of the current system to accommodate their ambitions and to transform accordingly remains dubious. The eternal quest to strike a balance between legitimacy and power seems to be acquiring renewed relevance at this critical juncture. It does not therefore come as a surprise that competing views of world order are emerging and are expressed with increasing assertion in political discourse and practice, whereas the perceived universality of the Western system and values in the wake of the end of the Cold War appears to be more and more precarious. The impetuous forces of globalization bring nations together, but rival approaches of governing elites to global governance need to be reconciled, lest international peace and stability be jeopardized.

It shall be clearly stated from the very outset of this dissertation that addressing the problem of world order in terms of acceptance or subversion of the currently dominant model is simplistic. Multiple variables come into play in determining the possible outcomes of the epochal transformation underway, which may result in just as many multi-layered realities. It is hence safe to say that room for reflexion on the issue of the management of the evolution of world order is wider than commonly assumed and a sophisticated account, capable of critically assessing the most significant studies on this

subject by drawing attention to their weaknesses and capitalizing on their strengths, can be a welcome and innovative contribution to the academic debate and the political praxis.

More recently, John G. Ikenberry and Walter R. Mead – among the foremost scholars of the discipline – published two enlightening articles in *Foreign Affairs*, reigniting a lively and vibrant scientific debate on the future of world order. Ikenberry is widely regarded as one of the leading global thinkers of International Relations. Most of his work is focused on American liberal order building in the aftermath of World War II. His latest major book, “*Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*”, offers a compelling account of the history and fundamental logic of the US-led international system through the last sixty years. This volume is to be thoroughly scrutinized in Chapter One of the present work, in order to highlight the shortcomings of the liberal internationalist perspective in evaluating the current state of the legitimacy of the American world order and of the power relations underpinning it and in answering to the dilemmas instrumental in predicting the pathways the transforming world order is most likely to take.

Chapter Two is to be devoted to the study of the realist analysis of the evolving character of world order. This approach to the theory and practice of International Relations has arguably found remarkable success both in terms of scientific production and in terms of policy implementation. Walter R. Mead’s major writings on the subject of world order make for an appropriate starting point of the critical study of the realist position, which is to take into account the contributions of other prominent authors, as well, namely Richard N. Haass, Charles A. Kupchan, and Henry A. Kissinger, in order to provide the reader with a systematic, precise, and broad perspective on a heterogeneous school of thought and ultimately on its inadequacies, limitations, and failings at accounting for some of the most complex, profound, and significant dynamics shaping the character of the changing world order today.

Liberal Internationalism and Realism are often conceptualized as antithetical and irreconcilable theoretical approaches. In Chapter Three this generally accepted claim is not called into question, but rather it is demonstrated through an accurate empirical analysis how both schools of thought can together be conducive to a proper comprehension of the changing logic and character of world order. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to take advantage of the varied modern literature on the issue of world order for the purpose of studying the tension between normativity and power in the theory and practice of International Relations in a cautiously previsionsal perspective.

Chapter One: The Grand Narrative of Liberal World Order

The liberal world order is in crisis. Across the whole academic spectrum, there seems to have emerged a broad consensus among International Relations scholars about the fact that the American-led international system is encountering considerable strain. Different authors ascribe the dysfunctionality of the current dominant political arrangements of global order to different root causes.

Some argue that liberal internationalism, which has provided the theoretical basis for American foreign policy ever since World War I, is struggling to reconcile its internal tensions between restraint and imposition, thus proving unable to offer a coherent and effective vision for the management of world order (Sorensen 2011, pp. 1-2, 43). A strategy of liberal restraint entails the acceptance of different values as central to liberty, as opposed to the notion of universality of liberal values, which implies the need for their ideally world-spanning imposition. Adopting restraint means accepting the present unsustainable state of affairs, whereas imposition is bound to engender imperialism (p. 67). The resulting paralysis is undermining the very liberal character of world order.

Others maintain that the ongoing power shift is eroding the deep fundamental structures upholding the current order. The unipolar moment in the aftermath of the Cold War generated new dilemmas of rule for the leading state, which until recently tried to offer a new hegemonic bargain to the world by virtue of its unrivalled power, wherein it would rule the world, but would not abide by the existing rules (Ikenberry 2011, pp. 254-275). Such alarming tendencies brought to the fore the inherent contradiction in the expression “liberal hegemon”. The underestimation of the importance of norms and institutions sustaining the liberal world order proved counterproductive in the long run and put the legitimacy of the system at risk.

The problem of legitimacy remains central to this day, but for different reasons. The liberal world order is an American project built upon the geopolitical realities of the second half of the Twentieth century. It is a well-established fact that the power shift underway urgently calls for a significant overhaul of the institutional foundations of the system in order to accommodate rising powers, so as to prevent an undesirable shift from reformism to revisionism. Not only is the current model, based on great-power managerialism, no longer effective (Bisley 2012), but, unless a new multilateralism is vigorously reaffirmed, the possibility of emerging competing logics of order shall not be ruled out.

In *The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers*, Walter Russell Mead engages this debate. He contends that Western policy-makers misinterpreted the collapse of the Soviet Union to signify not only “the ideological triumph of liberal capitalist democracy”, but also the “obsolescence of hard power”. Increasingly, he argues, “China, Iran, and Russia are all pushing back against the political settlement of the Cold War” through “forceful attempts to overturn it”. While there may be no “strategic alliance among them”, they are united in “their agreement that the status quo must be revised” and in their judgment that “U.S. power is the chief obstacle to achieving their revisionist goals”. According to Mead, “whether or not the revisionists succeed, their efforts have already shaken the balance of power and changed the dynamics of international politics” (Mead 2014).

In *The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order*, Gilford John Ikenberry responds to Mead’s article with a fierce critique of his stance on the problem of world order. Mead’s argument that “an increasingly formidable coalition of illiberal powers – China, Iran, and Russia – is determined to undo post-Cold War settlement and the U.S.-led global order that stands behind it” is described as alarmist and “based on a colossal misreading of modern power realities”. In Ikenberry’s view, China and Russia are “part-time spoilers at best”, whereas Iran is “engaged more in futile protest than actual resistance” to today’s system. Confronting “the most globally organized and deeply entrenched order the world has ever seen”, those two countries would be undertaking a “fool’s errand”, if they tried to “contest its basic terms”. While Ikenberry does not argue that today’s system can or will endure in its current configuration on its own, he is confident that it will grow more entrenched, as long as the United States continues to strengthen the “network of alliances, institutions, geopolitical bargains, client states, and democratic partnerships” over which it presides and ultimately reinforce and expand the logic of the liberal world order.

Ikenberry further develops his argument in *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. This book is an inquiry into the logic and changing character of liberal world order. Ikenberry offers a grand narrative of the rise of the American system, as he explains that in the aftermath of World War II the United States found itself in a unique position of overwhelming military and economic superiority and therefore engaged in an ambitious liberal order-building project (Ikenberry 2011, p. 159). Ikenberry draws upon a solid theoretical framework, which is presented in the first part of the volume, to illustrate the distinctive combination of ordering mechanisms

underpinning this peculiar kind of order, i.e. balance, command, and consent. Inspired by liberal internationalism, argues Ikenberry, American officials pursued a sweeping milieu-oriented grand strategy to restructure the overall international environment, so as to foster U.S. national interests in a fashion to be perceived as legitimate by other actors in the international arena.

Starting in 1944, “the United States shaped the governing arrangements of the Western system into an order tied together by partnerships, pacts, institutions, and grand bargains and built around multilayered agreements that served open markets, bind democracies together, and create a far-flung security community” (p. 159). Two major bargains underlay the liberal hegemon order. “In the security bargain, the United States agreed to provide security protection and access to American markets, technology, and resources within an open world economy. In return, America’s partners agreed to be reliable partners that would provide diplomatic, economic, and logistical support for the United States as it led the wider order”. In the political bargain, the United States would consent to “exercise power through institutions that established restraints and commitments on that power and provided mechanisms for voice and reciprocity”; “in return, European and East Asian states would accept American leadership and operate within the liberal hegemonic order” (pp. 208-216).

The result was a remarkably successful hierarchical order with liberal characteristics (p. 160-162). Throughout the book, Ikenberry often returns to the definition of liberal world order as an “order that is relatively open, rule-based, and progressive” (p. 2). Its hierarchical character stems from the global distribution of power and authority, which organizes the system around superordinate and subordinate relationships. The United States is situated at the top of the order and plays a “special functional-operational role” (p. 192), providing public goods and sponsoring rules and institutions. This is precisely what gives the hegemonic order its liberal character: all parties are situated inside a system of loosely agreed-upon rules and institutions – and the leading state is no exception (p. 73). Despite allowing for special rights and privileges, U.S. power is embedded in the system and therefore made less threatening. “This is the paradox of power: a powerful state can increase its ability to shape outcomes in the international system by voluntarily restraining and institutionalizing its power, at least to some extent. Power and rules are not opposite, but work together in complex and reinforcing ways” (p. 85, n. 4).

It is of paramount importance to stress the fact that the liberal order was not conceived in a singular vision and imposed on the world. In fact, quite on the contrary, it was the outcome of an arguably still rolling political process, spanning over half a century and encompassing at least two American geopolitical projects. Originally, Woodrow Wilson envisioned a one-world system of nation-states that trade and interact in a multilateral framework of laws and institutions, creating an orderly international community. Despite its great ambition, this experiment in liberal order building failed and the world soon ushered in an interwar period of closed geo-economic spheres of influence and rival imperial blocs (pp. 19-20). Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to build on and update the Wilsonian project. His administration envisaged a more hierarchical system based upon great-power managerialism, capable of enforcing international peace and security and of managing growing economic interdependence. The ultimate outcome was “more Western-centered, multilayered, and deeply institutionalized than originally anticipated” and the United States “found itself to be not just the sponsor and leading participant in a new postwar order”, but “it was also the owner and operator of it”. Eventually, “the United States got both more and less than it wanted”: “it wanted a universal order; it got an American system” (pp. 165-166, 193-194).

The Cold War undoubtedly played a major role in defining the American Grand Strategy at such a critical juncture. As a matter of fact, it provided a twofold rationale for orientating American foreign policy: on the one hand, the construction of security partnerships and open economic relations with Western Europe and East Asia were essential to address the problem of Soviet power; on the other hand, this very multidimensional cooperation imposed by structural imperatives created domestic support for American leadership. Surprisingly enough, “with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity, the ‘inside’ Western system became the ‘outside’ order”, i.e. its underlying liberal logic extended to the larger global system (p. 8). “The end of the Cold War was a conservative world-historical event, a story of triumph, continuity and consolidation of the American-led postwar order” (p. 223).

Ironically, this order has been “the victim of its own success”, by generating developments that have led to profound questions about its American-centered nature. Ikenberry’s claim is that we are witnessing a crisis of authority. “A struggle over how liberal order should be governed, not a crisis over the underlying principles of liberal international order” is happening. “What is in dispute is how aspects of liberal order – sovereignty, institutions, participation, roles, and responsibilities – are to be allocated, but

all within the order, rather than in its wake” (pp. 6, 334). In the face of past crises, liberal international order has proven impressively adaptable, resilient, and durable: it has evolved multiples times and Ikenberry believes it will again. As a matter of fact, in the last chapter of *Liberal Leviathan* he outlines what are supposed to be the pillars of a new liberal internationalist Grand Strategy: rule-based leadership, conditional provision of public goods, inclusive rules and institutions, liberal-democratic solidarity, promotion of modernization (pp. 358-360). In a nutshell, according to Ikenberry, the crisis of liberal world order can ultimately only be solved with more liberal internationalism.

