



# Brexit, the Rise of China, and the Future of the Liberal International Order and Great Power Competition

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## Abstract

In the last decade, the European Union (EU), a bulwark of the liberal international order, has been subject to a high degree of turmoil resulting from various processes and crises and has witnessed the rise of national populism, of which Brexit was the main exponent. The leadership of the order was also impacted by the changes in the foreign policy of the United States of America (USA) effected by the Trump Administration. The USA, the United Kingdom (UK), and the EU are the leaders of the liberal zone of peace and if national populism structurally affects them the liberal international order could be seriously challenged. Among the various instances of national populism, Brexit remains a significant challenge to the EU and might greatly impact the liberal international order. By adopting an interpretivist methodology anchored in hermeneutics and in the methodological approach of emergent causation, this article seeks to understand how Brexit, as an internal challenge to the order, and the rise of China and other revisionist powers, as an external one, might influence the future of the liberal international order and great power competition. I argue that the news of the order's death is greatly exaggerated, and that depending on British, German, and US variables, Brexit and the rise of China can either challenge or reinforce the liberal international order. Nevertheless, liberalism has a resilience no other political perspective has due to its innate ability for criticism and adaptation to change. Considering that the current liberal international order is a USA-led order, I argue that these are the two main variables concerning how Brexit might influence the liberal international order and how the order's leading powers will adapt their strategies and foreign policies towards China and other revisionist powers.

**Keywords** Brexit · European Union · China · United States of America · Liberal international order · Great power competition

## Introduction

In the last decade, the European Union (EU) has been subject to a high degree of turmoil resulting from various processes and crises: the Eurozone crisis, terrorist acts inspired by Islamic fundamentalism, the refugee crisis, the unrest in Ukraine and the recent invasion of the country by Russia, populism, Brexit, the reemergence of secessionist movements, and, since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic that has had a global reach. Apart from the pandemic, some of these are intrinsically linked, represent causes or

consequences of the rise of the radical right and its national populism (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), threaten the cohesion of the EU, and may lead to changes that have the potential to modify the liberal nature of democracies and influence the future of the liberal international order.

Almost three decades after Francis Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed the end of history, the globalization of liberal democracy faces several problems that seem to converge on the European continent, a central space of what Michael W. Doyle (2012, 2016) calls the liberal zone of peace, an area where there's a separate peace between liberal democracies that is the basis of alliances between them and of the liberal international order. The United States (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), and the EU are the leaders of this zone and if national populism structurally affects them the liberal international order could be seriously endangered.

The two most prominent instances of national populism in the past decade were the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the USA, in November 2016, and the Brexit

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referendum of June 2016, in which the *Vote Leave* campaign won with 51.9% of the votes. The two cases have been thoroughly studied and spurred both the debate about the sources of populist support in the USA and the UK — where the theses of the ‘left-behinds’ of globalization and of the ‘cultural backlash’ are the main explanations (Norris and Inglehart 2019) — and the one concerning the crisis of the liberal international order to which both the Trump Administration and Brexit have contributed decisively. The two debates are inextricably connected. In fact, the debate about the crisis of the international order unfolds into an internal dimension — an immanent criticism and challenges brought about by populism to the liberal zone of peace — and an external one — threats posed by non-democratic regimes, especially revisionist powers, to the liberal international order which fuel the competition between great powers. Despite turbulent relations with traditional European allies by the Trump Administration, the new Administration led by President Joseph R. Biden has been working to restore relations with European and other allies. This does not mean that the USA is safe from Trump or another populist winning the White House again and disturbing such relations. Nevertheless, for now, and leaving the pandemic and the war in Ukraine aside, Brexit remains a significant internal challenge to the EU and has the potential to greatly influence the liberal international order. In face of this, it is particularly appropriate to proceed from the following research question: *How might Brexit and the rise of revisionist powers influence the future of the EU and the liberal international order?*

The main objective of this article is to outline the possible effects that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU and the rise of revisionist powers, especially China, might have on the liberal international order. The specific objectives are, firstly, to understand and develop a theoretical interpretation of what the liberal international order is, a concept whose meaning has recently been the subject of much discussion, and, secondly, building upon that interpretation, to envisage how Brexit and the rise of China might influence the future of the EU and the liberal international order by resorting to the emergent causation methodological approach and to a Hayekian analytical framework which takes in consideration internal challenges — immanent criticism — and external ones — competition via cultural evolution.

Notwithstanding that there are too many variables to allow for anything more than prediction based on emergent causation, with several possible emerging scenarios in the horizon, I argue that the news of the order’s death is greatly exaggerated and that depending on British, German, and US variables, Brexit and the rise of China can either challenge or reinforce the liberal international order.

This article draws on the interpretivist epistemological paradigm and resorts to a qualitative methodological approach anchored in hermeneutics. Through this approach I aim to

understand the meaning of the recently disputed idea of a liberal international order and how the viewpoint of its crisis has been constructed and developed fundamentally based on perceptions of interconnected internal and external challenges and threats. Drawing on literature as the main data source and relying on theorizing as the primary instrument to answer the research question, I will venture into prediction via the framework of emergent causation developed by William E. Connolly (2004). It is by resorting to this methodological approach that “interpretive research can come close to offering suggested explanations for outcomes” without “claims to direct causality between variables” (Lamont and Boduszynski 2020, 92).

