

CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

LUIS TOMÉ

ltome@autonoma.pt

He is a Full Professor at Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa (Portugal), Director of the Department of International Relations, Director of the OBSERVARE-Observatory of External Relations research unit and Coordinator of the Ph.D. in International Relations: Geopolitics and Geo-economics. He is a Researcher in the areas of International Relations, Geopolitics and Security Studies, specializing in the Euro-Atlantic, Euro Asian and Asia-Pacific regions. He is the author and co-author of more than a dozen books and dozens of essays and articles published in national and international specialist journals. He has supervised and supervises several dissertations and theses, participating, as an examiner, in dozens of public examinations panels in national and international universities. He is an elected member of the Scientific Council of Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa and a guest lecturer at several higher education institutions, giving lectures and conferences.

Abstract

What does “liberal order” mean? And should we distinguish between “world order” and “international order”? On what basis did the liberal order emerge and what factors contribute to its erosion? This article seeks to answer these questions in a text divided into four parts. In the first, we explain the meaning of “order” in international relations, the difference between “international” and “world” order and our notion of “liberal international order”. In the second, we justify the paradox of considering that the liberal order was built on what many call the “Westphalian system”, although we reject this designation and typification and the initial attempt to build a liberal world order after World War I World, as well as its rapid deconstruction. In the third part, we demonstrate the building and consolidation of a liberal order after World War II, within the framework of a broader world order in the context of the Cold War. And in the fourth, we show that this liberal order has been a “world” one since the end of the Cold War, and that this process occurred amidst paradoxes and ambivalences that contribute to its deconstruction.

Keywords

International Order, World Order, Liberalism, International Relations, History

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CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER¹

LUIS TOMÉ

Introduction

Some of the most emblematic and intense debates in International Relations focus on the characterization of the international order. Interestingly, the many distinct and contrasting views converge in the perception of the erosion of the “liberal order”, both among its advocates and among its opponents, ranging from «*The End of the American World Order*» (Acharya, 2014) to «*A New World Order Made in China*» (Gazibo and Chantal, 2011), «*World Order 2.0*» (Haass, 2017), «*A Post-Western World*» (Flockhart et al., 2014), «*The rise of the Rest*» (Beeson, 2020: 17-27) or «*The Return of Anarchy*» (Gaspar, 2019).

Whereas for some the liberal order «*that never existed*» has come to an end (Barnet, 2019; Ferguson and Zakaria, 2017), for others «*the liberal order is vitiated*» (Colgan and Keohane, 2017), and others question «*Why Liberal Internationalism Failed*» (Mead, 2021) or if «*Has China Won?*» (Mahbubani, 2020). Some believe that the liberal order is a kind of constitutional regime of international society and that, therefore, its continuity does not depend on the strategic oscillations of the great powers, including the United States (Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). Others consider that the liberal order can only exist in a unipolar system «*where the leading State is a liberal democracy*» (Mearsheimer, 2019: 7), and that «*Trump may be the unwitting catalyst for a more equitable era... energize a multipolar world*» (Deo and Phatak, 2016). Some consider the US a benign hegemon (Monteiro 2014, Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019, Mearsheimer, 2018), while others condemn the US “hegemonism” and hope that «*A period of collapse opens up possibilities for the creation of a new world order; hopefully, a fairer, more stable, and peaceful order than has been previously experienced.*» (Karaganov and Suslov, 2019: 72). Some talk about the emergence of a “second” Cold War or even that the US and China may be «*destined for war*» (Allison, 2017), others believe that «*There Will Not Be a New Cold War*» (Christensen, 2021, Nexon, 2021) or propose a new agreement of powers that «*Prevents Catastrophe and Promotes Stability in a Multipolar World*» (Hass and Kupchan, 2021). And while for some the liberal international order «*was destined to fail from the start, as it contained the seeds of its own destruction*», and it will inevitably be replaced by a «*realistic order*» (Mearsheimer, 2019: 7-9), others maintain that it is possible to

¹ Article translated by Carolina Peralta.



save the liberal order through a «*new normative consensus*» (Kupchan, 2014 and Hass, 2021) or by reforming it (Colgan and Keohane, 2017 and Kundnani, 2017).

In addition to these debates, there are conceptual confusions promoted by political leaders. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech at the UN General Assembly, spoke of a profound crisis in the «*ordre international libéral westphalien*», transcribed as «*Westphalian liberal world order*» in the official English version (Macron, 2018)². In other words, Macron not only refers to a “Westphalian liberal order” (thus taking as one what for many are two distinct and opposite orders, the Westphalian and the liberal) but also uses indistinctly “international” and “world” order just with variation in the language he uses.

But what does “liberal order” mean? And should we distinguish “world order” and “international order” or do they mean the same? On the other hand, on what basis did the liberal order emerge and what factors contribute to its erosion and crisis? This article seeks to answer these questions, exploring the construction of the liberal international order and the various reasons that explain its deconstruction, also examining its constituent elements and the dilemmas and contradictions that are inherent to it.

In line with our other works, we have adopted an “eclectic approach”³ and “complexity theories”⁴. Based on a descriptive-analytical model, and supported by specialized literature and official documents and speeches, we present our arguments in a text divided into four parts. In the first, we explain the meaning of “order” in international relations, the difference between “international” and “world” order and our view of “liberal international order”. In the second, we justify the paradox of considering that the liberal order was built on what many call the “Westphalian system” although we reject this designation and typification and, on the other hand, the initial attempt to build a liberal world order after World War I, as well as its rapid deconstruction. In the third part, we demonstrate the building and consolidation of a liberal order after World War II, within the framework of a broader world order in the context of the Cold War. And in the fourth, we show that this liberal order has become “worldwide” since the end of the Cold War, but that this process occurred amidst paradoxes and ambivalences that contribute to its deconstruction.

² The complete sentence of E. Macron is as follows, in both languages: «*Nous vivons aujourd’hui une crise profonde de l’ordre international libéral westphalien que nous avons connu*» / «*We are currently experiencing a deep crisis of the Westphalian liberal world order that we have known*».

³ The eclectic approach assumes that none of the conventional IR research/paradigms/theories traditions, in isolation and by itself, can encompass and explain the entire international reality that, by nature, is complex, dynamic, unpredictable, adaptive and co-evolutionary. Thus, limiting the risk of *a priori* alienating aspects that may be crucial, with pragmatism and prudence, the eclectic approach goes beyond the “natural expectations” of these theories, combines different explanatory hypotheses and takes advantage of the potential of complementarities. This aspect is even more relevant due to the opposing views and proposals that often liberal, realist, constructivist, systemic, functionalist, structuralist, critical and other theories confront themselves regarding the international order. For a more detailed explanation of our “eclectic approach” see Tomé 2016.

⁴ From the theories of complexity, we have taken, above all, the assumption of “non-linearity”, that the result of behaviours and interactions is “naturally unpredictable” and the notion of “complex adaptive systems”, emphasizing the ideas of complexity, co-adaptation and co-evolution of actors and the system. Our most developed explanation of the relevance and usefulness of complexity theories and the notion of “complex adaptive systems” in the analysis of International Relations is found in Tomé and Açikalin 2019. For a broader explanation of chaos and complexity theories and their use in several scientific areas, namely in the social and human sciences, see, for example, Erçetin and Açikalin 2020.



1. Order in international relations and liberal international order

To speak of “order” in international relations may seem contradictory, given the relatively “anarchic” nature of the international system rooted in the sovereignty of States. This apparent contradiction explains why many theorists avoid using the term. For example, Raymond Aron refers only to “peace”, which is obviously not the same thing: for him, international relations have only two forms, war and peace, understanding the latter as *«suspension, more or less lasting, of violent forms of rivalry between political units», unveiling “three types of peace: balance, hegemony and empire»* (Aron, 1984: 158). Hedley Bull, on the other hand, prefers to speak of an “international society”, conceived as a *«society of States [...] when a group of States, aware of certain common interests and values, form a society insofar as they conceive for themselves limits in their mutual relations by a common set of rules and participate in the activity of common institutions»* (Bull, 1977: 13). Due to their exclusively State-centric character, these views of realist theorists are contested by liberal, constructivist, functionalist, structuralist, critical and other theories. And, for example, in a radically different perspective, there are those that outweigh the role and impact of non-State actors, capable not only of influencing the decisions of States, but also the international system and even promoting a *«global civil society»* (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

The fact is that among realists, too, there are many who assume the concept of “order” in IR, such as John J. Mearsheimer (2019: 9), who defines it simply as *«an organized group of international institutions that help to govern the interactions between member States»*. In the same vein, Bart MJ Szewczyk (2019: 34) conceives “order” as *«a set of rules and norms to govern State and non-State behaviour, through international law based on the United Nations Charter, multilateral treaties and political norms resulting from State practice»*. However, while Szewczyk believes that the order's primary objective is *«to minimize violence and provide stability. The opposite of it was “disorder”, characterized by war, conflict and uncertainty»* (ibid.), Mearsheimer (2019: 9, note 3) considers that order *«is not the opposite of disorder, a term that refers to chaos and conflict»*.