In the final analysis, Ikenberry’s position can most certainly be deemed rather optimistic. Out of the three pathways that the current dominant, yet declining system might take, he wholeheartedly espouses the idea that a renegotiated American-led liberal order is possible, desirable, and likely to take shape, if only for lack of alternatives. It is imperative that the United States pursue a milieu-oriented liberal order-building strategy in order to renew the existing international institutional architecture, so as to give voice to the rising key stakeholders of the system and, most importantly, to safeguard its long-term interests. After all, according to Ikenberry, the powers that are more often perceived as dangerously revisionists, namely China and Russia, are actually status quo powers, who share a legitimate interest in upholding the current order. “They are political insiders, sitting at the high tables of global governance” (Ikenberry 2014). To be sure, a profound reform is direly needed, but this shall take place inside the prevailing system, which is – as Ikenberry oftentimes reiterates – admittedly “easy to join and hard to overturn” (Ikenberry 2011, p. 9).

Nevertheless, Ikenberry refrains from offering an in-depth analysis of the exact issues besetting the current configuration of liberal world order and from putting forward specific policy recommendations. He is so confident in the resilience of this model that he ends up at least partially overlooking its problems in terms of efficiency and sustainability, thus not even bothering exploring less attractive, yet very real alternatives. It is hardly debatable that the virtues of economic liberalism are widely embraced in the developed world and that the United Nations, despite its difficulties, remain to this day an unparalleled political forum and the primary institution for global governance. Still, however salient these two features of liberal world order may be, Ikenberry’s intransigent approach to the study of liberal world order – assumed to be completely liberal, properly world-spanning, and to be either accepted or refused in its entirety – risks leaving little room for the nuances of the world.

A crisis of authority is evident and needs to be urgently addresses. When rules are not reflective of the basic shared values and needs of great powers and institutions are disconnected from the current power distribution, the legitimacy of the system itself is undermined. However, ascribing the weaknesses of liberal world order solely to an imperfect allocation of roles and responsibilities within the existing political arrangements would be severely limitative in the comprehension and explanation of the complex crisis with which the liberal world order must learn to grapple. Perhaps, even in the ideal case of an optimally reformed institutional structure inspired by liberal principles, the conditions of geopolitical flux which confront contemporary states would still give rise to hardly manageable crises. A unitary, integrated, and coherent model of global governance might just be not only an unattainable goal, but also an unsuitable solution for the resolutions of global problems. It might be safer to expect a trend towards “a patchwork of overlapping, often ad hoc and fragmented efforts, with shifting coalitions of member nations, international organizations, social movements, NGOs, philanthropic foundations, and companies. [...] Most of the pressing transnational problems are unlikely to be effectively resolved by the actions of individual nation-states. The need for effective global governance will increase faster than existing mechanisms can respond. Leaders will pursue alternative approaches to solving transnational problems — with new institutions, or more likely, many informal groupings” (National Intelligence Council, 2008, p. 81).

The crisis of the liberal world order is a crisis of authority and efficiency. The crisis of this model is exceptionally serious because the nature of this model is exceptionally ambitious: it is “a hierarchical model, founded on the unrivaled power of the leading state, on the collaboration of an ever-growing number of allies, and on the acquiescence of all potential opponents; pursuing an unapologetic project of social engineering, boiling down to the ‘civic religion’ of market and democracy transition; and ultimately based upon a fantasy of coherence amongst dimensions and values imagined as always reconcilable, but in reality bound to periodically clash – democracy, equality, justice, stability, power, rule of law” (Colombo and Magri 2015, p. 10).

With the benefit of hindsight, it appears to be advisable to put the expectations attached to the post-bipolar international order in perspective. In fact, in the absence of a fundamental ordering principle emerging after 1989, talking about order itself is at the very least a daring enterprise. The supposedly spontaneous transition of the liberal world order from inside order to outside order when the Cold War ended proved to be nothing more than wishful thinking (Ikenberry 2011, pp. 8, 161, 223, 275). Albeit contested, it is

undeniable that the American-led order boasts an impressive amount of liberal accomplishments in terms of wealth creation, security provision, and social progression. This order has also revealed an admirable geopolitical sensibility – an aspect that predictably tends to be pushed in the background in the liberal discourse – as it integrated Germany and Japan into the system, paved the way for European integration, and promoted democratic transitions, creating a massive area of relatively stable peace. Its underlying logic still wields an unmatched appeal: this feature shall by no means be underestimated, since it was instrumental in the successful outcome of the bipolar confrontation and has continued to exert a significant gravitational pull ever since. A careful terminological reflection then becomes necessary: to what extent can the liberal world order be rightfully said to be liberal and world-encompassing?

Upon closer inspection, the demise of a rival superpower and its respective geopolitical bloc does not provide enough solid grounds to support the claim that the inside order mechanically became the outside order, despite a considerable rise in the number of market democracies across the globe – a controversial piece of data that fails to adequately contribute to the debate outside of an appropriate context. To begin with, democratic transitions and their subsequent institutional consolidation processes encountered not entirely negligible hurdles along the way. Whilst electoral institutions are in fact in place, actual political democracy often remains fragile. The Third Wave Democracy – a term famously coined by Samuel P. Huntington – is at risk of backsliding because of widespread economic instability, social upheaval, continued elite dominance of politics, and ongoing military interference in civilian affairs (Diamond 1996).

Furthermore, the fact that wide world regions escape the liberal logic of the American-led order can barely go unnoticed. Until proven otherwise, the Middle East is a case in point: such a strategically relevant geographical area better fits the theoretical narrative of New-Medievalism (Bull 1977; Arend 1999) rather than the one of any order whatsoever – let alone liberal. Interestingly enough, the areas where democracy was recently exported are precisely the ones which most evidently evade any possible configuration of liberal character, whether it be because of flawed strategic vision, ripple effects spiraling out of control, or institutional difficulties, as stated above.

It is possibly even more remarkable to observe that the rising great powers capable of drawing the greatest attention from scholars and practitioners alike are far from being liberal or democratic. This, of course, does not prevent Ikenberry from maintaining that they are actually status quo powers, which benefit from the system, exercise special rights

within it, and are interested in upholding it – and, admittedly, reform it. Then again, vis-à-vis recurring political disagreements in global governance institutions, failures to take action at decisive moments to prevent, manage, and resolve crises, and ultimately different, if not conflicting international agendas, it is right and proper to point out that one of the most blatantly obvious contradictions besetting the current dominant system is the widening discrepancy between its liberal character and the prominent role played by illiberal powers – whose actions are hard to counter precisely because of their privileges and authority inside the system. The consequences in terms of legitimacy and efficiency of the liberal world order are evident.

The great institutional challenge looming large over the architecture of the present dominant political order is its reform towards loosely agreed-upon rules and representative and effective institutions. If it is assumed that no power or coalition of powers for that matter are either willing or able to overturn the present order, then the developing confrontation revolves around the “tension between the reproduction and the innovation of norms, institutions, and models of conduct” (Caffarena 2010, p. 84). Yet, a comprehensive reform requires that the leading actors at the top of the international hierarchy take on considerable responsibility, but the supposed confluence of interests as the functional principle of great-power managerialism undermined the efficacy of this model of global governance. On the contrary, they are understandably the ones who resist reform the most, because of the lack of a broad consensus on new basic rules of the game and because new institutional arrangements reflective of the current geography of power would jeopardize their vested rights and ultimately go against their self-interest. Not only did the liberal world order not automatically become the outside order in the aftermath of the Cold War, but it also appears compromised by its own mechanisms and in dire need of a wide-ranging reform, which in turn requires strong political will, that at the present moment seems nowhere to be found.

The triumphalism of the unipolar moment resulted in a major strategic shortcoming: the rhetoric of the “new world order” allowed the United States to skip a clear redefinition of its relations with its defeated enemy, so that twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union post-communist Russia still remains an ambiguous actor, at the same time occupying a prominent role at the center of the American-led order and in the international society at large, but not entirely embracing its liberal logic. Torn between efforts to collectively manage a common security framework and the specter of a new Cold War, U.S.-Russia relations are struggling to reach a new normal. This is arguably the most

blatant example of the disregard for the international political dimension so diffuse in the aftermath of the age of bipolarity. On closer view, the successful discourse of “new world order”, however grounded at that critical historical juncture in the fascinating idea that a new paradigm would spontaneously emerge from the liberal core of the victorious Western order and expand seamlessly throughout the world, turned out to be merely a convenient label to neglect international affairs. “Making sense of change is a demanding task and, since it is always imprudent to give up certain for uncertain, it was easier and safer to take advantage – so long as possible – of one’s own revenue of position, rather than alter the terms of the ‘constitutional pact’ and therefore reach an agreement on new rules and objectives with new partners” (Caffarena 2009, p. 565).

Liberal world order is a geopolitical reality with a normative character: since its inception, it has always been an evolving social construct, conducive to the interests of the leading state, which was in the position to exercise power through the rules and institutions it itself established and to shape a congenial environment where it could thrive. A hegemonic power undertakes an order-building effort because its eventual outcome will serve its long-term interests, ideally even after a rising power outranks it in the international hierarchy. In the framework of the liberal world order, the United States built a political architecture that would allow for the exercise of special rights and privileges, agenda-setting capabilities, and the elaboration of new norms to justify its own conduct; it championed ideas and policies of economic openness and interconnectedness, these being prerequisites for its prosperity, and turned the dollar into the cornerstone of the international monetary system and its central bank into an international quasi-lender of last resort, thus being able to bear the weight of an ever-growing debt; and it projected its power through alliances and military bases all over the world, enforcing peace and security whenever it deemed necessary (Ikenberry 2011, pp. 194-207). In other words, order is a means, not an end in itself: it is “a pattern of activities that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states” and “men attach value to [it] because they value the greater predictability of human behavior that comes as the consequence of conformity to the elementary or primary goals of coexistence”. (Bull 1977, p. 8).

The liberal character of the American-led system adds a further layer of secondary goals of states to the universal Westphalian objectives of preservation, external sovereignty, and peace (p. 16). It is safe to assume that every government has an interest in keeping states as principal actors of world politics, demanding independence of outside authority, and making absence of war among member states of international society the

normal condition of their relationship. International society arises when “a group of states conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations to one another” (p. 13). “The element of a society has always been present, and remains present, in the modern international system, although only as one of the elements in it, whose survival is sometimes precarious” (p. 41). As a matter of fact, not only does the liberal logic of world order bring about phenomena of normative production and innovation, but it also produces an unprecedented reconsideration of widely accepted international ground rules.

The blind faith in the democratic peace theory has led the Euro-American guarantors of liberal order to believe that democratic regimes are inherently peace-loving and rule-abiding, less likely to engage in armed conflict among them, and therefore that a spread of democracy would plausibly result in a spread of peace. All other sovereign political units pose *per se* a threat to international order and shall therefore be isolated, contained, and overthrown – preventively, if necessary. As Christianity and monarchy in the past, today the liberal-democratic model is the criterion on whose basis the society of states tends to decide whether any particular government deserves recognition and, therefore, international subjectivity. Different degrees of acceptance of the liberal-democratic model grant different levels of enjoyment of political and legal rights. This tendency to equate democracy with international subjectivity, although always present in international praxis, has failed to develop into specific norms of international law. Even when states agree on the content of the threshold to be reached for the recognition of international subjectivity, they often end up disagreeing for political reasons on its existence in every specific case (Conforti 2014, p. 20). The failed attribution of constitutive value to the recognition of international subjectivity is a prime example of an attempt at normative production in the liberal order, as is often the case stymied by the lack of shared goals beyond the elementary ones.

One of the most distinctive features of the liberal order is the gradual erosion of norms of state sovereignty, impinging on the most fundamental logic of the Westphalian system. The postwar liberal international project involves the unfolding of a human rights revolution. According to this emerging view, the international community is seen to have a legitimate interest in what goes on within the domestic jurisdiction of any given country. In particular, this notion entails that Westphalian sovereignty is not absolute: it is a contingent legal right that must be earned. As notoriously articulated by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, “sovereignty implies responsibility, not just power” (Talbot 2008, p. 313).