Connolly’s approach is consistent with insights from systems theory, cybernetics, and the process of feedback as self-regulation of political systems which, among others, Karl Deutsch (1966) explored, as well as with the importance that liberalism attributes to the role of ideas in shaping society, which for liberals like Friedrich A. Hayek (1982, 1:35-54) is understood as a spontaneous order. Emergent causation, Connolly (2004, 343) elucidates, “issues in real effects without being susceptible to full explanation or precise prediction in advance, partly because what is produced could not be adequately conceptualized before its production.” In politics, where much of what *becomes* or *emerges*, such as norms, ideas, institutions, rules, or beliefs, is not always fully explainable or understandable in advance, linear models of causality cannot disentangle the multiple factors and variables “which tend to blend into one another” in complex processes and outcomes (Lamont and Boduszynski 2020, 92). This is especially true in foreign policy, and even more so in periods of turmoil.

This article is structured in three sections. In the first, I review the literature on the recent debate concerning the crisis of the liberal international order due to the Trump Administration, the Brexit process, and the rise of revisionist powers such as China. In the second, the meaning of the order is discussed by developing a theoretical interpretation about its foundations and a Hayekian analytical framework to be applied in the following section. The third and last section focuses on how one of the foremost instances of national populism, Brexit, as an internal challenge to the liberal international order, and the rise of China and other revisionist powers, as an external challenge, might influence the future of the said international order and great power competition.

## Trump, Brexit, the Rise of China, and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order

Although populism has been studied by many authors for several decades (Anselmi 2018), the most recent studies have

emerged in the last decade and a half as a result of the rise of various populist political agents around the world that have challenged the liberal international order. Among these, Trump and Brexit are of particular importance, being largely responsible, although not exclusively, for the recent debate about the crisis and the future of the liberal international order. While Trump and Brexit are immanent processes, located in the core of the Anglo-American leadership of the liberal zone of peace, external threats to this area are the other dimension of this debate — and both dimensions are intrinsically linked.

The debate on the crisis of the liberal international order has been dominated by two main schools of thought, a pessimistic and a cautiously optimistic one, which correspond roughly but not entirely to the realist/neo-realist and liberal/neo-liberal theoretical divide in International Relations (IR). It is not surprising that the mainstream dichotomy of IR and US foreign policy between realism and liberalism has been partially reproduced by the debate on the future of the liberal or USA-led international order since the latter overlaps with the older debate on the US decline or primacy and the transformation of its foreign policy in face of the rise of other great powers which has had its most recent iteration over the last decade and a half (Zakaria 2008; Kagan 2009; Ikenberry 2011; Mearsheimer 2014, 360–411; Layne, Wohlforth, and Brooks 2018). Concerning the most recent debate on the future of the liberal international order, the pessimists believe the order is already over or at least collapsing and great power competition with revisionist powers, especially Russia and China, is already the prominent feature of the international system. Cautious optimists, on the other hand, think it is possible to save or repair the liberal international order internally by adapting and modifying some of its features and that even if bipolarity might be inevitable, a Cold War with China is not (Zakaria 2020, 209).

The pessimistic school argues that the liberal international order is in disorder (Haass 2018, 5), is heading towards its end (Mead 2021), is essentially a myth (Bacevich 2018; Allison 2018b), and was destined to collapse (Mearsheimer 2019). Niall Ferguson even paraphrases Voltaire's famous *dictum* about the Holy Roman Empire to classify the order as not liberal nor international and not even orderly and determine that it's already over (Ferguson and Zakaria 2019, 15–16). According to this school, the world is in turmoil and the responsibility lies in the pursuit, by liberal elites, of a strategy of expanding the liberal international order. Nevertheless, the pessimistic school offers some ideas about the influence of Brexit on the future of the EU and the liberal international order. Ferguson and Zakaria (2019, 31–36) justifies the *Vote Leave* victory with the dysfunctionality of the EU concerning the euro crisis and the refugee crisis, the impositions from Brussels on the UK regardless of the desires of the British, who decided to answer with the need to take back control. For Ferguson, populism is a symptom of how the liberal

international order works badly and the historian is convinced that the EU is going to disintegrate due to problems with its monetary and free movement policies, which are not compatible with the stability and legitimacy of the member-states — something that the British were the first to understand. Richard Haass (2018, 1) notes that Brexit affects “not just the future of the United Kingdom and Europe but that of the United States and the entire world as well,” and that depending on its conditions, it might partially breakup the UK and maybe even the EU. This could place the European integration project at risk, as well as the relations between the UK and the USA (Haass 2018, 2). In face of the challenges posed by populism, T. G. Otte (2018, 167) believes that the EU, the main pillar of transatlantic relations since the Marshall Plan, is breaking up and foresees that Europe will originate much turbulence.

The cautiously optimistic school of thought does recognize the fragility of the order (Kagan 2018, 4), and that it is in fact in crisis (Ikenberry 2020a, 2), especially “because its leading patrons, starting with the United States, have given up on it” (Ikenberry 2020b, 133), though it bears mentioning that Ikenberry wrote this still during the Trump Administration. Nonetheless, Ikenberry believes the order is likely to survive (Ikenberry 2018) for it displays a remarkable resilience (Deudney and Ikenberry 2018) and, as Fareed Zakaria (2020, 209) observes, its durability is in everyone's interest, since it has maintained peace for the longest period in modern history and produced prosperity around the world which has lifted many million people from poverty. Furthermore, and contrary to the tendency of realists to blame, to a great extent, the internal dimension of the liberal zone of peace for the crisis of the liberal international order, Michael Mandelbaum (2019) shows that the main responsibility is to be found in the external dimension, in the three autocratic regimes, China, Russia and Iran, which actively seek to undermine the current international order.