Another issue concerns the use, often indistinctly, of the terminologies “international order” and “world order” – in addition to the “global order” that some refer to (Hurrell, 2007; Lo, 2020). Its use and distinction is rarely explained by the authors (Bertrand, 2004), but it is relevant to us here. Hedley Bull makes this difference, considering that *«The world order is vaster»* and *«of which the interState system is only a part»* (Bull, 1977: 21). He adds that *«The world order is more fundamental and primordial than the international order because the final units of society for all humanity are not States (or nations, tribes, empires, classes or parties), but individual human beings [...]. The world order is morally superior to the international order»,* since its values are those of all humanity, and not just those that prevail in the society of States (ibid.). Along the same lines, although with different assumptions, James N. Rosenau, one of the main representatives of the liberal IR school, developed the “bifurcation” model between two worlds in what he called the era of “post-international politics”: fundamentally, “international” characterizes the order in the *«State-centric world»* among States *«limited by sovereignty»*, using “post-international”, “world” or “global” to describe the



order in the «*multicentric world*» of non-State actors «*free of sovereignty*» (Rosenau, 1990 and 1997).

In our opinion, distinguishing between “international” and “world” order, assuming that the first refers to an order between sovereign States and the second to one that also involves non-State actors, does not make sense. The difference is conceptually pertinent and very useful, but on other grounds. We believe that “international order” characterizes the prominent pattern of ideas, values, interests, rules, institutions, behaviours and interactions between State and non-State actors, which can exist both on a regional and global scale, and include only one part of the actors or most of them. When the international order encompasses the world-space and the main actors, it becomes a “world order”. In other words, the world order can include several and distinct international orders, but an international order is only world or global if and when extended to a planetary scale. The distinction is important because one of our arguments, as we shall see later, is that the liberal international order did not become worldwide until the end of the Cold War.

On the other hand, order is not synonymous with peace or stability or absence of competition, just as it is not simply the opposite of disorder (chaos and conflict) nor a concept that characterizes the balance of power in a region or in the world. But it is associated with all of this, as order attenuates the anarchic character of the international system and the use of violence, limits the dependence on power games and provides a certain type of authority, regulation and stability in the coexistence of actors. An international order can exist and be referenced in terms of the power structure, but it is more than a simple reflection of that. The construction of the liberal order is linked to the supremacy of the “West” and the hegemony of the United States, but “liberal” means a specific set of values, norms and institutions, naturally distinct from those of other international visions and orders. Therefore, it is important to explain the elements that constitute it.

The liberal international order is usually characterized around two overriding ideas: on the one hand, it is «*open and rule-based*», in contrast to the other «*organized in rival blocks or exclusive regional spheres*» (Ikenberry, 2011b: xii), being «*enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism*» (Ikenberry, 2011a: 56). On the other hand, there is the association between political liberalism and economic liberalism, also referred to in the light of terms such as “democracy” and “capitalism”, which for some creates «*an international order deeply dependent on the internal nature of the units that comprise it*» (Simão, 2019 : 42). Thus, the liberal international order includes «*open markets, international institutions, democratic community of cooperative security, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, and rule of law*» (Ikenberry, 2011b: 6). Or it is «*mainly based on democracy, human rights, rule of law, market economies and fair trade*» (Szewczyk, 2019: 34) and on the assumption that «*only the liberal order considers the individual a central actor with inalienable rights*» (ibid.: 35). Others prefer to characterize liberal order by thematically disaggregating its «*three elements: the security order, the economic order and the human rights order*» (Kundnani, 2017: 4-8). The liberal order is also often associated with theories such as “democratic peace”, “economic interdependence” and *Pax Americana*.



Regardless of the multiple ways of characterizing it and referring to the elements that constitute it, we understand that the liberal international order is based on the promotion of Liberal Democracy; in the open market economy and free trade; in a certain limitation of the sovereignty of States and in the sharing of responsibilities, through the joint creation of common rules, rule of law, multilateralism and collective action; in collective security (security for all and on behalf of all); in the free navigation of the seas; in free access to the “global commons” and the dissemination and protection of “global public goods”; in recognizing the legitimacy of different international, State and non-State actors; and in a conception of human rights that implies the safeguarding of individual freedom, human dignity and respect for the inalienable rights of the individual.

Some of these elements may shape other international orders, but, taken together, they define and distinguish what we consider a liberal international order. On the other hand, the constitutive elements indicated were evolving and being adapted throughout the construction of the liberal international order. However, it should be noted that not all of these elements are recognized as part of the liberal order, either by its opponents or by some of its defenders; its general characterization does not mean that the promoters of the liberal order always respect all its precepts; and that there are tensions and contradictions between constituent elements of the liberal order.

2. Previous orders and initial attempt to build a liberal international order

Throughout History, there have been multiple and distinct international orders, usually associated with imperial powers and divine authorities. These various international orders were always limited in time and in space (with successive and coexisting orders in Europe, the Middle East, Asia and also on the American Continent), even if some claimed to be “universal”. However, we must recognize that the “West” has been the main inspirer and anchor of certain international orders and also of the world order for much of the last few centuries. Indeed, many of the ideas, doctrines and ideologies (liberalism, nationalism, capitalism, socialism, democracy, nation-State, sovereignty, multilateralism, institutionalism) that would mark distinct worldviews on the “international order” emerged in Europe. They spread as a result of the domination and colonial expansion of the European powers and, in the meantime, of the rise of the United States. Even so, until the 19th century, substantial parts of the world and certain actors, such as the Ottoman Empire, China or Japan were alien to these ideas, and international orders in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and in the Americas remained largely disconnected from each other. In other words, there were multiple regional international orders, but not a “world order”.

The previous Anarchic, but not “Westphalian” order

On the other hand, the idea that the liberal international order arose in opposition to and/or was built on the “Westphalian order” is very frequent. However, it is not appropriate to associate the Treaties of Westphalia (Munich and Osnabrück) of 1648 with an “international order” or even a new “international system”, normally described as the “Westphalian system”. As Luís Moita (2012) clearly demonstrated, the Peace of



Westphalia that ended the “Thirty Years War” in Europe did not represent the origin of the territorialized national State, did not inaugurate the concept of sovereignty and did not found the “modern” European system of Nation States. Without playing down the importance of the Westphalian Treaties, the European order in the mid-17th century did not correspond to a homogeneous State-centric system. A diffuse situation prevailed, with very diverse and overlapping political formations coinciding (from empires to principalities, including States, kingdoms and other territories organized under different configurations and designations) with different degrees of autonomy and in which, in essence, the State was “princely” and regimes were absolutist. Only later, in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the dissemination and consolidation of national States in the modern sense was seen, including the unified Italy (1870) and Germany (1871), the American (1776) and French (1789) Revolutions and the Industrial Revolution being decisive steps in this process. According to Moita (2012: 38)

the Nation-State, in the modern sense of the term, historically results from a confluence of elements: on the one hand, the end of the Ancien Régime dictated by the French Revolution, on the other, the emergence of industrial capitalism. The first factor underlines the political-institutional dimension, the second the socio-economic dimension of the process”, adding that “the origin of the modern Nation-State must be articulated with the emergence of industrial society and the phenomenon of nationalism (ibid.: 39).