“Sovereign status is contingent on the fulfillment by each state of certain fundamental obligations, both to its citizens and to the international community. When a regime fails to live up to these responsibilities or abuses its prerogatives, it risks forfeiting its sovereign privileges, including, in the extreme, its immunity from armed intervention” (Haass 2003). “When we read the Charter today, we are more than ever conscious that its aim is to protect individual human rights, not to protect those who abuse them” (Annan 1999). This notion was more systematically theorized by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, which advanced the idea of the “responsibility to protect” – a relevant example of normative reconsideration, trying to assert the greater value of the new norm of humanitarian intervention with regards to the traditional norm of state sovereignty (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001).

Many of the most critical and urgent issues troubling international order, peace, and stability require new kinds of far-reaching efforts. The nature itself of such problems is transnational, yet states remain the main actors in the international arena. Global governance today is, at least in aspiration, qualitatively different from the past. The evolution of liberal world order is thus bound to challenge Westphalian sovereignty norms. Nevertheless, a legal norm allowing the use of international force outside of the cases enshrined in article 51 of the United Nations Charter and the Security Council-sanctioned interventions in the framework of UN collective security has not emerged yet. An international custom is the result of the general practice of states and of the acceptance of the legal character of such practice. It is rather doubtful that at this stage the principle of responsibility to protect can be considered anything more than in fact just a principle. The use of force in violation of the existing norms of sovereignty, however motivated by virtuous humanitarian reasons, is encountering significant opposition both in theory and in practice (Conforti 2014, pp. 414-415).

Rules and institutions uphold the liberal world order, but their liberal character stems from the fact that they are at least loosely agreed-upon. Within this system, the leading state agrees to put its overwhelming power at the service of the other members of the community, who in turn accept its dominant position. The constitutional pact underlying this order would not be a proper agreement if the resulting norms are defined at the incontestable discretion of the United States and its closest allies alone. Aside from the fact that the humanitarian rationale of sovereignty-transgressing interventions remains questionable, considering that they are selectively carried out in strategic geopolitical areas and at best result in the establishment of so-called “moderate” governments, more

conceding to external economic and political requests, unilaterally imposed rules call into question the very liberal character of the American-led international system. The narrative of the erosion of norms of sovereignty raises new questions about the sources of legality, legitimacy, and authority in the international community. Unfortunately, any consensus on the answers has yet to emerge.

Liberal world order relies on the ordering mechanisms of balance, command, and consent. In the aftermath of World War II, U.S. leaders embarked on an ambitious institution-building and rule-making project, so as to create a conducive international milieu where they could legitimately exercise their unrivaled power to mutual gain and thrive as a consequence. The recurrent American imperial temptation is symptomatic of a fundamental contradiction underlying the liberal order: international institutions were designed in such a fashion as to counterbalance and at the same time reinforce the overwhelming power of the United States. Despite being a daunting, yet not necessarily paradoxical task, this rhetorical promise of coherence repeatedly proved hard to fulfil. Whenever international law and institutions stood in the way of American national interest, U.S. officials – as well as European partners – did not bother disregarding the very rules they contributed shaping. It is essential to underline that rules always serve a purpose – usually the purpose pursued by the actor that makes them. This entity is in the position to define and enforce the dominant patterns of behavior because it wields the greatest power in a given community. It is up to this social agent to opt for a specific strategy of rule, whether it be through command or consent. The former option generates an empire, whereas the latter produces a hegemon. The United States positioned itself as a liberal hegemon, i.e. consent is one of the distinctive logics of the order it built. Relinquishing such a crucial dimension would be a self-defeating strategy in the long run, as the George W. Bush presidency clearly demonstrated. Taking action outside of the common framework of representative institutions and agreed-upon rules, e.g. non-interference in a state's domestic affairs, would bring about similar consequences today in terms of legitimacy of the wider system.

This is especially true when the vast majority of the international society, defined as “a group of states [that] conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations to one another” (Bull 1977, p. 13), vigorously opposes the emergence of specific new norms. The role of China and Russia cannot be overlooked: they are two great powers and permanent members of the Security Council who are perfectly positioned to lead the fight against the affirmation of new norms bearing the potential of infringing on their

interests. From this perspective, the United Nations become an important vehicle to carry out policies in compliance with their top priorities. The main objectives of Chinese and Russian multilateral diplomacy are the protection of sovereignty, the maintenance of geostrategic balance and national security, the cultivation of a favorable international image as a responsible member of the international community and status as a great power, the promotion of their economic and political interests (Yang 2013, p. 61). The most fundamental concern for both China and Russia is the first principle, i.e. a steadfast adherence to absolute sovereignty. This cornerstone of their foreign policy entails consequential ideas, such as the prioritization of dialogue over the use of force to resolve conflicts; the conviction that chapter VII operations must have the consent of governments against whom they are directed, except where UN agencies can show clear evidence of breaches of UN rules; support for government efforts to promote social and economic development, with stability prioritized over human rights; the upholding and strengthening of the rule of law in international relations (Odgaard 2012, pp. 129-130). For China and Russia, the respect of the sovereignty of existing states is the fundamental principle of diplomacy in the modern world. As a consequence, they are very suspicious of new concepts of international law, such as the responsibility to protect, that legitimize the overriding of national sovereignty even for the sake of averting, containing, or ending large-scale humanitarian crises.

Restraint is encouraged for pragmatic reasons. Chinese and Russian governing elites are well aware of the fact that the assertion of new norms legitimizing foreign intervention within the domestic jurisdiction of another state potentially exposes them to dangerous external meddling. China is focused on preserving and strengthening CPC rule, whereas Russia's economic woes require utmost caution. Interference in their domestic affairs, especially if based on a democratic regime change rationale, would fatally endanger their national security. Most importantly, the affirmation of perilous sovereignty-eroding tendencies could encourage separatism in problematic areas, such as Chechnya, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Besides, thorny issues, such as the Taiwan question and the annexation of Crimea, would risk gaining renewed prominence.

In some respects, China and Russia can be considered as the guarantors of the Charter of the United Nations. They have committed themselves to the UN as a key element of their desired system of global governance and try to ensure that they play an important role in it. The United Nations serve as the central platform from which China and Russia seek to project themselves as responsible powers that fulfil their obligations

towards the international community by respecting the universal rules of international conduct enshrined in the Charter itself, especially principles concerning non-intervention in domestic affairs and the prohibition of the use of force. Paradoxically, the limitation on the legitimacy of other actors to sanction military action apart from the UN is contested in the United States. For instance, Richard Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, maintains that “the United States and other like-minded governments should not equate the United Nations with multilateralism, nor should they see the UN as having a monopoly on legitimacy” (Haas 2012). Condoleezza Rice further developed this view in her well-known article “*Rethinking the National Interest: American Realism for a New World*”, when she argued against the assumption that “the support of many states – or even better, of institutions like the United Nations – is essential to the legitimate exercise of power” (Rice 2008). Conservative realist discourse suggests that the source of legitimacy in American foreign policy lies in popular sovereignty and in the constitutional system.

Once again, one single state, however powerful, cannot amend basic international customary norms. China and Russia are well aware of this and they see collaboration with each other as a crucial tool to counterweight American hegemony. Their shared fundamental objective of a multipolar order underpins their foreign policy and keeps them moving in the same general direction. Already in 1997 they issued a joint declaration on a new, more just world order which states: “Diversity in the political, cultural and economic development of all countries is becoming the norm. [...] A growing number of countries are beginning to recognize the need for mutual respect, equality and mutual advantage – but not for hegemony and power politics – and for dialogue and cooperation – but not for confrontation and conflict” (Yeltsin and Zemin 1997).

China and Russia are taking advantage of their relevant position at the United Nations to pursue their common interests, such as the safeguard of the Westphalian principle of sovereignty and its consequences, but also to attain their individual goals. China is concerned to reassure governments across the globe that its rise is peaceful and does not pose a threat to the existing order. Its adherence to the norm of non-intervention is a further protection that allows it to focus on internal economic development, social stability, and political consolidation. This condition is additionally reinforced by the consequences of China’s self-image. The People’s Republic perceives itself as the leading state in the developing world. As a matter of fact, it is the only P5 state to have gained observer status at the Non-Aligned Movement. In the face of international crises and the possibility of a Security Council-sanctioned intervention, China has sought the previous

assessment of regional organizations, such as the African Union, the Arab League, and ASEAN, to verify whether a particular condition is identified as a threat to international peace and security, because such evaluation may vary from one region of the world to another. In other words, China has shown itself reluctant to concede exclusive judgement power to the UNSC, when the majority of the P5 members are still Western and developed, rather than from the developing world where most peace-keeping activity takes place. This stance, once again, reinforces China's commitment to the principle of non-intervention and provides its government with a further credential to insulate its rise from undesirable foreign interference.

Russia, on the other hand, attaches great value to its status in the world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of Russia's prime concerns has been the restoration of its international prestige. "For Russia today no world order is acceptable unless it can influence the taking of strategic decisions or be a member of the board of management", i.e. the United Nations Security Council (Orlov 2006, p. 6). The reaffirmation of Russian status is only possible through a firm assertion of its sovereignty. Russia's quest for its new place in the post-bipolar world proved more complex than anticipated in the wake of the Soviet breakdown. A convenient solution was to stick to confrontational rhetoric against the United States. Phrases such as "real sovereignty" and "sovereign democracy" became not only recurrent in political discourse, but also actual foreign policy objectives. In this perspective, the traditional concept of sovereignty provided post-Soviet Russia with a great wealth of opportunities in terms of international status enhancement, foreign policy orientation, and protection of the relatively fragile domestic system.

Tensions and disagreements among great powers within the liberal world order certainly do not amount to its demise. The American liberal project has proven time and again its resilience and durability. Throughout its history, it transformed many times. Ikenberry believes it will again (Ikenberry 2011, p. 7). At this critical juncture, however, reform appears to be harder to bring about than anticipated by liberal-internationalist theorists and the continuity of liberal order seems to be assured by a combination of political inertia and lack of credible alternatives. Admittedly, the liberal character of the American-led system, despite not being entirely embraced by all actors across the world – not even by geopolitical insiders – continues to underpin the present order. The dynamic relation amongst international institutions, economic interdependence, and democracy is a powerful catalyst for the reproduction and the expansion of this model. Liberalism as its core logic is a central tool of Western hegemony. Liberal international organizations, such

as the United Nations, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and NATO, serve the order in numerous ways. They embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; they co-opt the elites from peripheral countries; and they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas (Cox 1983, p. 62). On the other hand, the principles of liberal international trade, namely competition and openness, are built upon Western capitalism. It first united the West and now the West is seeking to unite the “rest”. Barriers to economic participation are low, whereas the potential benefits are high to encourage other states to integrate. “The expansion of capitalism tends in turn to alter the preferences of other states in a liberal and democratic direction, thus producing a more strategically and politically hospitable system” for the West to import liberal values (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999, p. 192).

The liberal international order is arguably “easy to join and hard to overturn”, as Ikenberry often reiterates in his writings (Ikenberry 2011, p. 9). Nonetheless, a crisis of authority and efficiency is undermining the legitimacy of the order. It needs reform, but it resists change. Its inherent contradictions between order and justice, political and juridical universalism and the acceptance of different values as central to liberty, normativity and power have resulted in unsustainable paralysis. This state of affairs is the exact opposite of the virtuous circle envisioned by the architects of the new world order. The inability of the present political arrangements to adapt to the current geopolitical realities is understandably giving rise to new institution-building phenomena outside of the historical Western core of the system. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Eurasian Economic Union are prime examples of this recent trend, which is reasonably looked at with preoccupation by the United States. To be sure, this tendency does not necessarily foreshadow the breakdown of the liberal order into competing regional blocs, let alone the emergence of a new dominant logic other than liberal. This would be a far-flung assessment unsupported by enough solid grounds and ultimately intellectually dishonest. In principle, however, the fact that no power – rising or declining, status quo or revisionist, from the West or the rest – is neither willing, nor able to overturn the present order does not necessarily rule out the possibility that alternative orders be built in the future. Liberal world order is not a one-size-fits-all model. Its intransigent conception fails to appreciate the nuances of the world. This order is less world-encompassing than convenient labels might suggest. So is its liberal character.