As stated above, Ikenberry (2020a, 2) acknowledges that today the order is in crisis due to the retreat of the UK and the USA from its leadership, and for Zakaria (2020, 225), contrary to Mandelbaum, the greatest threat to the liberal international order is not China but the abdication of the USA. For Mandelbaum (2019, 139) though, leaving aside the internal dimension of the liberal zone of peace, “The post-Cold War peace ended because three countries [China, Russia and Iran] brought security competition back to their regions by adopting foreign policies of aggressive nationalism.”

There is indeed a combination of internal and external causes that underlie the crisis of the liberal international order. Yet, and even as many replace one determinism — the triumph of liberalism and the end of history — with another — the inevitable death (once again) of liberalism (Kagan 2018, 11) — the news of liberalism and the liberal international

order's demise seem manifestly overstated. As Zakaria (2020, 223) stresses, “The truth about the liberal international order is that there never really was a golden age, nor has the order decayed as much as is often claimed. The core attributes of this order—peace and stability among major countries—are still firmly in place, with a marked decline in war and annexation since 1945. (Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is an exception that proves the rule.)” Zakaria (2020, 219) confronts Ferguson’s paraphrase of Voltaire in a quite realistic way, observing that the order “was never as liberal, as international, or as orderly as it is now nostalgically described. It has been a messy reality, with idealism mixed in with self-serving nationalism from the start.” The order is incomplete, not without faults, but it has provided more welfare to human beings than any other system (Zakaria 2020, 232).

I am not as pessimistic as most realists and I’m closer to the cautiously optimistic school of thought, though I think that it can be complemented with some insights and analytical tools from liberal political theory that can help us better understand what the liberal international order is and put its future in perspective. My argument is based upon a critical liberalism, inextricably linked to Hayek and Karl Popper’s critical rationalism, which I will expose in the next section. Notwithstanding that there are too many variables to allow for anything more than prediction based on emergent causation, with several possible emerging scenarios in the horizon, I argue that the news of the order’s death is greatly exaggerated, and that depending on British, German, and US variables, Brexit and the rise of China can either challenge or reinforce the liberal international order. Nevertheless, because liberalism has a resilience no other political perspective has due to its innate ability for immanent criticism and adaptation to change, and because the current liberal international order is a USA-led order, I argue that these are the two main variables concerning how Brexit might influence the liberal international order and how the order’s leading powers will adapt their strategies and foreign policies towards China and other revisionist powers.

## What Is the Liberal International Order?

To understand the meaning of the idea of a liberal international order, it is necessary to decompose the concepts of international order and liberalism so that one can discern what makes this order distinctively liberal.

The concept of international order has been addressed by several theoretical schools of IR, especially by authors affiliated with the English School (Bull 2012; Watson 1992; Hurrell 2007), realism (Kissinger 1957, 2002, 2016), neo-realism (Gilpin 1981), and liberal internationalism (Ikenberry 2019, 2011, 2020a). Ikenberry (2014) also edited

a volume with several contributions that discuss and further develop Robert Gilpin’s (1981) ideas and arguments.

Ikenberry (2011, 12–13) observes international order as “manifest in the settled rules and arrangements between states that define and guide their interactions. (...) Order exists in the patterned relations between states. States operate according to a set of organizational principles that define roles and the terms of their interactions. International order breaks down or enters into crisis when the settled rules and arrangements are thrown into dispute or when the forces that perpetuate order no longer operate.” According to Ikenberry (2011, 13–15), international orders can vary and be compared, for they can be regional or global, highly institutionalized or not, centralized or decentralized, organized around various poles of power, but essentially, they can be compared by analyzing how they are established and rendered stable in one of three ways (although these can overlap, as is the case with the USA-led order, that has relied on all three): balance, command, or consent. In the case of balance, order is produced through the balance of power between the great powers. An order that relies on command is one in which a great power enforces order hierarchically and states are integrated in it in a vertical way. The third kind of order, based on consent, is one where rules, norms, and institutions are agreed-upon by the states on a consensual basis, through which rights are allocated and limits on the use of power put in place. Ideally, a liberal international order is mostly based on consent.

A liberal international order, for Ikenberry (2011, 18), “creates a foundation in which states can engage in reciprocity and institutionalized cooperation. As such, liberal international order can be contrasted with closed and non-rule-based relations—whether geopolitical blocs, exclusive regional spheres, or closed imperial systems.” But this is just one meaning of the liberal international order. There is a second meaning, according to which a liberal international order is fundamentally built around “cooperation among liberal democracies, and the specific aspects of that cooperation may or may not be ‘liberal’” (Ikenberry 2020a, 19). In fact, liberalism is a broad intellectual tradition and political vision with an evolutionary and pluralist core that has allowed it to build an order around several ideas and organized in different forms since the nineteenth century dominated by Great Britain up to the twentieth century and its several ordering moments by the USA — the Wilsonian, the post-World War II and the post-Cold War ones. The specific features of a liberal international order can and have varied widely (Ikenberry 2011, 15–20). This is not surprising since “Liberalism itself has been understood and defined in so many ways that it is essentially impossible to identify and agree upon a fixed core” (Ikenberry 2020a, 19–20).