After the Napoleonic Wars, the great European powers (essentially, “empires”) made, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, an agreement in order to prevent war between them, maintain stability in the Old Continent and preserve the reigning dynasties. However, the “Vienna agreement” was short-lived and obviously never constituted a true world order – suffice to remember, for example, that in the Americas, the international order evolved distinctly between various independences and the prominence of the US, in the Middle East and North Africa the order was essentially the “Ottoman” and in East Asia it was that of the “Middle Empire”. On the other hand, the Congress of Vienna of 1815 was just one of several examples of multilateral diplomacy that, in Europe, throughout the 19th and early 20th century, sought to regulate certain issues and stipulate rules of coexistence⁵, to which they added the many bilateral treaties. Also throughout the 19th century, taking advantage of the lead in the Industrial Revolution, the United Kingdom fostered its economic-commercial and naval primacy, promoting an internationalized economy and trade under the auspices of *Pax Britannica*. But neither multilateral agreements nor British supremacy meant “world order” or even international stability, just as they did not prevent new wars in Europe, the Americas and East Asia⁶. At the same time, there were substantial transformations in power structures both in Europe (for example, through the retreat of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the unification of Italy and Germany), in the Americas (US hegemony) and in Asia (the decline of China and the rise of Japan), highlighting the emergence of new great powers

⁵ Other outstanding examples are the 1878 San Stefano and Berlin Congresses (Balkan division) or the 1884-85 Berlin Conference (division of Africa).

⁶ Such as the Crimean War of 1853-56, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, or the Balkan Wars of 1912-13; between the US and Spain in 1898; or the “opium wars” against imperial China, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 or the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-05.



at the end of the 19th century/beginning of the 20th century, namely Germany, the United States and Japan, which not only impacted regional systems but, along with the "old Great Powers", consolidated a multipolar global power structure.

Paradoxically, although we reject the designation of the "Westphalian order" for the reasons mentioned above, we recognize that the international system and regional international orders which, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, were generally characterized by the elements that are commonly attributed to such "Westphalian system". This corresponds to what J. Mearsheimer (2019: 12-13) calls "realistic order", formed by sovereign national States allegedly "equal" in rights and obligations, namely non-interference in the "internal matters" of each other. In order to attenuate the inherently anarchic character of the system, States have the duty to respect the commitments made (*Pacta Sunt Servanda*) and the rules that they sovereignly and jointly stipulate (International Law). If and when necessary, sovereign States resolve and regulate certain international issues through multilateral coordination (congresses and *ad hoc* conferences). Still in this system, a logic of free trade prevails (imposed by the "Westerners", for example, on China and Japan), of colonial domains, areas of influence and balance of power, the (dis)order in international relations residing precisely in games and (un)balances between the great powers.

A first attempt, quickly deconstructed

As a corollary of this system and of the evolutions and transformations that occurred in the late 19th/early 20th century, another great war took place involving European powers that, however, spread and involved other important non-European powers. It was World War I, which caused unprecedented devastation. The end of this Great War of 1914-18 was marked by the ambition to create a "new world order" to guarantee that a conflict of this magnitude would not happen again. It was in this context that, among the winners, the United States stood out, defining, for the first time, the guidelines of a "new world order", also configuring the first real attempt to transpose the liberal vision to the international order. In his address to the US Congress on 2 April 1917, where he called for the declaration of war against Germany, President Wilson justified the US entry into the conflict to «*make the world safe for democracy*» (Wilson, 1917). Less than a year later, on 8 January 1918, in a new speech to the Congress, he spelled out his famous "14 points", half of which dedicated to specific territorial issues between the belligerent countries and the rest prescribing a vision for peace and the new world order, proposing, in summary "peace without defeated or humiliated"; the end of secret agreements and transparency in international relations; the "absolute" free navigation of the seas; free trade; the reduction of armaments; «*A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.*»; and also «*A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small States alike*» (Wilson, 1918).

President Wilson's idealism won him the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize and inspired what might be called the "liberal international order". However, initially, he convinced neither his



allies nor the US Senate. The big European winners, specifically France and the United Kingdom, shared the political and economic liberalism of the US, but not entirely President Wilson's vision for international relations. Hence, Paris and London preferred to impose a humiliating peace on the defeated, especially Germany, and used the "principle of nationalities" only in the framework of the dismantling of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Russian Empires, without extending it to their colonial possessions. On the other hand, the League of Nations was created in the terms proposed by Wilson, but the American Senate did not ratify the US adhesion to it. In Washington, the "isolationist" impetus prevailed, as opposed to "internationalism".

The post-Great War order of 1914-18 is quite distinct from the international orders that preceded it. This was due to the substantial changes in the power structure, and to the creation of the innovative "liberal" and "Western" inspired League of Nations which, being of a "global" nature (covering the entire world and participants from all continents), should safeguard the free navigation of the seas and free trade, enforce the treaties and guarantee peace and stability between sovereign States based on international law, permanent multilateral diplomacy and collective security. It is along this line that other important international conventions were also established, such as the 1925 Geneva Protocol that prohibited the use of biological weapons, the first multilateral treaty prohibiting the use of "weapons of mass destruction". This means that a certain "world" liberal order began to be built after the Great War.

However, the alienation and lack of commitment of the main liberal powers prevented it from consolidating itself as a true international order. The fundamental elements of the previous "anarchic" system continued to prevail, both globally and in the reconstructed Middle East, Europe and Asia. In Europe, the new order may be termed the one of "Versailles" by reference to the 1919 Peace Treaty imposed by the Allies on Germany, with the victorious powers interested in keeping the results of the conflict and the defeated and dismantled powers interested, above all, in recovering from the imposed humiliations and conditions. Furthermore, for the new Republic of China, Japan or the brand new Turkey, the liberal concept of the international order was relatively foreign. The new "Soviet Russia", which emerged in the context of the Great War, had a view of politics, economy, society and, therefore, of international relations that was not only different from, but hostile to, the liberal vision. However, the emergence of a certain type of "offensive nationalisms", fascism and national socialism, contrary to liberal principles - with emphasis on the "living space" of Nazi Germany and the Imperialist Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere" - would dismantle the liberal aspects of the international system, regional orders and the fragile post-World War II "world order", causing an even more devastating Second World War. In short, the initial construction of the liberal order in international relations first merged into the anarchic system and then was undone by it.

3. The consolidation of a liberal, but not a world, international order

It was in the middle of WW II (1939-1945) that Western leaders again began the reconstruction of a liberal order. Even before the US entered the conflict (which happened in December 1941), its President Franklin Delano Roosevelt referred to the «*four freedoms*» - freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom



from fear - that should exist «*anywhere in the world*» (Roosevelt, 1941), in a message to the American Congress on 6 January 1941. That same year, President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill proclaimed the "Atlantic Charter"⁷, whose principles would be incorporated in the "Declaration of the United Nations" of 1 January 1942, signed by the 26 allied countries, not just Western countries, but also, for example, the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and South Africa. They were joined later by more than two dozen others, from Brazil to Ethiopia or Turkey. The same principles would also be included in the "United Nations Charter", signed in San Francisco, on 26 June 1945, by representatives of 50 countries, entering into force on 24 October of that same year.

On the other hand, at the end of World War II, the United States enjoyed an unprecedented hegemony (in all domains, including the exclusive one of the atomic weapon) drawing, for the second time in the 20th century, the guidelines of a "new world order," now in the hands of Democrat Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. And this time, unlike 1918-19, the US became founding member of the UN and did not withdraw, only reduced, its military apparatus from the European and Asian theatres, thus assuming responsibility for the post-war world reorganization.

The new UN was not an exact replica of the defunct LN, but its aims and principles were basically the same⁸. Although the Charter of the United Nations begins with the expression «*We the Peoples*» (of liberal inspiration and recalling the Constitution of the United States of 1787), its members were States that somehow self-limited their sovereignty by respecting the Charter and international law, collective security, the right of self-determination and human rights, while granting the organization, in particular its Security Council, the authority and legitimacy to recognize new States, decide on matters of war and peace and sanction the aggressors and violators of the established rules. This was followed by the creation of a series of new bodies of the "UN family", including commissions, programmes, funds and specialized agencies - from the International Court of Justice to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) – and new international conventions, with emphasis on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (also of Western and liberal inspiration) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. The "UN system" was established by balancing the sovereignty of States and the

⁷ Stating that the respective countries would not seek any territorial or other aggrandizement; territorial changes should only take place in accordance with the wishes freely expressed by the affected peoples; the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they want to live and the restitution of sovereign rights and independence to peoples who have been dispossessed of them by force; all States, large or small, victorious or defeated, must have equal access to the world's trade and raw materials; to promote, in the economic field, the broadest collaboration among all nations, with the aim of achieving, for all, better working conditions, economic prosperity and social security; a peace that gives all nations the means to live securely within their own borders, and people everywhere the guarantee of existences free from fear and want; freedom of navigation in the seas and oceans; the renunciation of the use of force and the disarmament of potential aggressors; and the establishment of a broader and more lasting general security system. (Atlantic Charter 1941).