Realist theorists place great emphasis on the alleged decomposition of liberal world order. Their approaches to the problem of international order is the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter Two: Political Realism and the Long Cycles of History

Realism is one of the major approaches to the study of International Relations. It is arguably the most successful one, both in terms of conceptual formulation and policy implementation. The realist theory of international politics boasts a long-standing tradition: its history is typically traced back to the Greek historian Thucydides and continues up until present day. Realism was the dominant paradigm of the theory and practice of International Relations through most of the Twentieth century, when it provided scholars and practitioners with a useful interpretative framework to comprehend and explain the underlying logics of Cold War-era power politics. Even in the post-bipolar and – according to an increasing number of accounts – post-unipolar era of globalization, realist notions, arguments, and orientations remain relevant in the most vibrant and dynamic debates in the discipline of International Relations. It therefore does not come as a surprise that political realism has remarkably evolved throughout its history, to the point that it has become increasingly difficult to give an all-comprehensive definition of what might be best understood as “a set of normative emphases which shape theory” (Ferguson and Mansbach 1988, p. 79) or as “a ‘big tent’, with room for a number of different theories” (Elman 1996, p. 26). “Realism is an approach to international relations that has emerged gradually through the work of a series of analysts who have situated themselves within, and thus delimited, a distinctive but still diverse style or tradition of analysis” (Donnelly 2000, p. 6).

Nonetheless, a careful inquiry into the most renowned writings falling under the realist school of thought allows for the identification of a set of recurrent core beliefs and inferences, which marks this diverse body of works as part of a single tradition. In particular, realism emphasizes the constraints on political practice imposed by human nature, which is pessimistically assumed to be egoistic, inalterably inclined towards immorality, and inherently prone to conflict, and the absence of an international superordinate political authority capable of wielding coercive power, i.e. a structural condition of international anarchy. Together, these premises make international relations largely a realm of power. As a matter of fact, power is a central explanatory concept in the realist approach to the study of International Relations. Realists assume that the issues of international politics can be understood by the objective, rational, and scientific analysis of competing interests of states defined in terms of power. Power relations are a fundamental, ubiquitous, and inescapable feature of international affairs.

As a consequence, realists usually display a strong sensibility for power dynamics underlying the international states system. At a time of sweeping power shift, it is no

wonder that the concept of order has attracted renewed interest in academia. Realist scholars, despite their at times even significant differences, appear to have reached a broad consensus in stating that power is currently becoming more diffuse amongst the different state actors in the international arena. This changing state of affairs entails crucial effects. First and foremost, the prospects for survival of the American-led world order look rather dim. Most realists subscribe to a cyclical vision of history, most notoriously exemplified by Paul Kennedy's seminal essay *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. A zero-sum perspective leads realist thinkers to believe that the relative decline in one power's material capabilities will necessarily lead to the relative rise of another power in terms of military might and economic resources, until the point when the latter is in the position to overcome the leading state, take charge of the international system, and consequently shape its character to its own advantage. This recurrent path of world history is not only likely to repeat, but according to realist thinkers it is unfolding right now before our very eyes. Rising states are struggling for power and none of them has any interest whatsoever in buying into the post-World War II political settlement. On the contrary, they are likely to pursue a grand strategy of order-building congruent with their objectives, values, and ultimately with their self-interest.

Walter Russell Mead, among the leading scholars of theory and history of International Relations, offers one of the most sophisticated accounts of the undergoing evolution of world order. In his elaborate analysis, he contends that, in contrast to what American and European governing elites expected in the aftermath of the Cold War, old-fashioned geopolitical confrontations did not disappear from the world stage, leaving room solely for issues regarding global governance, international trade, development economics, nuclear nonproliferation, human rights, the rule of law, climate change, and so on and so forth. Quite on the contrary, power remains the fundamental element of international politics. The waning power of the declining hegemon is giving rise to increasingly frequent and worrisome forceful attempts by revisionist powers at overturning the present liberal international system. "As the atmosphere turns dark, the task of promoting and maintaining world order grows more daunting" (Mead 2014, p. 69). History is far from being over.

The liberal world order is troubled, because its political arrangements result from a post-war settlement which completely overlooked the ambitions and the needs of major powers across the globe. In fact, a proper settlement can barely be said to have occurred, as the Western powers assumed that the end of the bipolar era would spontaneously usher in a post-geopolitical world. This assertion is currently being put to the test. China, Russia, and

Iran, provocatively dubbed “The Axis of Weevils”, are pushing back against the existing order. These countries are not bound by a formal strategic alliance. They differ in goals, worldviews, and tactics. They are carrying out distinct processes of revision of the international status quo. However, they are united in their judgment that U.S. power is the primary obstacle to achieving their destabilizing agendas. Neither China, nor Russia, let alone Iran possess the military, economic, political, or cultural means to overtly confront the dominant order, therefore they are looking for ways to chip away at the norms, institutions, and relations that uphold the American-led system. Mead convincingly illustrates that these revisionist powers share one common fear and one common hope. They are all aware of the Western hostility towards their illiberal forms of government. They are mindful of their domestic deficiencies in terms of economic prosperity and social stability and they are wary of dangerous external interferences in their internal affairs. The global status quo is a threat to their status quo. This is precisely the reason why they aim at restructuring the international environment according to their interests, which were not taken into consideration in the post-Cold War settlement.

China is seeking “to lay the foundation – brick by brick – of a hegemonic Middle Kingdom”. It is exerting incremental diplomatic and military pressure in East Asia by pursuing a so-called “cabbage strategy”: it asserts a number of territorial claims and gradually surrounds areas around them with multiple layers of security, thus denying access to rivals by virtue of its superior power. By “disaggregating its strategy into multiple parts and then pursuing each element separately”, it has allowed “the different pieces to fall into place with minimal resistance”. In other words, “China is careful to avoid any dramatic action that could become a *casus belli* by itself”. In so doing, China creates a series of *faits accomplis* amidst growing regional tensions, transforming the status quo in a way subtle enough not to trigger armed responses, especially by the United States (Mead 2013).

Meanwhile, Russia is struggling to find its place in the post-bipolar world. Plagued by economic instability and political isolation, it has resorted to an aggressive nationalist foreign policy in order to foster social cohesion domestically against a wide array of external enemies. Russia extends over a massive territory which is often complex to defend. It is surrounded by the European Union, a solid and expanding liberal-democratic bulwark deeply integrated in the transatlantic area, by a collapsing Middle East, bearing possible destabilizing effects on its neighboring areas, and by a rising and increasingly assertive China, with which it entertains a fragile pragmatic relation, undermined by latent

distrust. This geopolitical situation contributes to Russia's siege mentality and encirclement complex. The consequent bellicose international conduct is especially easy to have in the face of an indecisive Western opposition.

Iran, on the other hand, believes that by virtue of its history, culture, and religion it should be the leading power in the Middle East. Iran's self-image is that of a great power, whose place in the sun is being denied to it by Saudi Arabia, Israel, and most importantly the United States. The historic nuclear deal is a significant diplomatic victory for Iran, which is now poised to integrate more deeply in the international trade and financial system, attracting substantial foreign investments and enhancing its regional stature. At a critical moment, the United States is basically granting Iran more resources to wage war through its Shia proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, while the capacity of the nuclear deal to actually prevent Iran, which boasts a determined and skillful diplomacy, from acquiring nuclear weapons remains questionable. "Iran believes it can trade a promise to end its nuclear program for American acquiescence to its domination of the Fertile Crescent and, potentially, the Gulf. This would be an epochal shift in the global balance of power".

According to Mead, the United States is failing at comprehending the nature of the challenges it is facing. The very assumption that geopolitics no longer represents a relevant aspect in the international system has deprived the American policy thought of a crucial strategic dimension. "There are few or no serious strategic consequences to anything that happens, every issue can be addressed in isolation, and policy can become the progressive application of legal and moral norms grounded in American hegemony to various refractory countries and problem regimes around the world". This underestimation of the capabilities and of the intentions of revisionist states allows them to use their power to shape the world order in ways that fundamentally conflict with the American liberal project.

Nonetheless, Mead's analysis has a normative character, in that he believes that the United States can still successfully address major global challenges in the foreseeable future, as long as it rediscovers the importance of the strategic dimension of international affairs. Notwithstanding its relative decline, "the United States is much better positioned than any other country to maintain, defend, extend, and improve the international system in the Twenty-first century". It is "an adaptable society that embraces change, likes innovation, and adjusts to new realities with enthusiasm", thus often having an edge over its competitors. It possesses an incredible array of natural resources, recently bolstered by

hydraulic fracturing, which profoundly changed its energy landscape. It retains a favorable geographical position, bordering on friendly rising powers and distant from hostile great powers. Its economy is vibrant, dynamic, and able to attract a sizeable amount of investments. It is embedded in a vast network of alliances, which give it unparalleled global reach and resilience. It stands for democratic ideals, human rights, and the rule of law, i.e. its model incorporates appealing values for which the world strives. In order to put this advantages to fruition, it is imperative that the United States invest in the future, address the interstitial spaces and the invisible realms, and establish a Congressional Office for Strategic Assessment (Mead 2015).

Henry Kissinger, influential scholar, world-renowned statesman, and one of the most prominent political figures of the Twentieth century, reaches similar conclusions in his latest book, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*. Kissinger draws upon a lifetime's historical study and unmatched experience as a world statesman to examine the great tectonic plates of history and explain the motivations of nations in their respective world-ordering struggles. At the very outset of his essay, he acknowledges that the American-led international order, understood as an open, rule-based, and progressive system of states, is currently under considerable strain. "The frequent exhortations for countries to 'do their fair share', play by 'Twenty-first-century rules', or be 'responsible stakeholders' in a common system reflect the fact that there is no shared definition of the system or understanding of what a 'fair' contribution would be".

Kissinger is very unambiguous in clarifying that "no truly global 'world order' has ever existed", i.e. throughout world history a number of competing ideas of international order put forward by great powers have always existed. As a realist thinker, Kissinger largely focuses his study on the distribution of power in the international arena. He contends that today's international system of states has a Westphalian character, in that it consists of "a multiplicity of political units, none powerful enough to defeat all others, many adhering to contradictory philosophies and internal practices, in search of neutral rules to regulate their conduct and mitigate conflict" (Kissinger 2014, pp. 2-3). Under these circumstances, a stable balance of power shall be the chief instrument in pursuing international peace. In the words of President Nixon, "the only time in the history of the world that we have had any extended period of peace is when there has been balance of power" (p. 303).

Interestingly enough, Kissinger's investigation into the question of world order develops around the alternative visions of the same powers as Mead's: China, Russia, and

Iran, as well as Europe and the United States. Over the course of his career, Kissinger has attained a profound understanding of the dynamics underlying Chinese politics, culture, and society. In *World Order*, he argues that China has historically considered itself as the sole legitimate government of the world, inspiring and uplifting the rest of humanity from the top of a universal hierarchy. It was only after an unsuccessful armed confrontation against the British Army that China reluctantly and resentfully acquiesced to the concept of reciprocal diplomacy within a Western system of sovereign states. Present-day rising China's self-perception is that of both the inheritor of an ancient civilization and a contemporary great power on the Westphalian model. However, the quest for a synthesis between these two perspectives has often turned out to be rather turbulent. As a matter of fact, China is acutely aware of the fact that it is asked to adhere to rules that it had no part in the making, so it expects – and sooner or later it will likely act on the expectation – the international order to “evolve in a way that enables China to become centrally involved in further international rule-making, even to the point of revising some of the rules that prevail” (p. 225).

Kissinger depicts Russia as an enigma. Since the Congress of Vienna, it has played a unique role in international affairs: it has been a distinctively Eurasian power, participating in the balance of power in both Europe and Asia, but contributing only fitfully to the equilibrium of the international order. Kissinger highlights geographical factors in explaining Russia's international conduct. Defending such a vast territory is a daunting task which could only be fulfilled through constant expansion and absolute rule. “In the Westphalian concept of order, European statesman came to identify security with a balance of power and with restraints on its exercise. In Russia's experience of history, restraints on power spelled catastrophe”. “When it was strong, Russia conducted itself with the domineering certainty of a superior power and insisted on formal shows of deference to its status. When it was weak, it masked its vulnerability through brooding invocations of vast inner reserves of strength”. “The world-conquering imperialism remained paired with a paradoxical sense of vulnerability – as if marching halfway across the world had generated more potential foes than additional security” (pp. 53-55).