This leads one to ask what is liberalism and what is specifically liberal in the liberal international order? The literature

on liberalism is particularly extensive, so I will limit myself to advancing with a brief interpretation of liberalism, especially considering liberal internationalism and being aware that “there is no canonical description of liberalism” (Doyle 2012, 4) and that its meaning has become muddled (Rosenblatt 2018, 1).

The first idea to emphasize is that liberalism is first and foremost a domestic political theory, though it influences the foreign policy of states and international relations, which gained relevance in the historical period of the Enlightenment and ended up being intrinsically linked to the process of scientific autonomy of IR at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is not a pure theory of IR, unlike realism (Doyle 2012, 5–6).

Although liberalism “is a big tent that encompasses a range of political views that nonetheless agree on the foundational importance of equal individual rights, law, and freedom” (Fukuyama 2022, vii) and it is possible to speak of several liberalisms, according to John Gray (1995, xii–xiii), it constitutes a single tradition, despite containing several variants that articulate differently the four essential elements of liberalism: *individualism*, the “moral primacy” of the individual before any “social collectivity”; *egalitarianism*, the attribution of equal moral status to all individuals; *universalism*, insofar as it defends the moral unity of the human species; and, finally, *meliorism*, the belief in the possibility of improving social institutions and political arrangements. For Gray, “It is this conception of man and society which gives liberalism a definite identity which transcends its vast internal variety and complexity.”

Liberalism emerged animated by a revolutionary spirit (Arendt 2001) which aimed at restoring or proclaiming individual rights and liberties and installing political regimes that could guarantee them. This spirit was embodied in the three main Atlantic Revolutions, the English (1688), the American (1776), and the French (1789). In their own ways, these represented a rupture with absolutism, despotism, and the *Ancien Régime*. The first two had John Locke and Montesquieu as their intellectual fathers and embodied the ideas of natural rights, individual liberty, private property, freedom of association, the rule of law, limited and mixed government, the separation of powers, and checks and balances. The French Revolution drew on Rousseau’s ideas of general will, popular sovereignty, and the recovery of the classical Greek notion of liberty as participation in the political process. The contrast between the spirit of the two first revolutions and the latter leads to the distinction between classical, old, or Anglo-American liberalism and new, French, or continental liberalism. In political theory, liberalism branched into two main paths that became dominant in the West in the twentieth century: classical liberalism, with its focus on negative liberty (Berlin 2000,

194–203) and which had in Hayek, Isaiah Berlin and Robert Nozick some of its proponents, and egalitarian liberalism, which emphasizes positive liberty (Berlin 2000, 203–6) and had in John Rawls its main exponent.

The ideas which fueled these revolutions evolved and their concrete historical practice gave humankind what we call liberal democracy (Maltez 1991, II:189), a political regime in which, according to Robert A. Dahl (Dahl 1989, 221), we need to find at least seven institutions for it to be a polyarchy, i.e., democracy on a large scale: elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information and associational autonomy. For Samuel P. Huntington (1993), the expansion of the number of liberal democratic regimes advanced over the course of three waves, a first long one (1828–1926), a second short wave (1943–1962), and a third which began in 1974 with the Portuguese Carnation Revolution.

Together, liberal democracies form the liberal zone of peace. This concept is Doyle’s refinement of the democratic peace theory derived from Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* (2009). It is in the German philosopher that we find the main ideas on which liberal internationalism and all variants of liberalism in IR are grounded. It is in Kantian thought that we perceive the fundamentals, later recovered, deepened, and updated by other liberals, of what makes the current liberal international order specifically liberal. First of all, in both the six preliminary and the three definitive articles for a perpetual peace (Kant 2009, 130–51), we observe ideas present in Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points speech (Williams, Goldstein, and Shafritz 2006, 33–36), such as the rejection of secret diplomacy, the respect for international law, economic interdependence, the reduction of armaments, and the creation of an association of states. Secondly, the modern democratic peace theory is foreshadowed by Kant’s (2009, 136–51) three definitive articles: First, “the civil constitution of every state should be republican” (meaning a liberal/representative democracy); secondly, “the law of nations shall be founded on a federation of free states”; and thirdly, “cosmopolitan right shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality.” Doyle (2016, 68) updates these three articles for contemporary times. The first means “representative republican government, which includes an elected legislative, separation of powers, and the rule of law”; the second, “a commitment to peace based upon a principled respect for the non-discriminatory rights that all human beings can rightfully claim”; and the third, “the possibility of social and economic interdependence.” Working together, these three conditions generate “an expectation of peaceful interaction among fellow liberals – the liberal zone of peace – and suspicion towards non-liberals.”