⁸ With its members determined to «*to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war...to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and; to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and; to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom; And for these Ends, to practice tolerance and live together in peace...; to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,» (United Nations Charter, 1945: Preamble).*



associated principle of non-interference in internal affairs, the supranationalism of the Security Council and International Law, and the rights of peoples and individuals.

Does this mean that from the 1939-45 War a liberal world order emerged, resulting from two hundred years of “liberal ascendancy” fused into the “Westphalian system”, as defended by John Ikenberry (2011b: 2)? Only partially. Although Western and liberally inspired, the design of the new UN was done by the US, the UK and also the USSR, the “big three” who, along with those they invited, France and China, became Permanent Members of the Security Council of the new Organization with the exclusive right of veto. At the same time, the US and the USSR articulated and shared with each other, as allies and in a context of war, the surrender conditions of Germany and Japan and, above all, respective areas of influence in European and Asian theatres at the Summits in Yalta and Potsdam, respectively, in February and July-August 1945, in which the United Kingdom also participated. This “sharing” would lead, from 1946-47, to the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union that marked international relations until 1989-91.

The Cold War World Order

The global power structure established after World War II was not unipolar (as suggested by the US hegemony) nor multipolar (as indicated by the constitution of the UNSC with its five Permanent Members), but rather “bipolar” by the emergence of two superpowers. The US and the USSR shared opposing ideologies, Liberalism and Marxism-Leninism, but «*both were enlightened ideologies that sought to expand into universal civilization*» (Gray, 2007: 30). Then, they became involved in a strategic, economic and ideological dispute that began in Europe and quickly spread to all regions of the world, determining systems of alliances, economic alignments, conflicts, rules, institutions, behaviours and interactions between most State and non-State actors. Much more than the UN and International Law, it was nuclear weapons (which the USSR also possessed since 1949) and deterrence through “mutual guaranteed destruction” that forced Americans and Soviets to coexist in the Cold War and the world to live under this “balance of terror”. Each of the superpowers had “areas of influence” in the world and in the various regions, leading and organizing their “bloc” according to their respective interests, visions and institutions. This bipolar confrontation directly resulted in countless conflicts, civil wars, coups d'état, guerrilla and subversive movements, “proxy wars”, “crises” and international wars.

At the same time, although always in competition, the US and the USSR were able to cooperate and articulate when their interests converged. For example, both favoured the right of self-determination and decolonization by European countries, just as they condemned certain neo-colonial stances (as in the Suez Crisis of 1956). It was possible to develop the “UN system”, recognize countless new independent States and even launch UN “peace missions” (when none exercised its right of veto in the UNSC). The articulation between the Eastern and Western “blocs” was equally crucial for the signature of the armistice that ended the 1950-53 Korean War, Peace Accords such as the 1954 Geneva one, the “replacement” of the Republic of China/Taiwan by the People's Republic of China at the UN (and then as a Permanent Member of its Security Council) in 1971, or the Helsinki Accords attained at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975. And whereas it is true that the level of economic and commercial



interdependence between the two sides was minimal and did not justify the development of common rules and institutions in this area, they managed to create or support the development of new norms and, at times, institutions, regarding arms control, the non-militarization of certain spaces or the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, at bilateral and multilateral levels, as attested by the Antarctic Treaty System, the Moon Agreement, the Outer Space Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaties, the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) 1 and 2 and the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START), the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation, the Biological Weapons Convention, the Seabed Arms Control Treaty, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Partial Test Ban Treaty, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Therefore, the world order that prevailed between 1946-47 and 1989-91 was essentially that of the Cold War, merged with the "UN system" which, despite everything, developed and extended to many new States resulting from the decolonization processes which the organization supported mainly through its General Assembly (see O'Sullivan 2005). Within the scope and coexisting with this world order, two other international orders were established corresponding to the "camps" led by each of the superpowers: on the one hand, the "West", "Capitalist", "Liberal", "Democratic" or "Free world"; on the other, the "Communist", "Eastern Bloc", "Soviet" or the "Popular Democracies". These two international orders were dynamic and underwent changes: examples include the Sino-Soviet split that tore up the "communist camp", triggered a new "cold war" between the USSR and the PRC and introduced a triangular dynamics Washington-Moscow-Beijing. On the other hand, these orders were not defined in a regional logic, but in ideological, strategic and economic blocs with their respective multilateral conventions and institutions (see Crump and Godard, 2018). A third international order that has been trying to be promoted can still be included, embodied in the spirit of the Bandung Asian-African Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, as well as in the Chinese doctrine of the "three worlds", in the adoption by the UNGA of the concept of "permanent sovereignty over natural resources"⁹ or the idea of a "New World Economic Order"¹⁰. Basically, the world order in the decades after World War II was a complex combination of several international orders, the liberal being just one of them.

⁹ It was from the 1950s that the concept of "permanent sovereignty" of States (with an economic content, distinct from the usual purely political view) began to emerge within the UNGA, with the adoption of a resolution in 1952 on the "Right of to Freely Exploit Natural Resources and Wealth". The following decade saw a change in the terminology adopted by UN resolutions, referring to "permanent sovereignty over resources". A milestone in this evolution was the adoption by the UNGA, on 14 December 1962, of Resolution 1. 803 (XVII) on "Permanent Sovereignty over Natural Resources", developed in subsequent resolutions in 1966 and 1973. In essence, these resolutions support the efforts of developing countries (or "third world") for effective control over the natural resources in their territories, recognizing that each State had the right to determine the amount of compensation and the method of payment, and that possible disputes should be resolved according to the national legislation of each State.

¹⁰ Resolutions 3201 and 3202 of May 1974 adopted by the UNGA, encompassing the "Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order" and the "Action Programme for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order", which was followed by the "Letter of Economic Rights and Duties of States" (Resolution 3.281) of December of that year.



The liberal international order in the "West"

That liberal international order is rooted in political and economic liberalism and in the four freedoms enunciated by President Roosevelt in 1941, based on "liberal democracy" (as distinct from communist "people's democracy") and on equally distinctive precepts regarding economic organization and social or human rights, embodying its own rules and institutions beyond the "UN-Universe" and opposed to the "Soviet order". For example, in Europe, European democracies early created the Western European Union (WEU) in 1948 and the Council of Europe in 1949, at the same time that the US created on the American Continent, based in Washington, the Organization of the American States (OAS) in 1948.

Given the constraints associated with the ideal of "collective security" inscribed in the UN, the US established with Canada and Western European countries, since 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a multilateral mechanism for "collective defence", in order to contain the expansion of the Soviet Union and communism and «to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and rule of law» (NATO, 1949). However, not all NATO founders were "liberal democracies", like Portugal with its *Estado Novo* ("New State"), which attests the weight of geostrategic considerations linked to the Cold War. The same geostrategic objectives and imperatives presided over the generality of the US Alliance System in other regions and which included both bilateral alliances (with the Philippines, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea, Republic of China/Taiwan or Thailand), trilateral alliances (such as ANZUS between Australia, New Zealand and the US) and multilateral ones, from the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Pact) to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO/Manila Pact) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO or the Baghdad Pact). Not all of these alliances were successful, some were even dismantled (such as SEATO and CENTO, in the 1970s), and not all allies were liberal democracies, having only the "advantage" of being anti-communist. But the fact is that many of them were crucial to consolidating and/or expanding liberal democracy and maintaining peace between democracies, with the *Pax Americana* being the mainstay of the liberal international order.

The economic pillar is rooted in the "Bretton Woods system", a set of agreements reached at the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference held in the city of Bretton Woods, in the US State of New Hampshire, in July 1944, with the presence of delegations from 44 countries. It defined the basis for the monetary management of international trade, with the value of other currencies being associated with the US dollar and continuing to have its value linked to that of gold. In Bretton Woods, it was also agreed to create the International Monetary Fund (IMF) - responsible for maintaining an emergency fund to help countries that had unaffordable trade deficits - and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) to support the reconstruction of countries. IBRD would be integrated into the World Bank which, like the IMF, was formally established in 1945. Two years later, in 1947, they were joined by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), in order to boost international trade by reducing customs barriers. In the same year, the US launched the "Marshall Plan" designed to aid Europe's economic recovery and eliminate conditions that would favour



the expansion of communism (see Leffler 1988) and, in 1950, it established the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Control (CoCom) for the embargo of goods, technologies and weapons to the countries of the Committee on Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECOM) led by the USSR (Mastanduno 1992). It was based on these principles and under the "American hat" that certain regional organizations were also established and developed, with emphasis on the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 and on the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957. Other institutions would be created, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 1961, in order to stimulate economic progress and international trade.