Kissinger, well-aware of the momentous consequences of the shifting balance of power in the Middle East, devotes great attention to Iran, which has arguably been the most successful rising power at enhancing its regional status and challenging the existing order. As a matter of fact, according to Kissinger, ever since the Khomeini Revolution, Iran has strived to build an international order which is fundamentally incompatible with

the contemporary prevailing institutional arrangements. “With Iran’s revolution, an Islamist movement dedicated to overthrowing the Westphalian system gained control over a modern state and asserted its ‘Westphalian’ right and privileges – taking up its seat at the United Nations, conducting its trade, and operating its diplomatic apparatus. Iran’s clerical regime thus placed itself at the intersection of two world orders, arrogating the formal protections of the Westphalian system even while repeatedly proclaiming that it did not believe in it, would not be bound by it, and intended ultimately to replace it”. Modern states are viewed as illegitimate political structures that shall be overcome in order to unify the Islamic *umma*, wherein religious differences are to be sublimated under divine law for shared interests and Iran can rise to its rightful dominant position by virtue of its ideological supremacy. The implosion of the Middle East tilted the balance of power in Iran’s favor, as some of its most significant Sunni adversaries are facing major challenges, so that it can deepen its regional influence through the increasing power of its proxies and move closer to its ultimate objective.

Kissinger’s diplomatic experience shows: *World Order* is more than anything a historical work, capable of accounting for culturally-based self-images of great powers. International politics is studied, comprehended, and explained through the lens of a realist scholar of Nineteenth-century power politics. The Westphalian system of states is the bedrock of the international system. The current distribution of power gives rise to a multipolar arrangement of the system, in which rival ideas of order compete. Under these circumstances, the ultimate challenge to statesmanship is to reconstruct the world order on a multilateral, inclusive, and constructive basis, capable of providing peace, security, and prosperity. It is imperative to develop a coherent grand strategy to establish a concept of order within regions and to relate regional orders to one another in a framework of participatory, cooperative, and efficient global governance.

It is evident that power is a central element in the realist approach to the study of International Relations. The long-term trends of world history are dependent variables of power relations and transitions underpinning the international system, whereas the superstructure of institutions, values, and human factors is often pushed to the sidelines. It is just as apparent, however, that different realist scholars reach a wide array of diverse conclusions on the possible trajectories of the present world order. For example, Mead is rather cautious in his assessment of the current worldwide power distribution. As long as a set of requisites is met in order to revive the United States’ global leading role, he remains confident that a decline of its relative power is neither inevitable, nor irreversible, so that it

can continue to be “the indispensable nation” for the foreseeable future. Kissinger, on the other hand, finds his analysis on quite different premises: the international system of states is already multipolar, no world order in the strictest sense of the expression has ever existed, nor is it likely to emerge anytime soon, and therefore, as historical experience suggests, a durable peace can be achieved exclusively through the ordering mechanism of the balance of power. Needless to say, these two accounts of the changing character of the international system, however influential, are not an exhaustive exploration of the issue of world order within the realist school of thought. Other prominent theoreticians and practitioners offer a different look at the evolving power distribution underpinning the global system of states by introducing the concept of nonpolarity into the debate.

Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, defines nonpolarity as an arrangement in which the “world [is] dominated not by one or two or even several states, but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power” (Haass 2008). Nonpolarity differs from multipolarity, in that many of the existing power centers are not nation-states. “States are being challenged from above, by regional and global organizations; from below, by militias; and from the side, by a variety of nongovernmental organizations and corporations”. Nonpolarity is the main feature of Twenty-first-century International Relations and entails epochal consequences. Although the unipolar moment is clearly over, the United States remains “the largest single aggregation of power”, whose military might is unrivaled, economic prosperity sets global standards, and cultural influence spans the world. The United States’ preeminent position is unchallenged, because its international conduct has not stimulated the rise of a counterbalancing coalition, because other great powers lack the material capabilities to credibly pose an existential threat to the U.S., and because the United States plays a crucial functional role in the dominant international system, so that it is counterproductive to disrupt an order on which collective security and prosperity depend. Still, nonpolarity is likely to complicate matters for the United States: promoting collective responses to global challenges will be increasingly difficult, because it has become necessary to manage a plethora of powerful actors differing in nature and pursuing conflicting objectives, and because the possible threats to America’s national interest are now originating from non-state actors able to exert considerable influence, as well.

Haass underlines a crucial point in his analysis when he – somewhat unusually for a realist thinker – acknowledges that the distribution of power tells us who has the power, but not how it will be used. The risk of instability is certainly present, but it is not

inherently inevitable in a remarkably diffuse distribution of power. Haass argues that, as long as the United States remains capable of improving the quality of the international system, it “should take steps to reduce the chances that a nonpolar world will become a cauldron of instability”. Developing energy independence, strengthening homeland security, resisting the spread of nuclear weapons, combating terrorism, promoting free trade and investment, preventing state failure, and most importantly encouraging a cooperative multilateral approach to the resolution of common problems are all necessary steps to avert the rise of destabilizing trends and the deterioration of the international system.

In his latest book, *No One's World: The West, The Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*, Charles Kupchan seems to share to a great extent Kissinger's and Haass's conclusions, even though his analysis remains largely state-centric. He argues that the global distribution of power is rapidly changing: the United States and Europe are ceding power and influence to China, India, Brazil, and other emerging powers. The Western liberal-democratic, industrial-capitalist, secular-nationalist brand of modernity will increasingly have to compete with other political and economic models, including state capitalism in China and Russia, political Islam in the Middle East, and left-wing populism in Latin America. Contrary to post-historical expectations in the aftermath of the Cold War, it is now manifest that the West has to adapt not just to the loss of its material primacy, but also to its waning ideological dominance. As a matter of fact, rather than following the West's path of development and obediently accepting their place in the American-led hegemonic liberal international order, rising states are shaping their own versions of modernity and pushing back against the West's ideological ambitions. “The Twenty-first century will not belong to Europe, the United States, China, or anyone else; it will be no one's world”.

Kupchan argues that the ongoing power shift is mostly a consequence of the economic dynamism and the political ambitions of rising states, but the Western beleaguered model is playing a major role in its relative decline, too. He sees in the renationalization of politics in Europe and in the polarization of politics in the United States the prime causes of the crisis of the transatlantic version of modernity, whose global allure is at stake in the worldwide competition with alternative models. Aside from advising Western leaders against the expectation that rising powers conform to Western values, lest the legitimacy of the existing order be jeopardized, Kupchan does not put forward specific policy recommendations to advance the ultimate goal of forging “a

consensus amongst major states about the foundational principles of the next world” (Kupchan 2012, p. 189).

This general overview illustrates the positions of some of the most prominent contemporary realist scholars and policy-makers on the issue of world order. Although some of the premises of their studies and some of their assessments regarding the future of the international system differ, they share numerous analytical tools and develop their arguments in similar ways. Power is correctly held to be – and to likely long remain – a central element of international relations. It is hardly debatable that a major power shift is currently underway. This evolving distribution of power is bound to have enormous implications for the present arrangement of the international system. As history suggests, great powers cyclically rise and fall. In the zero-sum game of international politics, the relative decline of the United States is giving emerging power increasing leeway in giving shape to their own ideas of order. The international order built by the United States after World War II was fashioned in such a way so as to serve its long-term interests. It was specifically structured to foster economic openness and integration and to allow the United States to provide security on a global scale, i.e. to check the balance of power by playing the functional role of an offshore balancer. Such an international environment was instrumental in America’s prosperity and security: the U.S. was perfectly positioned to access markets worldwide under relatively safe conditions.

Today, however, the ongoing power shift is tilting the balance of power in favor of the “rest”. According to realist thinkers, it is self-explanatory that rising powers have no interest in upholding the existing system. They did not participate in the definition of the rules of the game, they are underrepresented in the dominant institutions, and they are rapidly gathering material resources to overturn the liberal world order and replace it with a new international milieu in which they can better attain their national interests. Of course, the United States can pursue a multidimensional grand strategy in order to extend the durability of the American-led system and preserve its core interests, but on the long run it must come to terms with the idea of living in a less transatlantic-centered order and act accordingly, possibly relinquishing its leadership role for a more pragmatic approach to international affairs in an era of widely diffuse power. International order itself is at stake and under no circumstances shall it be taken for granted. In fact, its character is assumed to be fundamentally anarchical – a true, yet unoriginal assessment, which does not contribute much to the debate on the character of the world order to come. International politics hinge on power relations, which underpin the arrangements of any world order in history,

including the emerging one. The prospects for survival of the liberal world order in its present configuration look rather grim.

States seek power and they calculate their interests in terms of power, but power, however central in their actions, is certainly not the only fundamental element of international relations. Many realist academics tend to systematically overlook other no less important dimensions of international politics.

First and foremost, states do not act in a formless void. They are embedded in a vast and integrated network of multilayered rules and institutions. Granted, international law and the international architecture are instruments of power shaped by the strongest state at a certain moment – usually after a hegemonic war – to serve its interests, but they have a very real impact on the conduct of states. As a matter of fact, the content of international norms is essentially a set of limits to the use of international and internal force by states. In theory, particularly powerful states can afford disregarding the existing norms and wield their power with no strings attached – and, in fact, great powers have repeatedly transgressed agreed-upon rules throughout history, confident that they would face no consequences, because no rival coalition of states could match their material capabilities. There is no shortage of recent examples. In practice, however, international rules are essential in legitimizing the conduct of states. Breaking international law causes resistance and opposition by other members of the international community. The transatlantic drift of the last decade epitomizes this point. In an age of diffuse power, “you’re either with us or against us” foreign policies and unilateral action are no longer viable possibilities and counterbalancing coalitions become once again a concrete reality. If a state were to try to act above international law, other states would be legitimized in resorting to self-help measures. Power and restraint are deeply intertwined elements, which a state must pursue simultaneously in the quest to enhance its international posture.

International institutions, on the other hand, are important actors that sustain the international system. Not only do they perform a significant normative function, but they are also instrumental in facilitating political dialogue, elaborating common policies to achieve shared goals and tackle global problems, and legitimizing their respective system, at least as long as they are able to reflect changes in the distribution of power and accommodate the demands of rising stakeholders. In short, they influence the international conduct of states by mediating the unconstrained exercise of power.

Power is an enduring immanent dimension of international politics, but every actor capable of wielding power acts not simply in an anarchical system, but in an anarchical

society, i.e. it conceives itself to be bound by a common set of at least elementary rules in its relations to other states. “The element of a society has always been present, and remains present, in the modern international system, although only as one of the elements in it, whose survival is sometimes precarious” (Bull 1977, p. 41).

International norms and institutions are among the most significant elements alongside globalization that make the liberal world order qualitatively different from past orders. “Whereas many realists always see more of the same in international relations, namely anarchy and power politics, most liberals have a notion of modernization and progress built into their theoretical foundation which makes them more receptive to study of social, economic, institutional, and political change” (Jackson and Sørensen 2012, p. 121). Over the past several hundred years, international relations have undergone profound transformations. The current levels of economic integration are almost unprecedented in history. The economic component of the liberal world order is arguably the only world-spanning one in the strictest sense of the term. We are living in a one-world trade and investment system, which exerts a powerful restraining effect: large-scale interstate war is not only legally almost impracticable, but also economically disadvantageous. The ultimate deterrent, however, remains the existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of major powers, whose massively destructive capabilities paradoxically ushered in an era of so-called nuclear peace. Admittedly, international relations is still the realm of power politics, but “war-driven change is removed as a historical process” (Ikenberry 2011, p. 130).