The core of the democratic peace theory is the idea that liberal democracies are essentially peaceful in their relations with other liberal democracies, hence they do not go to war with each other and, thus, the higher the number of liberal democracies in the world, the more peaceful international relations become. We already know that the theory has strong empirical grounds, precisely because of the existence of the liberal zone of peace, which is what Kant labeled the ‘pacific federation’ or ‘pacific union.’ With the waves of democratization, the number of liberal democracies expanded and, today, there are around 100 liberal states that compose the liberal zone of peace, in which there is a separate peace among these states that “provides a solid foundation for the crucial alliances of the USA with the liberal powers (NATO, the US-Japanese alliance, the alliance with Australia and New Zealand)” (Doyle 2016, 57–59).

But the nature of the domestic political regime is not the only Kantian constraint on the occurrence of conflicts between liberal democracies. John Oneal and Bruce Russett (1999) have shown that this constraint works together with two other Kantian constraints, trade or economic interdependence and membership of International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), to pacify the international system. This does not mean that liberal democracies do not go to war with non-democracies. In fact, they display an imprudent aggressiveness with non-liberal states. But authoritarian states also have a record of imprudent aggression, which accounts for the defensive wars in which liberal democracies have had to enter, such as the First and Second World Wars (Doyle 2016, 59–60).

On another hand, the waves of democratization are followed by reverse waves and the growth of the number of liberal democracies is not a linear process. But regardless of the recent advances of populism and talk of the reemergence of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and the death of the liberal international order, the international system has looked much bleaker for liberal states than it does today. Liberal democracies have fought and won over authoritarian and totalitarian states in the twentieth century and the liberal zone of peace has expanded. Liberal democracies have adapted internally to face social, economic, and political changes in both the domestic and international levels, and externally they worked together to outperform their competitors and, when necessary, win wars — even a Cold one.

The answer to why this is so does not lie solely in the ascendancy and pre-eminence of a liberal great power such as the USA. It is to be found in what concerns the distinctive liberal character of liberal democracies and of the liberal international order. Learning, adaptation, and innovation processes in political systems are both at the kernel of systems theory and cybernetics and the fundamentals of what I think is the core feature of liberalism, which explains its resilience and why it is and will continue to be the mainstream dominant political perspective in the West: the function of criticism.

The model of foreign policy decision-making elaborated by Deutsch (1966, 258–61) illustrates the metaphor of the political system as a nervous system irrigated with information which is communicated via the several sensors and is then transformed into decisions (Maltez 1996, 93). It also evidences the metaphor of government as a ship, which guides its future behavior grounded on information about the past, the present, and the goal to be achieved (Deutsch 1966, 182). Through the process of *feedback*, which transforms the outputs of the system (political decisions) and its consequences on the environment into inputs which are fed into the political system, government can adjust its course in the process of making new decisions (outputs).

Notwithstanding the criticism leveled at democracy concerning its vulnerability to demagogical inclinations, since Plato and Aristotle up to James Madison or Alexis de Tocqueville and more recent critics of democracy, the functioning of the political system as illustrated by systems theory is mostly characteristic of open societies (Popper 2003) or liberal democracies. These use what Popper (2003, II, 254–256) calls critical rationalism and Hayek (1967, 82–95) designates as limited, evolutionist, and traditionalist rationalism to learn and adapt to change, not through revolution — an abrupt institutional or systemic change that redefines the dominant features of the polity — but via evolution — a gradual, long-term process which operates through reform (Hay 2002, 139). Critical rationalism is not an anti-traditionalist irrational epistemology but, quite on the contrary, rejects the idea of knowledge starting from nothing (*a tabula rasa*), and postulates that the advance of knowledge is based on the modification of previously existent knowledge, i.e., tradition, which is itself open to critical examination and modification, although “without tradition, knowledge would be impossible” (Popper 2002, 36–37). For critical rationalism to operate, an open society — or liberal democracy — needs “social institutions to protect freedom of criticism, freedom of thought, and thus the freedom of men” (Popper 2003, II, 263). Furthermore, it is critical rationalism that allows for change via evolution, i.e., gradual reform or what Popper (2003, II, 263) labels piecemeal social engineering, as opposed to the utopian engineering of closed and authoritarian societies.

This is the foundation of the “liberal belief that in a free marketplace of ideas, good ideas will in the end drive out bad ones through deliberation and evidence” (Fukuyama 2022, 5) and precisely what Deutsch’s model is a practical representation of. On the other hand, closed, authoritarian societies have many difficulties in operating the process of criticism because it is stifled by gatekeepers, fear, obstacles to the circulation of information and, frequently, the cognitive unavailability of decision-makers to pay attention to and analyze information which does not conform to their preferences.

Furthermore, as Hayek (1967, 94) stresses, critical rationalism is at the core of “the political order of liberalism.” Through it, we follow moral rules that frequently we do not understand totally but serve our purposes, and we cannot redesign them all at once, we must work within the framework of values and institutions given to us, reforming them gradually (Hayek 2006, 57). This framework of values, moral rules, and institutions is conceptualized by Hayek (1967, 87–90) as traditions which are systems of rules of conduct. This brings me to the final point in this section, in which I aim to reinforce what is particularly liberal in the liberal international order and briefly develop a Hayekian analytical framework for the next and final section (for a more developed framework see Feser (2003) and Pires (2018)).