In general, the countries of this liberal economic order have experienced significant economic and social development, particularly North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the "New Industrialized Countries" of East Asia. However, completely satisfactory answers were never found for the redistribution of wealth, generating exclusion and inequalities both within countries and between them, while keeping many other peoples and States, namely from the "third world", largely excluded from this development (see Keohane 1984 and Krasner 1999). On the other hand, the erosion of the Bretton Woods system led President Richard Nixon, in 1971, to determine that the US dollar would no longer be associated with gold, putting an end to the historic gold standard and inaugurating a new phase of "floating exchanges". Soon after, the 1973 oil crisis highlighted the vulnerabilities associated with economic interdependencies and insufficient regulation of internationalized markets. This type of distortions and insufficiencies would lead to revisions and re-adaptations of the liberal economic order, through reforms and new rules in the IMF, GATT and the OECD, the creation of new intergovernmental cooperation and regulation frameworks - such as the G7, whose first summit took place in 1975 - or even new mechanisms for dialogue between the private sector and political leaders, of which perhaps the best example is the World Economic Forum/Davos Forum, launched in 1971.

The existing freedoms and rights in liberal democracies attracted more and more peoples and individuals "external" to the liberal order, including many "dissidents" from the "Eastern Bloc". Likewise, the economic development brought about by the liberal model attracted many peoples and even leaders of opposite models. This was the case of Deng Xiaoping who, from 1978 onwards, abandoning Maoist orthodoxy and with great pragmatism, launched deep reforms in the People's Republic of China in the sense of "creating socialism with Chinese characteristics with the means of capitalism". A few years later, in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev had the hierarchies of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) approve his *Perestroika*. The difference is that the Chinese reforms have never questioned the leading role of the China's Communist Party (CCP) and are at the base of China's modernization and resurgence to this day, while Gorbachev's *Perestroika* did not prevent, in a few years, the end of the "Soviet empire" and the collapse of the Soviet Communist Party and the USSR itself. The Soviet implosion ended the Cold War world order, favouring the expansion of the liberal international order.



4. From worldization to deconstruction of the liberal order

The world order changed suddenly, marked by significant events: in 1989, the “Berlin wall”, the greatest symbol of the division of Europe and the world in the Cold War, collapsed; in 1990, the UNSC authorized the use of force to expel Iraq from Kuwait by a broad US-led international coalition; in 1991, COMECON and the Warsaw Pact were officially dissolved and the USSR gave way to 15 New Independent States, one of them the Russian Federation. The Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China normalized their relations in 1989, the year when the “Tiananmen tragedy” took place. It is important to recall these last events to underline that the “double Cold War” ended, with two main winners, the US and China, and that with the brutal repression of democratic yearnings in China, the CCP regime went against the trend of political liberalization of the time.

The worldization of the liberal international order

The US stood alone in the superpower category, in a power structure that became unipolar. And for the third time in the 20th century, it traced the guidelines of a “new world order”, with Republican President George Bush proclaiming, at the UNGA, the vision

of a new partnership of nations... based on consultation, cooperation, and collective action, especially through international and regional organizations... the rule of law...a partnership whose goals are to increase democracy, increase prosperity, increase the peace, and reduce arms.... Calls for democracy and human rights are being reborn everywhere... (Bush. 1990a).

The following year, in the aftermath of the victory in the Gulf War, the same President assured that «*in our quest for a new world order... the United States has no intention of striving for a "Pax Americana"... we seek a "Pax Universalis" built upon shared responsibilities and aspirations.*» (Bush, 1991). The successive White House tenants have enthusiastically assumed the role of superpower: «*There is no substitute for American leadership*», said Bush (1990b); or «*Indispensable Nation*», as the Secretary of State of the Clinton Administration, Madeleine Albright (1998) and President Barak Obama (2014) preferred to say. And the fact is, under the leadership of the US supported by its “Western” allies and partners, the liberal order expanded and became worldwide.

The end of the Cold War unleashed new waves of democratization across the globe, seeming to confirm Fukuyama's (1989) thesis that there was no other viable political organization alternative. In fact, the 1990 “Charter of Paris”, signed by almost all European countries and also by the United States, Canada and the USSR, established «*democracy as the only system of government of our nations*»¹¹. The vast majority of former communist regimes, from Eastern Europe to Mongolia and to the new Russia, embraced liberal democracy, as did countless former autocratic anti-communist regimes

¹¹ Also stating that: «*Democratic government is based on the will of the people, expressed regularly through free and fair elections. Democracy has as its foundation respect for the human person and the rule of law. Democracy is the best safeguard of freedom of expression, tolerance of all groups of society, and equality of opportunity for each person*» (Charter of Paris 1990).



and other authoritarianisms. According to *Freedom House* (2017), 34% of countries were “democracies” in 1986. This percentage went up to 41% in 1996 and to 47% in 2006. The new international context also allowed to put an end to certain previously existing situations, such as the end of the segregationist regime of “apartheid” in South Africa or the end of the occupation of East Timor by Indonesia and the exercise of Timorese self-determination.

At the same time, the liberal/Western conception of Human Rights has become “universal”, favouring numerous human rights campaigns and the defence of minorities, religious freedom and women's rights, often targeting autocratic governments and leaders. They also became the main targets of notions such as “human security”, which gained prominence since the mid-1990s based on the defence of “human dignity” and the formula “freedom from fear and freedom from want”. The new primacy of human rights is also associated with other controversial principles such as the “right of humanitarian interference” (invoked by NATO in the intervention in Kosovo in 1999) or the “Responsibility to Protect”, adopted at the UN World Summit, in 2005. And precisely to reinforce human rights in the world and with specific competence in this domain, the UNGA created, in 2006, the Human Rights Council, heir of the extinct Commission on Human Rights. On the other hand, new international conventions and “global pacts” have emerged aiming at greater protection of the rights of children, women, people with disabilities or migrants and refugees. The international persecution of human rights violators has gained impact, leading some to say that «*Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics*» (Sikkink, 2011). International criminal justice was further developed (Teles and Kowalski, 2017) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) was established in 2002. The International Court of Justice, the UN jurisdictional body, and the Permanent Court of Arbitration and other courts gained “new life”. Inevitably, many of these developments meant the erosion of traditional State sovereignty, a distinguishing feature of earlier international orders.

In the field of security, the *Pax Americana* expanded. The US maintained its alliance system inherited from the Cold War, established new bilateral and multilateral strategic partnerships (such as the “Quad” with Japan, Australia and India since 2007) and NATO expanded, almost doubling the number members, mostly former Eastern European opponents. Furthermore, the US maintained its global strategic omnipresence and continued to have the role of “regional balancer” in Europe, the Middle East and Asia-Pacific. And it intervened militarily, not only in the leadership of UN missions (Gulf War or Somalia), but also in NATO (Bosnia, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Libya) and certain “coalitions of will” (Haiti, Iraq and Syria), as well as invaded and occupied Afghanistan in “self-defence” in the wake of 9/11. In addition, there are many special operations, surgical bombing, multiple military and “free navigation of the seas” exercises or even the relentless pursuit of its enemies, from Milosevic to Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Muammar Gaddafi or Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi – by sometimes exercising a kind of “right of anti-terrorist interference”.

On the other hand, the end of the Cold War immediately favoured various peace processes, from Cambodia to Angola, from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Mozambique. The number of UN “peace missions” has increased considerably, expanding the number of peacekeepers and participating countries, and diversifying the nature and typology of these missions, from conflict prevention to post-war stabilization and reconstruction (see



UN Peacekeeping). "Collective security" had a new impetus, reinforced by the missions carried out by various regional organizations - NATO, EU, OSCE, AU, ECOWAS, OAS - and by *ad hoc* international coalitions, including in the fight against terrorism or maritime piracy (SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database). Meanwhile, the CSCE gave rise to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 1994, the year when the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Asia-Pacific was also established. South Africa, Libya and the former Soviet Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine gave up their nuclear programmes, and it was also possible to establish the "nuclear deal" with Iran in 2015¹².

In the economic domain, interdependencies increased and "economic globalization" abruptly accelerated. There was a strengthening and expansion of the IMF, the World Bank and the OECD, and the World Economic Forum/Davos Forum started to invite businessmen and political leaders from former communist regimes and from the new "emerging economies". And countless new agreements and free trade zones, new institutions and new multilateral mechanisms were established: such as the G20 which, since 1999, brings together the largest economies in the world and, above all, the creation, in 1995, of the World Trade Organization, replacing the former GATT. According to Ikenberry (2011a: 62), the latter is «*the most formal and developed institution of the liberal international order*». In the spirit of "free trade", but also as a counterweight to China's growing economic influence, the US has promoted new "mega-regional" frameworks with its traditional partners, specifically the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreed between 12 countries¹³ in 2015 and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership Agreement (TTIP) with the EU, negotiated since 2013.