“The traditional balance of power emphasized military and industrial capacity”, so that “a change in it could be achieved only gradually or by conquest. The modern balance of power reflects the level of a society’s scientific development and can be threatened dramatically by developments entirely within the territory of a state” (Kissinger 2014, p. 159). The liberal world order was built on the foundations of American preeminence. It is a well-established fact that the rise of emerging powers in the global South and East has the potential to undermine the stability of the institutions sustaining the US-led order. The BRICs countries and the so-called global middle class are gaining economic momentum, are advancing social reforms, and increasingly display worldwide ambitions. Meanwhile, the Western liberal-democratic, capitalist, nation-state model of modernization is discredited by its inability to assure international financial stability, to disentangle political gridlock, and to reduce social inequality. It is more and more clear that modernization does not exclusively equal westernization. Rising powers are finding their own paths to economic prosperity, social stability, and political effectiveness.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that a crucial element in a power's claim to global leadership is the appeal of its model. The Western model, based on democratic rule, human rights protection, and promotion of social progress, exerts remarkable drawing power across the globe. Representative government, individual freedom, and personal wealth are all universal goals for which many peoples around the world are striving. This proves that the Western model is peacefully exportable, in the sense that it can be brought about by gradual reform in the domestic sphere. The same can hardly be said with respect to Chinese and Russian autocracy, Iranian and Saudi theocracy, Latin American left-wing populism, or African dictatorship. Over the course of world history, rising powers were able to successfully take up a hegemonic role in the international system not only thanks to their military superiority and economic capabilities, but also because at a certain time they represented the vanguard in defining what it means to be modern and make it to the next level of advancement.

At this stage, all the eyes of the world are understandably on China. Yet, the Middle Kingdom cannot be said to be able to offer the world a coherent alternative vision of world order. By generally accepted standards, China is still a developing country and over the long haul it might formulate a model with considerable allure. As of now, however, it has an approach at best, not a model. It is a more mercantilist and statist approach. It is using infrastructure development as a catalyst to bring states into trade and resource relationships. It is trying to assert influence in its own region through a muscular security policy. This is not a model for the world, though. On the contrary, in a sense it depends on the liberal model.

Furthermore, even though it is certainly a possibility in the long run, no alternative model or approach to the liberal world order has been capable of providing a sound basis for the articulation of a different concept of world order yet. It is a matter of turning power into influence. This task requires the definition of new norms and the building of new institutions in order to be fulfilled. We are certainly witnessing new phenomena of institution-building processes: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, the Eurasian Economic Union all at first glance appear to be stepping stones towards the construction of a new regional order. It can be argued that these institutions in a sense mirror NATO, the Bretton Woods international organizations, and the European Union, while trying to overcome their deficiencies, at least in aspiration. Nevertheless, the basic logic of what seems to be an emerging Eurasian regional order is once again liberal: openness, rules, and progress are fundamental

prerequisites for its success. It remains unclear whether a different set of norms will be elaborated and, if so, what their content might be and how would it differ from the basic ones enshrined in the Western vision.

If it is assumed that in a few decades the rising powers can capitalize on the shifting balance of power and exploit their strategic prowess to articulate, build, and enforce alternative international orders, this does not necessarily imply the undoing of the existing liberal system. By taking a perspective from far above the globe, modern world history can be seen as a succession of different hierarchical orders. Great-power war has oftentimes served as the primary mechanism to overturn the old order and make the rules and build the institutions of the new one. However, hegemonic war is no longer a practicable instrument of international historical change. Under these circumstances, it is appropriate to enquire into the possible means to which the rising powers can resort in order to overturn the liberal world order and restructure the international environment so as to serve their interests, according to the predictions of realist scholars, who nonetheless do not explain how such transformation can be brought about in a qualitatively different international system.

The liberal world order is a complex, vast, multilayered, multidimensional, and deeply entrenched geopolitical reality. Its functional core is represented by Western democracies, but its logic also encompasses other wide areas of the world. It consists of numerous political, economic, strategic, and cultural institutionalized elements. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, despite their shortcomings, still play an important role in fostering international financial stability and in promoting economic and social development. Both organizations are heavily dependent on Washington's contributions and policies. Even more crucially, an active participation in the World Trade Organization remains to this day a fundamental prerequisite for economic prosperity: rules of nondiscrimination and reciprocity are indispensable to take advantage of the consequences of worldwide economic interdependence. The role of the European Union shall not be underestimated: at the present stage of the process of European integration, the EU is a *sui generis* international organization, deeply integrated in the transatlantic community and likely to further deepen its ties to the United States through trade and investment agreements. Besides, it is within the European Union that the principles of the Washington Consensus are arguably more rigidly applied. Thus, the European Union gives the liberal international order significant geopolitical heft. Most importantly, the United Nations, despite its resistance to reform and consequent loss in legitimacy, remain an

irreplaceable political forum which, thanks to its universal character, it does not make much sense to replace with a different system, especially because the present revisionist powers, namely China and Russia, enjoy special rights and privileges within it.

No realist theorist seems to be capable of providing a solid explanation of the way in which this order, i.e. these rules and institutions can be overturned. The liberal order consists of so many different deeply integrated components, that it is virtually impossible to disassemble it without plunging the world in a dark era of great-power armed confrontation. If anything, the liberal order might fall victim to its own dysfunctions. The paradoxical pursuit of illiberal foreign policies, the resurgence of nationalist strains as an effect of the difficulties of the European federalist project, a crisis of legitimacy and efficiency of international institutions are all factors that might contribute to the liberal order's own undoing. A problem of conceptualization needs to be addressed. If the liberal order is understood as the geopolitical outcome of the Cold War, i.e. the sole remaining and in fact expanding pattern of particular arrangements of international life, as it is in the liberal-internationalist perspective, then it is safe to come to the conclusion that this model is indeed threatened by competing ordering logics embodied by rising powers. However, if on the other hand liberal order is framed as a regional system, binding together Western democracies, as it is in most realist analyses, then it can be correctly assessed that it has proven remarkably resilient and is likely to endure through the ongoing power shift.

According to realists, therefore, liberal international order is only one among many orders in the emerging international system. The ongoing global power shift is giving rise to ambitious states, eager to pursue their self-interest to the detriment of their regional and worldwide competitors. Treading different paths to modernity, China, Russia, Iran, as well as a whole range of middle-class states are trying to maximize their power and security, so as to reach a dominant position, from where they can shape the international environment in a conducive way to their long-term interests. Nevertheless, structural factors are likely to hamper hegemonic ambitions: the emerging rather diffuse distribution of power might result in a relatively flat international system, where even the more powerful states are not capable to take up functional roles and turn into regional, let alone global hubs. Under these circumstances, the balance of power is not only an empirical concept which explains the way in which international politics operate, but it is also a normative concept, i.e. a legitimate objective and a guide to responsible statecraft. The balance of power shall be the linchpin of the evolving international Westphalian system of states: only through its achievement can elementary societal goals, such as preservation, external sovereignty, and

negative peace, be attained. The character of the world order to come is thus likely to remain anarchical, but its inherent instability is to be successfully managed through the ordering logic of balance.

Chapter Three: The Anarchical Society as a Human Construct

The dichotomy between the realist paradigm and the liberal school of thought represents one of the great debates in the history of the theory of International Relations. Liberal Internationalism and Political Realism are usually held to be irreconcilable theoretical approaches. In fact, this is a hardly debatable statement. Their conceptual premises differ widely, their respective interpretative tools emphasize different variables and analytical levels, and their reasoning leads to virtually opposite conclusions. An extended metatheoretical literature exists on the antithetical approaches to the study of International Relations, which offers several detailed, systematic, and all-comprehensive accounts of realist and liberal core notions, assumptions, and arguments, highlighting their explanatory capabilities and conceptual vulnerabilities.

Nevertheless, the competing character of the major theoretical paradigms of International Relations does not necessarily signify their mutual exclusiveness. As a matter of fact, a pluralist approach to the study of International Relations is potentially able to overcome the incompatibilities of realism and liberalism, acknowledge multiple rather than inconsistent perspectives, and build on their synergies to optimize the comprehension of the various dynamics and constituent elements of international reality by illuminating different facets thereof. Power, norms, institutions, values, ideas, agency, structures, systems, and individuals are different elements, which acquire varying relative relevance in each theoretical interpretation, but they all coexist and operate simultaneously in a continuous interplay within the same complex reality. Theoretical pluralism transcends static metatheoretical debates in an effort to dynamically relate realist and liberal traditions for the purpose of developing a sophisticated grand theoretical narrative. The salience of Hobbesian and Kantian perspectives lies in their ability to enlighten opposite phenomena: in spite of their antithetical character, a synthesis of both is essential in clarifying how the countless dimensions of the world operate and interact. Therefore, the question is not which analytical approach is right in absolute terms, but rather what kind of configuration their combination produces. The ultimate task is to identify, understand, and explain major transformations that define profound shifts in different eras in the history of the international system (Buzan and Little 2001, pp. 36-38).

The International Society tradition successfully combines elements from both the realist and the liberal approaches to the study of International Relations. Realism is built into this school of thought as one of its basic elements. Wight characterizes International Relations as a “theory of survival”, which is an acknowledgement of the primacy of states,

their right to exist and the legitimacy of their interests. At the same time, however, self-interest is not the sole possible justification of international conduct. States have also legitimate interests that other states recognize and respect and all states comprehend the general advantages of observing a certain set of shared fundamental principles in international affairs, such as reciprocity (Wight 1966, p. 33). International treaties are important examples that validate this argument. “States do not observe treaties only when it is in their best interest to do so. Rather, they enter into treaty commitments with caution, because they know that they are binding themselves to the terms of such treaties. If states really acted like realists claim, there would be no binding treaties, because no state could be expected to keep their promise when it was no longer in their interest to do so. Yet, binding treaties are a commonplace in world politics”. The International Society approach also largely draws upon traditionally liberal notions of historical progressive change, the significance of institution-building, and democratic stability (Jackson and Sørensen 2012, p. 154-155).

It shall be clearly stated that International Society theory is much more than the mere sum of the parts. It is a remarkably innovative approach to the study of the theory and practice of International Relations, which has articulated an elaborate interpretative framework. In a sense, it is a subjectivist-holist response to the conceptual rigidity of realist structuralism and liberal rationalism, which places great emphasis on the conscious social construction of the international reality (Dunne 1995). The core argument of the International Society theory is that states form not only an anarchical system, but also an anarchical society. An international system is formed when “two or more states have sufficient contact between them and impact on one another’s decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole” (Bull 1977, p. 9). However, it is important to underline that “two or more states can be in contact with each other and interact in such a way as to be necessary factors in each other’s calculations without conceiving themselves to be bound by a common set of rules” (p. 14). On the contrary, international society emerges when “a group of states conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations to one another” (p. 13). It can be persuasively argued that “the element of a society has always been present, and remains present, in the modern international system, although only as one of the elements in it, whose survival is sometimes precarious. At no stage can it be said that the conception of the common interests of states, of common rules accepted, and common institutions worked by them has ceased to exert an influence” (pp. 41-42).

The ideational dimension adds a constructivist element to the International Society theory analysis. The implications are enormous for the understanding of international politics, which is seen as a social phenomenon. Agents and structures construct each other reciprocally. As a matter of fact, actors share common sets of ideas, which, once they become social facts, are capable of structuring social contexts. Structures, in turn, are simultaneously constraining and enabling. They are reproduced and transformed by actors within them through time. Our international reality is of our own making. This assumption has dramatic consequences on the meaningfulness of the fundamental notions of realism and liberalism. The mechanistic character of the realist notion of power is considerably downplayed in International Society theory. The distribution of power is not “a fixed determinant, but a factor whose impact plays through the social structure of the international system” (Buzan 2004, p. 78). In other words, to use Wendt’s iconic formulation, if anarchy is what states make of it, so is polarity. Whatever the political climate of the international system, an element of international society always persists. The same is true for liberal notions. International Society theorists have a deeper sense of institutions: they do not only take into account regimes and intergovernmental organizations, but also “shared practices and values among states, such as sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, which evolve slowly over long timescales” (p. 79). These social constructs are primarily fundamental norms and institutions of coexistence, from which international society can emerge.