Hayek sees institutions, ideas, and traditions as vehicles of production and transmission of knowledge and develops a theory about the evolution of traditions based on their ability to generate and disseminate knowledge, both tacit and explicit (Gray 1998, 41). Traditions evolve via two processes, one internal and the other external. Internally, traditions develop through *immanent criticism*, which is a “criticism that moves within a given system of rules and judges particular rules in terms of their consistency or compatibility with all other recognized rules in inducing the formation of a certain kind of order of actions” (Hayek 1982, 2:24). Via this process, what is tacit becomes more explicit, the “whole is made more systematic and consistent,” through a “gradual and coherent” way which is “essentially a conservative rather than revolutionary process” (Feser 2003, 24). Externally, traditions evolve through what Hayek (1982, 3:153–176, 1991, 11–28) designates as a *theory of cultural evolution*. In this case, traditions compete among themselves by their incorporation in groups. Group selection accounts for the prevalence of some traditions over others through adaptation to the environment. Groups who follow more adaptive rules “grow and prosper,” while “less adaptive rules will tend to cause the groups following them to shrink, become impoverished or in other ways perform less well than the groups following the more adaptive rules” (Feser 2003, 27). It must be stressed that this is not Social Darwinism between individuals, but a mechanism of selection of the fittest traditions via competition between groups of individuals (Feser 2003, 28), such as states.

The abolition of slavery is an example of an internal evolution via immanent criticism, while the Cold War is an example of the theory of cultural evolution, in which competition between the liberal and the Marxist traditions led to the prevalence of the group of states that adopted liberalism. This group of states composes the liberal zone of peace. Currently, this zone is confronted with external competition from revisionist powers and the challenges posed by the immanent criticism of the populist surge, such as Brexit, to which I now turn.

## The Future of the Liberal International Order and Great Power Competition

As I’ve already mentioned, there are still many uncertainties and numerous variables surrounding the influence that Brexit will have in international relations. Emergent causation allows us to put in perspective what some of those consequences might be and venture into prediction. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that it is not possible to predict with precision what will be the full consequences of such a complex process. As Rudolf G. Adam (2020, 207) points out, “Assessing the consequences of Brexit for the United Kingdom, for Germany, the EU and the rest of the world is a speculative business as long as so many details remain undecided. (...). Today, the most that can be analysed are trends, dynamic correlations and probabilities.”

The first factor to bear in mind is that Brexit has indeed happened. On the 31st of January 2020, the UK left the European Union. The two parts negotiated and concluded a Trade and Cooperation Agreement which entered into force on the 1st of May 2021. It is essentially a Free Trade Agreement which also provides for legal and judicial cooperation in criminal and civil law matters and establishes a governance framework to ensure its application. “Foreign policy, external security and defence cooperation is not covered by the Agreement as the UK did not want to negotiate this matter” (European Commission 2021).

The second point to consider is that the COVID-19 pandemic has plunged the world into a reality of economic disruption and in which the tendency for state intervention and increased great power competition was accelerated. Furthermore, during the Trump Administration, accusations against China concerning the origin of COVID-19 deteriorated the relation between the two countries which was already degraded by a trade war. And in Biden’s term already, Washington’s focus on China did not change (it is indeed bipartisan), and the USA put Russia back on its radar when Biden openly admitted he considers Vladimir Putin a killer.

The third and most recent development to have in consideration is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which represents the most significant threat to the liberal international order since the end of the Cold War and whose total effects we cannot discern yet. Nevertheless, the USA, the UK, the EU, and NATO have reacted in a unified way by supporting the Ukrainian war effort, welcoming refugees, reinforcing NATO’s eastern flank, increasing Defense budgets, implementing massive economic sanctions against Russia, and trying to find ways to diversify oil and gas sources to decrease the energy dependency on Moscow.

In this challenging international arena, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have taken precedence over Brexit. In any case, Brexit’s effects are emerging and will become more visible. By resorting to the Hayekian framework developed

in the last section, I will now look at some of the main dimensions in which Brexit and the rise of China can influence the future of the liberal international order and great power competition.

In the first place, Brexit is an internal challenge to the liberal zone of peace. At the state level of analysis, it proceeds from immanent criticism originated in the UK, though aided by supporters in both the liberal zone of peace and outside of it — like Russia, as Snyder (2018, 104–7) shows. But this criticism is not as much British as it is English. “Brexit is not a Brexit but an ‘Engxit’. It is England that wants to leave, not the entire United Kingdom. An undisputed majority voted Remain in Scotland and Northern Ireland (56% and 62% respectively). (...) Apart from England, only Wales, historically, geographically and economically tied to England, yielded a majority for Leave” (Adam 2020, 209). This represents a problem for the UK, with centrifugal forces gaining strength and reinforcing divergent interests between the several nations, especially Northern Ireland and Scotland, as Adam (2020, 209) stresses. The concern with Northern Ireland was already salient during the negotiations, with the backstop issue taking center stage. The Northern Ireland Protocol does not satisfy everyone, especially the Democratic Unionist Party, who criticizes what it believes to be an effective new border created at sea. Scotland, on the other hand, led by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and with a majority of pro-independence parties in the Scottish Parliament, seems to be headed to another independence referendum, despite the opposition of Boris Johnson’s government. If successful, Scotland could then ask to formally join the EU, but regardless of such a move, the fact is that “The United Kingdom leaving the European Union could hasten Scotland and Northern Ireland leaving the United Kingdom, too” (Adam 2020, 214). This would mean a UK of only two countries, England and Wales, i.e., less population, territory and natural resources, a smaller economy and a weaker projection in international politics.