At the same time, international and regional organizations proliferated, in all domains and regions of the world. The UN has expanded both to pre-existing States (such as the two Koreas in 1991) and to new independent States, from ex-Soviet and ex-Yugoslav to East Timor or South Sudan, and currently has almost four times as many members than when it was founded, while the "UN system" was reformed and expanded. The Council of Europe extended to former adversaries and the former European Communities gave way to the European Union (EU), which deepened and also enlarged to many new members, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, including ex-Soviet ones. The former Organization of African Unity was replaced by the new African Union (AU), covering the majority of countries on the African Continent, as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has expanded to practically all countries in that region (with the exception being East Timor) and deepened as a "Community". On the other hand, numerous new regional, sub-regional, pan-regional and inter-regional organizations have been created, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Mercosur and the Southern African Development Community (ECOWAS/SADC). Indeed, "regionalism" is the other side of "globalization", understood as the intensification of all types of flows and the reduction of spatial and temporal distances on a global scale. The multiplication of institutions was accompanied by the adhesion of more States to international conventions and by a countless number of new

¹² Formally, the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action-JCPOA) established between the five Permanent Members of the UNSC plus Germany (5+1) with Iran in 2015.

¹³ Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, US, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam.



international and regional agreements on a wide range of matters, including some that gained prominence on the global agenda¹⁴.

In order to “globalize” the liberal order, the United States and its allies sought to involve in key institutions, among many others, Russia and China. The Russian Federation was soon recognized as a replacement for the deceased USSR as Permanent Member of the UNSC in 1991, also joining the IMF and World Bank in 1992, the G7 in 1997 (which became the “G8” until 2014) and to the WTO, in 2012. In the meantime, Russia became a formal partner of NATO¹⁵ and concluded with the US several agreements on the reduction and control of strategic arms¹⁶. The PRC has been a member of the UNSC since 1971 and of the IMF and World Bank since 1980, when it took the place previously occupied by the Republic of China/Taiwan in these institutions. And despite the tensions caused by the Tiananmen tragedy, it was quickly integrated into APEC in 1991 and, more importantly, into the WTO in 2001. The US, China and Russia were also involved in multiple other multilateral mechanisms, such as the “Six-party Talks”¹⁷ on North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programme, the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, G20 and the ARF.

Paradoxes and ambivalences of a globalized liberal order in deconstruction

One of the most salient aspects of the post-Cold War world order was the proliferation and increased relevance of non-State actors, such as international and regional organizations, multinational companies, civic associations and transnational activists, terrorist groups, organized crime networks, NGOs, or hackers. However, the international order is what the main actors make of it and, therefore, the great powers continue to be its main architects.

This is just one of the many ambivalences of the globalized liberal order, and some of which paradoxically contribute to its deconstruction. For example, the wave of democratization has not stopped the survival of many authoritarianisms around the world, including some officially “socialist” regimes. There were, however, some “setbacks”, including in Russia since Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999. Paradoxically, instead of economic liberalism contributing to political liberalism, economic hyper-globalization seemed to subvert democracy (Rodrik, 2011 and Halper, 2012), given that economic success has become a factor in the “legitimation” of certain autocracies, especially the PRChina. On the other hand, massive human rights violations continue to occur, and international institutions and conventions show that they have a limited impact on the behaviour of States and are unable to effectively and efficiently regulate some crucial issues.

¹⁴ Examples include the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (2005) and the “Global Strategy Against Terrorism” (2006), the Kyoto Protocol (1995) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) or the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001) and UNGA Resolution 74/197 (2019) on Information and Communication Technologies for Sustainable Development.

¹⁵ The Russian Federation joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991 - a forum for dialogue replaced in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council - and the Partnership for Peace Programme in 1994, formalizing the bilateral relationship with the “Founding Act”, in 1997 and the NATO-Russia Council, since 2002.

¹⁶ Treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF), START 1 and START 2, Moscow Treaty on Reduction of Strategic Offensive Weapons (SORT) and New START.

¹⁷ Also with the participation of both Koreas and Japan.



In the economic field, despite a very significant reduction in poverty in the world and the improvement in the living conditions of hundreds of millions of people, certain “crises” were not prevented in numerous countries and regions, such as the one in 1997-98 in Southeast Asia. Emphasis must be placed on the economic and financial crisis that began in the US in 2007-08 and quickly became global. Paradoxically, “hyper-globalization” has taken away influence from both sides of the North Atlantic and instead contributed to the centrality of China and Asia-Pacific in the world economy and trade¹⁸. And economic growth is at the base of the increase in China's “comprehensive national power”, with consequences in all domains, from military capabilities to science and technology and political-diplomatic influence.

The progress of collective security and the *Pax Americana* did not prevent the Rwandan genocide or other failures in Somalia, Haiti, DR of Congo or Sudan. Numerous territorial, border and exclusive economic zone disputes remained unresolved. There are still hotspots such as Palestine, Kashmir, Taiwan, South and East China Seas or the Korean Peninsula. New conflicts broke out, from Georgia to Syria, from the Sahel region to Ukraine and Yemen. The “Arab Spring” resulted in turbulent “chaos” that instigated further instability, insecurity and violence. Transnational organized crime networks proliferated and powerful new terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS emerged. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan (both in 1998) and North Korea (in 2006) became nuclear. At the same time, after a first decade of global reduction in military budgets, world military expenditure rose again, surpassing those of the Cold War period¹⁹. And the “arms races” returned, particularly in the Middle East and Asia-Pacific, with substantial changes in the ranking of the largest defence budgets, with an emphasis on the rise of China²⁰.

US hegemony has not eliminated the aspirations of other powers, like China, Russia, India, Japan, EU, South Africa, Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia or Iran. In fact, the end of the US-USSR bipolarity was seen by various powers as the possibility of succeeding in a “multipolar” system, whereby the “hegemonism” and “unilateralism” of the US were increasingly contested. Meanwhile, the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer 1990/91) or the “unipolar interregnum” (Gaspar, 2019: 123-172) gave way to a “uni-multi-polar” structure (Tomé, 2003 and 2004) and, later on, becoming “uni-bi-multi-polar” (Tomé, 2016, 2018 and 2021), where the increasingly incomplete American supremacy coexists with several other power poles, global and regional, from which the resurgent China

¹⁸ In 1990, the “advanced economies” represented a share of world GDP in purchasing power parities (PPP) of 63.25%, while that of “emerging economies” was 36.75%; the situation was completely reversed and, in 2021, this share of advanced economies dropped to 44.43% and that of emerging economies rose to 55.57% (IMF 2021). At the same time, North America's share of world GDP in PPP in 1990 was 26.53%, Western Europe was 26.13% and Asia-Pacific was 27.52%; in 2021, the shares of North America and Western Europe had fallen to 19.29% and 15.18%, respectively, while those of Asia-Pacific soared to 45.14% (ibid.). China was indeed the great winner of globalization, becoming central in the world economy and trade: its share of world GDP in PPP soared from 4.03% in 1990 to 18.78% in 2021, while in the same period, the US and EU shares decreased, respectively, from 21.64% to 15.97% and from 23.60% to 14.74% (ibid.). The PRC tends to become the world's largest economy also in nominal terms within a few years, being already the world's largest exporter and importer and the largest trading partner of the US, EU27, ASEAN10 and more than 100 countries throughout the world (WTO statistics).

¹⁹ In 1990, the world spent globally 1,372 Billion USD, an amount, at constant prices, was surpassed from 2004, reaching 1,960 Billion USD in 2020 (SIPRI 2021).

²⁰ While always remaining prominent in the top of this ranking, the US began to see its share reduce; the European powers were dropping positions and losing shares; while maintaining nuclear parity with the US, Russia saw the gap widen with the US and, meanwhile, was overtaken by China and, in some years, also by India and Saudi Arabia; and China rose to the second place in this ranking, gradually approaching the US and increasingly distancing itself from the other powers (see SIPRI 2021).



stands out. Furthermore, the view on the “international order” and, in particular, on the putative universal benefits of the liberal order were never shared by many outside the “West” nor by all Westerners.