Through conscious deliberation, international society is what states have made of it. “It is the habitual intercourse of independent communities. It is manifest in the diplomatic system, in the conscious maintenance of the balance of power to preserve the independence of the member-communities, in the regular operation of international law, whose binding force is accepted over a wide though politically unimportant range of subjects” (Wight 1966, pp. 96-97). “The sovereign state is the constitutive community of international society, one whose obedience to the norms of the society of states both reaffirms the identity of the sovereign state and reconstitutes the structure of international society” (Dunne 1995, 379).

Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism are different ways of looking at the relations among states. “The first concept views states as power agencies that pursue their own interests. That is the realist view of Machiavelli. The second concept downplays the importance of states and places the emphasis on human being. Humans are seen to compose a primordial ‘world community’ or ‘community of humankind’ that is more

fundamental than the society of states. That is the revolutionist view of Kant. The third concept views states as legal organizations that operate in accordance with international law and diplomatic practice. It thus conceives of international relations as rule-governed activities based on the mutually recognized authority of sovereign states. That is the rationalist view of Grotius” (Jackson and Sørensen 2012, p. 133). In order to be adequately comprehended, complex macro-phenomena, such as international systems, require a composite, multilayered, and integrated approach. The foremost methodological task for International Relations theorists shall be to highlight the complementarities of the various schools of thought of the discipline and to clearly illustrate how their respective elements can dynamically coexist and interact and possibly contribute to the establishment of international order, instead of fruitlessly exposing their well-known differences. “If the chronic tendency towards fragmentation is to be overcome, theoretical pluralism has to be favored” (Buzan and Little 2001, p. 34). The International Society approach is not an all-comprehensive explanatory approach to the study of International Relations, but, if applied as only one lens alongside Realism and Liberalism, it is most certainly an additional step in the right direction.

The question of world order remains central in all three approaches. Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism reach different answers. Instead of using one lens at a time in the explanation of the transformations of the international reality, resorting to a theoretical kaleidoscope can provide a bigger and clearer picture of the forces, institutions, and ideas shaping world politics in the Twenty-first century.

Realist thinkers place great emphasis upon the notion of power, which is assumed to be the central feature of international politics. Establishing a priority scale of the countless elements of the international system is an endless and futile task, but it is a well-established fact that power has been an enduring variable in interstate relations throughout history and it is very likely to keep exerting great influence on international conduct. Realist theorists employ specific interpretative tools which allow them to illuminate the changing power dynamics underpinning the present world order and draw deterministic conclusions on the possible trajectories of the international system of states.

Realist scholars argue that today power is more and more diffuse. History is cyclical: the current hegemon is declining, whilst emerging powers are rising. Growing military capabilities and economic resources are gradually pushing states such as China, Russia, Iran, and so on to the position where they will be able to assert their influence on a larger scale in ways alien to the modern Western experience. In other words, a

heterogeneous group of revisionist powers is striving to erect regional blocs, wherein each leading state can better project power, organize parts of the global system around itself, and pursue its interests, perhaps through illiberal methods. The resulting international system is likely to be relatively less open, based on a fragmented legal framework, and more competitive in terms of security provision than it is now. It will be a relatively flat international system, because it will feature no superpowers. In fact, long-term historical trends show a drop in the number of superpowers striding the world stage over the last century. More importantly, though, no great power will be capable of gathering enough military might, gaining adequate economic prosperity, and developing sufficient ideological appeal in the foreseeable future to acquire the superpower status.

“The United States is behaving like a declining hegemon: unwilling to share power yet unable to impose” (Luce 2014). The disorientation of American foreign policy is proving a major factor in revealing the image of a leading state incapable of providing guidance for the wider system and unable to capitalize on the unrivaled power and unmatched prestige it has enjoyed ever since the end of the Cold War (Colombo 2015, p. 29). The disastrous War on Terror took a heavy toll on America’s position in the global hierarchy. Arguably, it was a typical case of imperial overstretch: the United States engaged in a controversial conflict in a relevant geostrategic area, but its astronomical cost undermined the balance between power and wealth. Both domestic and international public opinion rapidly turned unwilling to support a war by many accounts deemed illegitimate and are still growing increasingly unsupportive of the United States’ global leading role. Political indecisiveness jeopardized progress both in Syria, where the military capabilities of America’s opponents were greatly underestimated, and in Ukraine, where the political resolve of the Russian adversary was evidently miscalculated. The “Pivot to Asia”, instead of reorienting American geopolitical ambitions, damaged its relation to China, while not succeeding in solving the regional security dilemma. Strategic short-sightedness and diplomatic incoherence have proved to be recurring elements in American foreign action. The implosion of the Middle East, growing tensions in Eastern Europe, and phenomena of preemptive securitization in East Asia feature among their consequences.

The international stature of the United States was further deteriorated by a dire financial crisis, which seriously discredited the Washington Consensus model of development. Furthermore, profound social inequality, widespread private violence, and ineradicable institutional racism cast a long shadow on what once used to be perceived as a shining city upon a hill. Besides, the radicalization of the right and the electoral debacles of

the left result in political gridlock in Washington, which prevent the elaboration of effective policies beyond the unsatisfactory common ground.

Ruinous foreign enterprises and disadvantageous domestic circumstances call the credibility of the U.S. as a global leader into question. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States embarked on an ambitious liberal world order-building project. The resulting international system was open, loosely rule-based, and progressive. It was a favorable milieu conducive to American long-term interests, but its liberal logic exerted a powerful gravitational pull on many other nations. This system allowed the United States to take up a leading functional role and enjoy its benefits for over half a century through the Cold War and the following unipolar moment. The liberal order proved remarkably resilient and even outgrew its founder. Yet, this political formulation is in crisis. It is a crisis of authority and efficiency. If the decline of American authority, the rise of alternative approaches to tackle political, economic, and social issues, and the current global power shift are jointly taken into account, it is safe to conclude that the prospects for a resurgence of American hegemony are rather bleak.

China, on the other hand, seems to be gaining the upper hand in the ongoing power transition. It is registering impressively high economic growth rates, its modernizing army is the largest in the entire world, it possesses unmatched demographic resources, its middle class is flourishing, its geostrategic position facilitates energy sufficiency, it is encouraging innovation at an incredibly fast pace, it is embedding its power in a wide array of institutions, it aspires to internationalize its currency, and it is showing increasing global ambitions. In a comparative perspective, however, China is still a developing country, mostly concerned with its internal economic prosperity, social stability, and political consolidation. It appears to lack the necessary political will to assert itself as a global hegemon. By definition, a great power cannot be a reluctant hegemon. A state willingly becomes a hegemon, because it believes that the advantages of occupying such role in the global hierarchy will outweigh its drawbacks. Beijing, on the contrary, remains committed to its peaceful rise, strategic humility, and anti-hegemonic discourse.

Even though it might be more a matter of “when” rather than “if”, China is currently not positioned to put forward a credible and coherent model of world order. Above all, its illiberal character is proving a major obstacle to its regional ambitions. In fact, China is surrounded and contained by democracies, many of which are U.S. allies. The intense security competition in The South China Sea, whose great strategic significance cannot be overstated, exemplifies the hindrances that rising China is likely to

keep facing for a long time. Under these circumstances, anachronistic imperial dominance is the only possibility to attain dominance, but this is a costly and ultimately self-defeating option. The People's Republic of China does not fit into the superpower ideal type.

The European Union is widely considered to be the third possible global power which might attain superpower status in the coming decades. At the current stage, the process of European Integration has given rise to a unique political and institutional formation. The European Union is more than a confederation, but it is not a federal state yet. It is an advanced phenomenon of regional integration largely based on the principle of economic functionalism, which is clearly unsustainable in the long run, if it is not accompanied by a strong political will to move forward to a unitary, cohesive, and accountable organization. This is evident in the recent resurgence of nationalist tendencies, which question the legitimacy of the European Union from within and pose a direct threat to its existence.

The external action of the EU encounters no fewer difficulties. The European Union is a civilian power which embodies alluring values of freedom, human rights, and rule of law, but it lacks the means to enforce them. The institution of a European army is a long debated issue, but, as notoriously stated by Robert Kagan, "Americans are from Mars; Europeans are from Venus" (Kagan 2003). NATO is the main security provider in Europe, whose priorities are as a consequence not military-driven. Although the sitting European Commission seems to have revived the office of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, forging a coherent foreign policy out of twenty-eight different positions remains a daunting task. The continuation of the European integration process and the institutional strengthening of the Union are the top priorities of the European agenda. The lack of a clearly articulated grand strategy is significantly hampering any possible European claim to international dominance.

The global power shift, therefore, seems to be giving rise to a multipolar or a nonpolar international system, according to different accounts by realist authors. Such a diffuse distribution of power raises questions on matters of security, stability, and peace. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand that polarity, however central, is only one of the numerous variables that come into play in defining the character of the international system. Realist determinist assumptions that unipolarity and bipolarity are inherently stable, whereas multipolarity and nonpolarity are likely to engender instability, acquire significance only when placed within a broader context. The liberal school of thought is

able to provide an accurate description of the profound dynamics underlying the existing international order, which is conceived of as qualitatively different.

A multipolar distribution of power does not say much on the quality of international order if it is removed from its historical framework. The 1930s share some similarities with the emerging world order in terms of distribution of power, but the hard geopolitical competition of that time is unlikely to repeat for several reasons. Contemporary international relations do not function like those of the 1930s. The emergence of modernity, i.e. industrial capitalism, rational bureaucratic states, and new ideologies of progress, in the Nineteenth century stimulated a deep global transformation which empowered the West and prompted the construction of a highly unequal global political economy. These same notions are now enabling the rise of the “rest”. The dominant power-periphery relations of the past two centuries are being gradually replaced by an international order based on decentered globalism: no single power is dominant and able to assert its influence on a worldwide scale (Buzan 2011). In this context, capitalism has emerged as a near-universal unifying feature of the contemporary international system, so that the wars of the Twentieth century to organize the global economy are now obsolete. The overriding lesson of the Cold War is that non-capitalist economies cannot compete against capitalist ones in the long run, especially in an age of information-based economy. Capitalism has an unparalleled capacity to generate wealth and power, thus legitimizing itself (Buzan and Lawson 2014, p. 77).

As the economic gap shrinks, so does the ideological divide. Fascism and communism are no longer credible paths towards modernity. Empire-building and racist rationales are broadly seen as illegitimate. Economic protectionism and mercantilism are not considered rational policy choices anymore, at least to a certain extent. Whereas a fundamental ideological question driving much of the geopolitics of the Twentieth century was “Capitalism or not?”, today the fundamental ideological question in world politics is “What kind of capitalism is able to produce the best results in terms of wealth and power creation?”. The reflection on the organization of world economy is much narrower now than it used to be in the Nineteenth century. The fact that both the United States and China are capitalist market economies – although considerably different in their specific configurations – is one possible explanation of the absence of the level of systemic confrontation between them that marked the competition in the bipolar age (p. 72).

Different models of capitalism are competing in a soft geoeconomic rivalry. This competition is unlikely to engender conflict, because the global architecture of economic

governance is substantially more institutionalized than in previous centuries. It is undeniable that existing institutions are under considerable strain and in dire need of reform, but there is “common ground between all types of capitalism when it comes to the desirability of maintaining the global trade, production, and financial circuits on which their prosperity and growth depend” (p. 87). The analogy between present-day multipolarism and the multipolarism of the interwar period is thus disproven: a world of decentered globalism featuring different varieties of capitalism will not replay the conflicts of the 1930s, when different Great Powers represented mutually exclusive forms of political economy. There are solid grounds for ruling out the possibility of a return to hard geopolitics.