The secessionist tendencies in the UK lead to another issue but at the international level of analysis. Not only has the UK already lost some influence in the UN (Wouters 2021, 149), and questions about the EU having one less member in a permanent seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) and how it could strengthen its voice through EU ‘actorness’ been raised (Wouters 2021, 151–52), but if especially Scotland and possibly Northern Ireland were to leave the UK, it is not clear that the UK would be able to keep its permanent seat in the UNSC. Calls for UNSC reform would certainly gather strength and the argument about the precedent of the Russian Federation assuming the legal successor status after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Lang 2016) does not take into account that the international environment is substantially different from the one of 1991. How the UNSC reform would play out, if the UK and the EU would be able to get permanent

seats and if more liberal states would too, and how would the balance between liberal and authoritarian states remain, could lead either to a fragmentation or a reinforcement of the UN and the liberal order.

Remaining at the international level of analysis, but turning more specifically to the EU, the first point to be stressed is that with Brexit, the EU loses around 20% of its military capabilities (Adam 2020, viii). This is a serious blow to EU’s ambition in the security domain, and with the reevaluation of NATO by the Biden Administration the Atlantic Alliance will probably remain the chief guarantor of European security (Adam 2020, 275–76) — something which NATO’s reaction to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has already attested to. Security and defense issues were left out of the agreement between the EU and the UK, and in fact the UK has been one of the main European members of NATO, where it has put more emphasis than on EU military capabilities (Jacobs 2018, 118). This situation serves the UK foreign and defense policies and what remains to be seen is how the EU will adapt its Common Security and Defence Policy.

Secondly, in the wake of the Brexit referendum, many observers believed that if the UK was to succeed, other EU member-states could soon follow. The argument was that Trump and Brexit would fuel national populist parties to power, which would hold referendums and take their countries out of the EU. Although the risk remains due to national populist leaders in Poland and Hungary and other political parties which might do better in elections than they have so far — the performance of *Rassemblement National* in the 2022 French presidential and legislative elections is an indicator of the growing support to that party which allowed it, in the legislative elections, to increase from 8 to 89 seats in the National Assembly — there is not a majority among public opinion in any member-state that favors the exit of the EU, and what the reaction to the Brexit referendum and ensuing negotiations showed was that the EU leaders became more united (Jacobs 2018, 12). With the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine under way, the risk of other states leaving the EU is even more reduced.

Thirdly, focusing on Germany, considering that the UK is one of Germany’s main trading partners, Brexit is a decision opposed to the pragmatic commercial character of the British, and since Germany has increasingly become a hegemonic leader of the EU, the UK’s decision to leave the EU runs contrary to its main traditional foreign policy objective of preventing the emergence of a hegemonic power in the continent. Notwithstanding that Germany’s hegemony has been achieved through economics and that the EU is a space of peaceful cooperation and economic integration, in fact Brexit could destabilize the European balance of power by, according to Kagan (2019, 117), “exacerbating the imbalance of power and leaving an already weakened France alone to face a powerful but increasingly isolated Germany” and



contributing to the potential reemergence of the German question by striking “another blow to the institutions that were established to address the German question and to keep Germany moored in the liberal world.” The British may have forgotten Margaret Thatcher’s words: “By its very nature, Germany is a destabilising, rather than a stabilising, force in Europe” (Freire 2015, 285). Despite Germany being seemingly anchored and deeply committed to the liberal international order, that the Alternative for Germany has entered the *Bundestag* is a consequence and a symptom of the cultural and political struggle already under way (Kagan 2019, 118).

Nevertheless, the liberal international order is a USA-led order. This means that the structural constraints of the order, which can either promote and deepen liberalism or loosen up the order to a point where it might be subverted by authoritarian states and populists amid the liberal zone of peace, depend to a very large extent on US leadership. The UK, Germany, and the EU are traditional allies of the USA. Together, they form the core of the liberal zone of peace. But the turmoil of the Trump Administration is not yet forgotten, and the prospect of Trump’s return to power or Biden being succeeded by another national populist looms over US politics. These prospects add uncertainty to the perspectives of European leaders, despite efforts by Biden to normalize relations with traditional allies and stabilize US foreign policy. US leadership, i.e., the future of its foreign policy, will affect decisively the future of its main allies and of the liberal international order. Taking this into consideration, I turn to the end of this section, resorting to the second tool of the Hayekian analytical framework, the theory of cultural evolution.

Michael Desch (1996) has explained a pattern concerning how the international security environment influences the domestic level. In periods of great power competition, the state tends to develop itself and become more efficient, exhibiting a high level of national cohesion. On the other hand, when the perceived level of external threat is low, the polity tends to polarize and fragment internally. Right now, the USA is socially and politically highly polarized, but the concern with the rise of China is bipartisan. This means that Washington’s foreign policy towards Beijing should remain along stable strategic lines for the next decades. The pessimistic school of thought might be right: whether we want it or not, great power competition between the USA and China is already under way. The main question is if it is possible to escape what Allison (2018a) calls the Thucydides’ trap, i.e., an armed conflict between the USA and China. It is not my purpose to answer that question.