China has been the main beneficiary of the post-Cold War world order, but the CCP regime has never ceased to criticize the “hegemonism” of the United States, to demand “multipolarity” and to vociferate against the interference of Western countries in its affairs internal (China, 2019a and 2019b). In reality, the Beijing regime does not hide a «*distinction between three elements of the “U.S.-led world order”*: “*the American value system*”, “*the U.S. military alignment system*”; and “*the international institutions including the UN system*» (Fu Ying 2016). So when Chinese leaders talk about “supporting the international order” they are referring to a “rules-based order”, but not a system based on Western values or *Pax Americana*. In one way and another, this is what Beijing repeats to exhaustion, including through the voice of the President of the PRC and Secretary General of the CCP:

we should stay committed to international law and international rules instead of seeking one’s own supremacy... China will continue to promote a new type of international relations... Let us all join hands and let multilateralism light our way toward a community with a shared future for mankind. (Xi Jinping, 2021).

The truth is that the Chinese regime violates many of the rules, including those it formally subscribes to: for example, despite being a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Beijing has failed to comply with the Court of Arbitration’s decision on the South China Sea, which, in 2016, ruled that «*China’s claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the South China Sea encompassed by the relevant part of the ‘nine-dash line’ are contrary to the Convention [UNCLOS] and without lawful effect*» (PCA, 2016: 473, X.B.2). It also continued to militarize and reinforce its positions in the South China Sea, trying to establish a kind of *mare nostrum* or *mare clausum*. Indeed, the CCP appears committed to restoring China’s centrality, expanding its sphere of influence and taking a leading role in reforming the global governance system:

China moving closer to center stage... new era of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics... take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system... a leading position in terms of economic and technological strength, defense capabilities, and composite national strength... crossed the threshold into a New Era (Xi Jinping, 2017).

This is largely the meaning of the “Chinese dream” and the “New Era” of a more self-confident and increasingly assertive China in its claims, especially since the rise of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the CCP and the PRC in 2012 (Shambaugh, 2020; Markey, 2020). However, its growing economic power has made China an extraordinary alternative partner to the “West”, undermining the efforts of Europeans and Americans to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law.



For its part, Russia considers itself the main victim of the end of the Cold War, having long been opposed to the enlargement of NATO and the expansion of the influence of Western “extra-regional actors” (US, NATO and EU) in the post-Soviet space, understood as a threat, interference in its “near neighbourhood” and a re-edition of the «*infamous policy of containment*» (Putin, 2014). The Russian President even considers that «*the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster*» (Putin, 2005), for two fundamental reasons: on the one hand, because Russia has lost much of what is “its”²¹; on the other, because it caused an imbalance of power in the world that the US took advantage of to force its unilateralism and the West to impose its values and interests, triggering chaos and instability²².

Like Beijing, Moscow defends multipolarity, willing to use all means to safeguard its interests and strategic objectives. This included, for example, developing strategic partnerships with China and India; invading Georgia and unilaterally recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008; annexing Ukrainian Crimea in 2014 and “divide” what remains of Ukraine by controlling separatism in the Donbas region; or intervening militarily in Syria since 2015 in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Russia is not the Soviet Union, but Putin acts as if it were (Tomé 2018/19), insisting on a return to an agreement between great powers and sharing of influence zones similar to the 1945 Yalta and Potsdam conferences. In addition, the Russian President now considers that «*the liberal idea has become obsolete*» (Putin, 2019).

The views of China and Russia on the world order are not entirely coincident, but this does not affect their strategic articulation, which has intensified since Russia's annexation of Crimea (Lukin, 2018; Gaspar, 2019; Tomé, 2018 and 2019; Sutter, 2019; Lo, 2020; Markey, 2020; Stent, 2020). Not because they are members of an “autocratic international”, but because they consider it to serve their respective geopolitical, strategic and economic purposes - including containing US supremacy, dividing the West and the democratic powers, and suppressing liberal political influences on international organizations and conventions and on the world order. Both share the assumption that great powers have certain “natural rights”, including regional spheres of influence; they have a traditional notion of security and sovereignty, instrumentally absolutizing the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs”; and they agree on ideas like the “sovereign internet”. At the same time, Moscow and Beijing have supported certain autocratic regimes, such as North Korea, Venezuela, Iran, Cuba, Syria, Belarus, Myanmar and several African leaders – with political support and halting sanctions on the UNSC (using its right of veto), breaking international sanctions and blockades, selling them arms and doing business.

This deconstruction of the liberal order also involves international organizations. Moscow and Beijing promote, each in its own way, a kind of “embedded revisionism” in the

²¹ «*After the collapse of the USSR, Russia, which was known as the Soviet Union or Soviet Russia abroad, lost 23.8 percent of its national territory, 48.5 percent of its population, 41 of the gdp, 39.4 percent of its industrial potential (nearly half of our potential, I would underscore), as well as 44.6 percent of its military capability due to the division of the Soviet Armed Forces among the former Soviet republics*» (Putin 2018).

²² «*What is happening in today's world... is a tentative to introduce precisely this concept into international affairs, the concept of a unipolar world... first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way*» (Putin 2007); «*After the dissolution of bipolarity on the planet, we no longer have stability... instead of democracy and freedom, there was chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals*» (Putin 2014).



institutions that they integrate together with the Western powers, from the UN to the WTO. On the other hand, they institutionalize “parallel realities”. Indeed, China and Russia are among the main great powers and “intermediate powers” that have launched new institutions and new mechanisms for bilateral, trilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation, creating what Barma, Ratner and Weber (2007) called «*a world without the West*». Examples of this include the Strategic Triangle Russia, India and China, since 2003²³, or the trilateral dialogue China-Japan-South Korea, since 2008; groups of countries such as IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa, created in 2003), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India and China) in 2006²⁴ or MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia, since 2013); and institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), since 2001. The list also includes the New Development Bank (NDB) created by the BRICS in 2014 and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), established by 57 founding countries in 2015. Russia also created the Eurasian Economic Community-Eurasian Economic Union (the first was created in 2000, and was replaced by the second in 2014) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002. In the case of China, the “Sino-centric order” also involves the many bilateral agreements on free trade and investment, the granting of credits and loans, the “Beijing consensus” alternative to the “Washington consensus” (see Ramo, 2004 and Halper, 2012) and of course the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or “New Silk Road” launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013 (Leandro and Duarte, 2020). In addition to these, there are other frameworks such as the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, the China International Import Expo, Hongqiao International Economic Forum, China-Africa Cooperation Forum, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, China Forum and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Boao Forum for Asia, Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations, World Internet Conference, Macau Forum of China with Portuguese-speaking Countries or the mechanism China + 17 Central and Eastern European countries and Greece.

Several Western governments have also contributed to the deconstruction of the globalized liberal order. From the outset, the US and its allies showed their willingness to “break the rules” of the security order, with emphasis on NATO's military interventions against Serbia, in 1999 and the Anglo-American one against Saddam's Iraq, in 2003 - although none involved the annexation of territory - or certain abuses in the “Global War on Terrorism”, undermining the moral authority of the “West” as a defender of “a rule-based order”. Furthermore, the US withdrew hastily from Iraq and Afghanistan in 2011 and 2021, respectively, favouring the rise of ISIS (see Tomé, 2015) and the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul. Also in other interventions, such as in Haiti, Somalia, Libya or Syria, the results were not democracy and rule of law, “abandoning”, in fact, their local democratic allies. On the other hand, the US has not ratified certain international conventions to which most countries adhere (such as the Kyoto Protocol on the reduction of greenhouse gases or the International Labour Organization Convention on Forced Labour), as it has never joined the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

²³ This date refers to the first meeting of RIC Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of a UNGA session in New York, following a proposal by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in the late 1990s.

²⁴ The Foreign Ministers of Brazil, Russia, India and China first met as BRIC in September 2006 on the sidelines of a UNGA meeting in New York. The first BRIC Summit took place in June 2009 in Yekaterinburg, Russia. South Africa joined the group from 2011, the acronym becoming “BRICS”.



(UNCLOS). The US and several of its allies and partners have also failed to join the ICC and often seem to instrumentalize the right to humanitarian interference, the principle of responsibility to protect, "human security" and certain "color revolutions" not to promote democracy, rule of law and human rights, but rather to project their interests and influence. Furthermore, Americans and Europeans have preferred to promote collective security through NATO, the EU and "coalitions of will" missions rather than providing more peacekeepers for UN missions. All these aspects illustrate that there can be tension between "liberalism" and "order", or as Geor Sorensen (2006) Stated, between "restriction liberalism and imposition liberalism".