The fabric of the international system can be reinforced if an institutional way of building on a sense of capitalist commonality is elaborated and applied. In fact, the impact of power and the effects of institutions play through the social structure of the international system. Ideas, perceptions, and self-images are an essential variable in influencing international conduct. States are embedded in dense networks of international social interactions that shape their sense of self and their relation to the other. Identities are intersubjective social constructs that are reciprocally built in the process. The international system works differently depending on the prevalence of identities of enemies, rivals, or friends within it. “The posture of enemies is one of threatening adversaries who observe no limits in their violence toward each other; that of rivals is one of competitors who will use violence to advance their interests but refrain from killing each other; and that of friends is one of allies who do not use violence to settle their disputes and work as a team against security threats” (Wendt 1999, p. 258). In a culture of enemies self and other are existential threats and easily fall into mutual securitization based on fears of extermination. In a culture of rivals self and other recognize rights of coexistence. In a culture of friends the cognitive boundaries of the self are extended to include the other (pp. 262-305).

The Cold War is a fitting example to illustrate this point. Once this cultural formation was in place, the United States and the Soviet Union “had a shared belief that they were enemies, which helped constitute their identities and interests in any given situation, which they in turn acted upon in ways that confirmed to the other that they were a threat, reproducing the Cold War. Socially shared knowledge plays a key role in making interaction relatively predictable over time, generating homeostatic tendencies that stabilize social order. Culture, in short, tends to reproduce itself, and indeed must do so if it is to be culture at all” (p. 187).

Cognitive elements determine the content of power and the meaning of institutions. It is imperative that the vast majority of states develop a culture of rivals and friends, rather than rivals and enemies. An international order based on soft geoeconomic competition has the potential to foster this kind of interactional culture, which in turn reinforces the relatively peaceful operational logic of the system. The great challenge facing the actors in the global arena is to build a cohesive international society based upon rules and institutions that primarily discipline conduct and allow coexistence and possibly encourage cooperation. It is first and foremost necessary to define common goals. Foreign policy is the institutional tool that states use to pursue their interests, whether they be power, wealth, geostrategic advantage, glory, domination, or ideological triumph. Although it seems impossible to reconcile these different objectives, a common ground can be reached on a more fundamental level. As a matter of fact, all states strive to accomplish a common set of shared elementary goals, which stand out as primary in a hypothetical scale of interests of states, because “their fulfilment in some measure is a condition not merely of this or that sort of social life, but of social life as such” (Bull 1977, p. 4). These universal goals of states can reasonably be identified as preservation, external sovereignty, and peace (p. 16).

In any society, order is maintained not only by common interests, but also by agreed-upon rules and institutions which define the limits of acceptable behavior and thus sustain the orderly pursuit of such interests (p. 54). Sovereignty, territoriality, nationalism, international law, diplomacy, and the market are some examples of primary institutions in international society which are held in common and therefore provide important resources for the maintenance of international order. They are the constitutional normative principles of world politics in the present era (p. 65). It is the existence of shared principles, norms, and institutions which allows actors to collectively define goals and pursue them in a decentralized system. In other words, these are the very prerequisites for the establishment and management of global governance, which is in fact coessential with the principles and norms underpinning any given order (Caffarena 2012, p. 396-397).

In this perspective, the scope for international cooperation is limited to the pursuit of a generally desired degree of international order. However, “when powers have similar ideologies and similar structures of law, government, and economy, scope opens up for the joint pursuit of shared values. The domestic character of powers matters a great deal in determining how they relate to each other, and not just in whether they converge or not, but on what set of values they converge” (Buzan 2004, p. 79). It is apparent that a worldwide convergence on values does not exist, for better or for worse. Nevertheless, this does not

necessarily mean that global governance is doomed to encounter structural complications. A pluralist order is a sustainable solution and a sound basis on which global governance can rely. A pluralist order is “one in which there is respect for, or at least tolerance of, difference, and a willingness to adapt to the realities of power, alongside a responsible attitude towards the maintenance of an international society based on the principle of coexistence” (Buzan and Lawrence 2014, p. 90).

The lack of a universal guiding principle and of a “supporting framework of socially constructed indivisibility” might cause the diverse actors operating at different levels – national, regional, and global – to experience “limited and ineffective responses to problems which are global in the sense that they are cross-layered and require the participation of many actors to be dealt with effectively” (Caffarena 2012, p. 398), unless multilateralism is essentially reconsidered and vigorously reaffirmed as the fundamental organizational principle underpinning global governance. The most pressing political, economic, and social issues of our time far exceed the capacities of individual states to successfully address them alone and require an intense joint multilateral effort. All powers in the contemporary world share common interests beyond the elementary ones that allow for the emergence of an international society. Coexistence can be accompanied by cooperation on urgent concerns, such as managing the global economy, avoiding nuclear proliferation, combating terrorism, and dealing with climate change, lest present problems become future threats.

As the fabric of the international system is progressively loosening, the contemporary quest for world order requires a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order within regions and to relate regional orders to one another. As power diffuses and regionalism features more and more prominently in international affairs, a symbiosis between these two trends can become an important structural element of the emerging world order. A complex, multi-level, and inclusive institutional architecture of global governance is the necessary juncture amongst world regions. A legitimate and effective system of global governance must enshrine principles of equal liberty, equal justice, and equal rights, mutual respect, mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, honest friendship, equal freedom, and generous reciprocity. Most importantly, it must hold in great regard the enduring sensitivities of all states and safeguard their domestic political spheres, but at the same time it must integrate all states in the global political space in an effort to manage collectively those problems they can no longer solve individually.

In order to achieve a genuine world order, its components, while retaining their values, must acquire a new culture that is global, transcending the perspective and ideals of any given region. “A world order of states affirming individual dignity and participatory governance, and cooperating internationally in accordance with agreed-upon rules, can be our hope and should be our inspiration” (Kissinger 2014, p. 372). Putting words into action is never an easy task and requires that all actors in the international system take up new responsibilities. In a world of decentered globalism, the adherence to “democratic normality” is no longer a valid measure to evaluate the legitimate membership of relevant stakeholders in the international community. The respect for the rules of the game appears to be a more suitable criterion. In this way a primary international society founded on a broad sense of commonality can operate as a joining link between so to speak secondary or regional international societies, each treading their separate political, economic, and social ways, but pursuing together shared goals of peace, stability, and prosperity within a framework of solid global governance.

Conclusion

This thesis has studied the changing logic and character of the transforming world order. Throughout the history of the discipline, International Relations scholars have produced a considerable scientific output on this topic. As a matter of fact, order is one of the central notions of political thought and has always stimulated great reflection. Especially at a time of sweeping change and great uncertainty, it is important to devote particular attention to profound long-term trends shaping the international system and to ponder on the prospects for world order in the strictest sense of the expression.

This dissertation has attempted to stand out from the existing literature in several different ways. First and foremost, it has focused on one specific aspect of this grand theme, i.e. the character of the emerging international system, defined as the general essence of the most fundamental features underlying the order and influencing the quality of the relations and interactions taking place within it. Furthermore, it has privileged theoretical thinking to a significant extent, in the firm conviction that the proper comprehension of world politics indeed requires a solid theoretical framework. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to engage the academic debates on the issue of world order and elaborate a multidimensional approach to the study of an increasingly complex international reality. Finally, it has proactively and pragmatically addressed the question of global governance by identifying a set of core guiding policy principles to restructure its institutional arrangements on a basis of legitimacy, so as to preserve and in fact enhance its ability to tackle the most urgent transnational issues of the present age.

The fundamental proposition of this study is that the changing character of world order can only be understood through the combined use of different perspectives. Liberal Internationalism, Political Realism, and International Society theory are the three main paradigms of International Relations. They differ widely in core assumptions, interpretative tools, and explicative capabilities. Over the course of three chapters, each school of thought has been thoroughly scrutinized and critically assessed, in order to enlighten both their strengths and their weaknesses in accounting for the ongoing transformations occurring in the international system.

Liberal academics place great emphasis on the alleged liberal character of world order. They propose a grand narrative of its emergence in the aftermath of World War II and of its impressive durability beyond the end of the bipolar confrontation. Liberal thinkers acknowledge that the present international order is in crisis, but they argue that it is a crisis of success, which can be overcome by a new great bargain. Therefore, they

conclude that the problems of liberalism require more liberalism in order to be solved. Nevertheless, liberal reasoning on the issue of world order is fraught with flaws. The American-led liberal world order is not integrally liberal and properly world-spanning as it is often depicted. In fact, even its architects have often resorted to illiberal conduct to pursue their interests, whereas many world regions escape the liberal logic altogether. Besides, this model has proven unsustainable in the long term, because it is based on ultimately irreconcilable values. As a result, its legitimacy is direly undermined and unlikely to be rapidly restored.

Realist thinkers assume that international relations is largely a realm of power. As a matter of fact, power is a central explanatory concept in the realist approach to the study of International Relations. The issues of international politics can be understood by the objective, rational, and scientific analysis of competing interests of states defined in terms of power. During long historical cycles, powers rise and fall. Wars are important mechanisms of change in international politics, in that their outcome transforms the global distribution of power and determines which state attains hegemonic stature. The leading state in any given configuration of the international system is interested in shaping a milieu conducive to the pursuit of its interests. Therefore, as the West declines and the rest emerges, it is reasonable to expect that revisionist powers will at a certain point overturn the current dominant order. Although it is hardly debatable that power is an enduring element of international relations, hard geopolitics and great-power violent confrontation are significantly curtailed by a qualitatively different international environment. The impetuous forces of economic globalization, the constraining character of international law, nuclear deterrence, and political dialogue facilitated by a wide array of international institutions have ushered the world in an era of relative stability. This does not mean that every form of international conflict has been eradicated, but rather that the scope for war-driven change has been significantly reduced.

International Society theorists combine elements from both the realist and the liberal schools of thought in a coherent approach to the study of International Relations and further add a constructivist element to their analysis, which reinterprets traditionally realist and liberal notions as social constructs. In a sense, International Society theory is a subjectivist-holist response to the conceptual rigidity of realist structuralism and liberal rationalism, which places great emphasis on the conscious social construction of the international reality. Intersubjective identities play thus a crucial role in determining the outcomes of interstate relations and the quality of the international system.

It appears evident that Political Realism, Liberal Internationalism, and International Society theory are capable of enlightening different aspects of the multifaceted macro-phenomenon of international order. Therefore, the primary task for International Relations theorists must be to draw attention to their complementarities, to show how they can be fruitfully integrated into an all-comprehensive approach, and to demonstrate how static and dynamic elements of the system coexist and interact. It is undisputable that it is useful to present these paradigms separately in order to underline their singularities, but it is more worthwhile to attempt to tell these grand narratives in parallel.

The ongoing power shift is giving rise to a relatively flat international system, where many different actors possess similar material capabilities. No single model of development is likely to universally prevail and different world regions will tread their unique paths towards modernity, security, and prosperity. In a world of decentred globalism, capitalism is asserting itself as a crucial unifying feature of the international system, in that it is widely acknowledged as the preferable way to create power and wealth. All states share common interests in upholding an integrated system capable of generating profit, i.e. to abide by agreed-upon rules and institutions, which in turn bind them closer together. The prospects for large-scale violent conflict are thus rather bleak. The scope for cooperation, however, extends beyond the economic domain. Whereas the nation-state arguably remains the principal actor in the international arena, many of the challenges it has to address – nuclear proliferation, global terrorism, climate change – require transnational responses in order to be successfully tackled. A solid institutional architecture of global governance is necessary and its actual realization depends on the political will of states to establish mutual relations based on friendly rivalry and soft geoeconomic, rather than hostile rivalry and hard geopolitics.

Over the long historical continuum between normativity and power, several world orders have existed. Some were imposed by virtue of sheer force, others stemmed from a quasi-constitutional moment. Power is an enduring element of international relations, but so are norms. As a matter of fact, there has always been an element of society, however elementary, in any international system in history. All these features will continue to coexist and interact in complex ways in the emerging pluralist world order, which has the potential to be a viable alternative to both continued U.S. hegemony and a struggle between rising and declining powers.

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