My main point is that because this competition is already in effect, the USA will increase its national cohesion and liberal states will rally around it — liberal democracies end up on the same side, a historical pattern displayed throughout the twentieth century, in both World Wars and the Cold War, and that is once again on display in reaction to the Russian invasion of

Ukraine. Just like the liberal tradition competed with the Nazi, fascist, and communist totalitarian traditions in the twentieth century, so it will have to compete again with another tradition. Analyzed through Hayek’s theory of cultural evolution, two traditions embodied by different groups, the liberalism of the states that compose the liberal zone of peace and the authoritarianism of a leading revisionist power (China) and its allies (Russia being the most important) seem destined to compete. If this is so, the liberal international order will be reinforced, and thus possibilities mentioned above such as the fragmentation of the UK, the reform of the UNSC due to Scotland’s independence, and the growing influence of national populism in Germany and the EU will be nothing but scenarios that did not materialize. What tradition will win this competition? History seems to be on the side of liberalism, due to several of its features, of which I would once again stress its immanent criticism and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. If in this competition the two great powers do not escape the Thucydides’ trap, the odds are still with the liberal tradition, for “When democracies fight dictatorships they usually fight well—winning nearly 80 per cent of all their wars, and more than 90 per cent of those they choose to start” (Russett 2013, 107). Furthermore, in the rise of China debate, many authors tend to forget domestic Chinese economic and political problems, the fact that the country is surrounded by hostile neighbors which are US allies, and also ignore that the USA is and will still remain the main great power in terms of net stocks of economic and military resources (Beckley 2018).

Many have proclaimed the current century as China’s Century and Putin has declared liberalism obsolete. These declarations might just be significantly hyperbolic.

## Conclusion

Prediction in international politics is a risky endeavor. Social and political reality are complex phenomena composed of innumerable variables which human reason and scientific effort are only able to capture in reduced numbers and whose understanding is frequently only partially attainable. Nevertheless, and fully aware of the risks and limits of my approach, I aimed at contributing to the debate on the future of the liberal international order by taking in consideration what remains a significant internal challenge to the EU and the liberal international order (apart from COVID-19), Brexit, and also by examining how the external challenge posed by the rise of China and other revisionist powers might influence the future of the said order and great power competition.

My research question on *how might Brexit and the rise of revisionist powers influence the future of the EU and the liberal international order* was framed by the interpretivist epistemological paradigm and could only be answered via

emergent causation. Hence, to answer it and fulfill the main and specific objectives, I resorted to the emergent causation methodological approach, a theoretical interpretation of liberalism and what the liberal international order is, and a Hayekian analytical framework for evaluating the internal development of political systems via immanent criticism and their external development through competition with other groups that, in the case under analysis, embody different political traditions from those espoused by the states which compose the liberal zone of peace.

My argument and answer suggest that it is yet too soon to accurately predict the long-term precise effects of Brexit and the rise of China upon the liberal international order, but considering a small number of determinant variables, i.e., the UK, USA, Germany, the EU, and the prevalence of a liberal international order which is in fact a USA-led order, it is possible to put in perspective some emergent scenarios. The backdrop of the debate between cautiously optimistic liberals and pessimistic realists is the rise of national populism over the past decade, of which Brexit and Trump were the main examples. Closer to the liberal than the realist literature about the future of the rules-based order, I argue that depending on future political developments of national populism in the UK, USA, Germany, and the EU (especially but not only in France), Brexit can either have effects that contribute to challenge the international order or reinforce it. On one hand, secessionist tendencies in the UK which might also have repercussions in international organizations, especially in the UN and its UNSC, an imbalance of power provoked by the UK's withdrawal from the EU which reinforces Germany's hegemony within it at a time when France is not able to counterbalance Germany, and the prospect of Trump or another national populist winning the 2024 US presidential election are possibilities that would contribute to a continued erosion of the liberal international order. These are all internal challenges originated in the liberal zone of peace and thus anchored on immanent criticism.

But, on the other hand, considering liberalism's resilience, its innate ability for criticism and adaptation to change and also for resisting authoritarian and totalitarian revisionist attempts of the international order, bearing in mind that the current liberal international order is a USA-led order and, finally, attending to the great power competition which is already under way between the USA and China, I argue that if the USA continues to exercise its international leadership role, liberal democracies will rally around it and the perception of the external threat posed by China and other revisionist powers like Russia will lead them to overcome internal turbulence and focus on Hayek's *cultural evolution*, i.e., the competition of the liberal political tradition embodied by the liberal zone of peace with the authoritarian revisionist powers. In this scenario, Brexit's effects will be quite lessened, and the liberal international order will reinforce its institutions,

regimes, and alliances. This seems to be already happening due to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

The answer to my research question is then conditional on emergent causes and political developments that for the time being we are not able to envisage entirely. This is, of course, a limitation that can only be overcome by the passing of time itself. Historical distancing might then allow one to disentangle multiple variables and identify patterns of causation. Nevertheless, for the time being, avenues of research of significant importance, and resorting once again to the Hayekian analytical framework, are, on the internal side of the liberal zone of peace, the probability of secessionism being accomplished in the UK, what kind of leadership will Germany exercise within an EU without the UK, and if the USA can exercise its leadership to sustain the USA-led order. On the external side, what contours might the competition with China have in a globalized economy that is heavily dependent on it, and if that competition might escalate into conflict, or in Allison's words, if the USA and China can escape the Thucydides trap, seems to be the touchstone of research concerning great power competition in the twenty-first century.

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## Declarations

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