Likewise, the "West", the main architect of the liberal economic order and the rules and institutions associated with it, is primarily responsible for the insufficient regulation of the world economy and trade or for the comparative disadvantages of the "West" itself in the era of hyper-globalization. And it was in the US that, in 2007-08, the economic-financial crisis that spread the world began. On the other hand, all too often, the US and its Western partners play down democracy, rule of law and human rights in favour of economic interests, as exemplified by China's entry into the WTO in 2001. This also illustrates the tensions between the pillars of the liberal order. In reality, Americans and Europeans tend to identify their values and interests with those of the "international community" and, in order to make the world order more liberal, they have been undermining and distorting the foundations of that order.

Two other factors add to the deconstruction of the liberal order: the polarization of the "West" and the retreat of Democracy. Both transatlantic and intra-European divergences and divisions have been growing since the turn of the century, regarding the recognition of Kosovo's independence, the American doctrine of "preventive war", intervention in Iraq, the sovereign debt crisis, management the migration crisis, Brexit process, tensions with Turkey and disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, "burden sharing", the situation in Palestine, relations with Russia and China or the management of the pandemic crisis. On the other hand, authoritarianism, nationalism, protectionism and populism grew in the "West" - sometimes violating fundamentals of political liberalism, such as rule of law, press freedom and the separation of powers; tampering with "universal values" to safeguard the rights of minorities, migrants and refugees; and attacking multilateralism and international institutions. The reality is that Democracy is indeed in retreat: for example, *Freedom House's* latest "Freedom in the World" (2021) marks the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom, and the last "Democracy Index" by The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) shows the worst result ever since the Index was first published in 2006.

These aspects were aggravated during the Presidency of Donald Trump, whose "America First" was the antithesis of the liberal order. Trump's stance is based on the idea that liberal internationalism is detrimental to the US global position and that it only favours its enemies and adversaries. Accordingly, he has broken many of the rules and institutions to take an ostensibly nationalist and confrontational position in a "competitive world" (see The White House, 2017), and not just against China. Trump took a nationalist, populist and protectionist stance that did not place democracy and human rights among the priorities of American foreign policy. It was also antagonistic to free trade and international institutions and conventions. For example, with Trump, the US undid NAFTA (recreating it as the United-States-Mexico-Canada Agreement or USMCA)



and withdrew from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the Nuclear Agreement with Iran, the INF Treaty, the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, the International Court of Justice, the Global Compact on Migration and Refugees, the UN Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), the Open Skies Treaty and the World Health Organization (WHO).

At the same time, in addition to the “trade war” with China, Trump's protectionism targeted the US traditional allies and partners, including new tariffs imposed on Japan and the European Union and the US withdrawal from the TPP and TTIP negotiations. Trump also attacked central institutions like the UN and the WTO, and as a result of his choices, the US allies and partners were often on the opposite side of the US (and on the same side of China and Russia). In addition, its allies and partners maintained the line of “free trade” and deepened their ties among them - as reflected in the maintenance of the TPP, reconverted into a Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP or TPP11) and established the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership Agreement, the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement and the EU-Japan area of safe data flow) – and also with China: on 15 November 2020, the 10 ASEAN countries, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand jointly signed with China the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and, on 30 December 2020, the EU and China reached an agreement in principle on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI).

On the other hand, the Trump Administration abdicated from leading the world in a global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which, added to the disastrous domestic management of the pandemic, once again called into question the position of the US in the international order. And as if that wasn't enough, Trump accentuated divisions in US society and politics and challenged American democracy itself, trying to stop his defeat and the victory of Joe Biden-Kamala Harris by inventing “frauds” and encouraging the attack on the Capitol.

The Biden Administration is seeking to reverse much of Trump's legacy and restore the traditional foundations of American foreign policy based on the slogan “America is Back”. Maintaining and even aggravating the competitive and confrontational tone towards China and Russia as well (Tomé, 2021), Biden intends to «*lead and sustain a stable and open international system, underwritten by strong democratic alliances, partnerships, multilateral institutions, and rules*» (The White House, 2021: 9). In this sense, for example, he brought the US back to the Paris Agreement and the WHO, shows himself available to recover the “nuclear agreement” with Iran, renewed the US commitment to NATO and the UN, extended the New START Treaty with Russia for five years, promoted the first Summit between Heads of State and Government of the Quad, organized a “World Summit of Leaders on Climate” (with the participation of Xi Jinping and Putin), encouraged invitations to Australia, India, South Korea and South Africa to participate in the G7 Summit and convened, for December 2021, a “summit for democracy” bringing together political leaders and civil society. Biden has indeed sought to regain a certain liberal order, but he has not removed certain Trump-era tariffs or returned the US to the TPP or TTIP.

The issue is that neither the US nor the “West” have the power, centrality and cohesion to determine the course of the world order. As the Biden Administration also acknowledges, *The distribution of power across the world is changing... China is the only*



competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system» (The White House, 2021: 7-8). So, another of its objectives, perhaps the main one, is *«To promote a favourable distribution of power»* (ibid: 9). In order to maintain supremacy and leadership in the world, the US may have to sacrifice certain premises of the liberal order. In fact, Biden admits the reconstruction of the world order with others, namely China, in a mixture of competition and cooperation: *«We cannot and must not return to the reflexive opposition and rigid blocs of the Cold War»*, adding that

we cannot focus only on the competition among countries that threaten to divide the world, or only on global challenges that threaten to sink us all together if we fail to cooperate. We must do both... Competition must not lock out cooperation on issues that affect us all (Biden 2021).

For their part, US allies and partners will be more interested in cultivating a certain "order" involving China, Russia or Iran than simply accepting all of Washington's dictates or insisting on an "exclusively" liberal order. Hence, by inability and by choice, the "West" affirms, above all, that *«We are committed to the rules-based international order»* (NATO, 2021), which does not necessarily mean a liberal order. In fact, on top of the deconstructed liberal world order, a new world order "based on rules" is already being built, but with "new rules", many of them "Chinese style".

Final Remarks

It is justified to affirm the existence of "order" in international relations, as is justified by referring to a "liberal international order", but this does not necessarily mean the same as "world order". International order does not equate to power structure either, although it reflects the values, interests and power of its main units. The construction of the liberal order is associated with US hegemony and the Western worldview, but it is characterized by a set of constitutive elements distinct from those of other international orders, based on political and economic liberalism and inalienable human rights, and embodied in certain rules and international institutions.

The first attempt to build a liberal order came after World War I, in order to prevent the terrible consequences of the traditional anarchic system. However, it was quickly deconstructed by the lack of commitment of the main democratic powers and undone by the great anti-liberal powers. In the midst of World War II, the reconstruction of the liberal order began, but it would come to be established only in the "Free World" and in the broader framework of the Cold War. It was only when it ended that the liberal order became "worldwide", which is verifiable in terms of ideas and values and also in new waves of democratization, in the broadening and deepening of organizations that came from the Western liberal order and in the proliferation of new multilateral institutions, expansion of the *Pax Americana*, multiplication of international rules and conventions, reinforcement of collective security and acceleration of economic "globalization".

However, the many paradoxes and ambivalences of the globalized liberal order led to its deconstruction. Economic hyper-globalization seemed to subvert democracy and "legitimize" certain autocracies, while at the same time removing influence from the



“West” and favouring the growth of China's all-encompassing national power. China and Russia are two of the main opponents of the liberal order, which they confuse with the “hegemonism” of the US and the “arrogance” of the West: threatening their neighbours, exporting authoritarianism, absolutizing the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs”, binding themselves to a limited number of international rules that in no way harm their sovereignty, shaping existing international institutions and conventions to their interests and creating, in parallel, new institutions and mechanisms. For its part, whether in an attempt to make the world order more liberal or to maintain its primacy, the US and its European allies have shown their willingness to “break the rules”, which illustrates that there can be tension between “liberalism” and “order” and between the liberal pillars of security, the economy and human rights. Added to this is the polarization of the “West”, the retreat of Democracy and the impacts of the Trump Presidency. The Biden Administration has reintroduced normality into US foreign policy, but that means another way of trying to maintain American primacy and leadership in the international system and not that the world order can go back to what it once was.

As always, the international order depends on what the main actors make of it. Apparently, the liberal order is in an irreversible deconstruction, with the world order being recreated in an intense simultaneous dynamic of competition and cooperation, fundamentally between the US and China, but not only. What this means for sure, and what will remain liberal in the new world order, is still too early to see.

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