

The war in Ukraine underscores the fragile interdependence of the global economy as well as the long-term fraying of transnational institutions intended to support globalization. Much of the world has remained neutral in the European conflict, waiting on the sidelines. If the US, the EU, and NATO falter in their resolve to resist Russian aggression, what will be the effect on international norms and institutions? Will China and its leadership of the BRICS help accelerate global fissures? How effectively have regional and international institutions responded to other crises, such as the pandemic crisis? How might the United States maintain its role as the leader of a liberal international order?

An Enduring World Order: The Future of International Norms and Institutions

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Introduction

“This is a grave emergency,” said United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield on the evening of February 24, 2022 after Russian troops invaded Ukraine.¹ Shock and disbelief soared across the international community at the actions of Russia, despite omnipresent indicators of Russia’s intent: there had been a troop build-up on the border as early as April 2021, the United States intelligence community published reports about an imminent attack, and Russia demonstrated previous aggressive behavior back in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the 2008 invasion of Georgia indicating it did indeed have the audacity to act.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is an egregious violation of international norms that have been ingrained in the international psyche since the post-World War I era.² Following World War I, Germany was punished in a devastating manner for violating international sovereignty and throwing Europe and the world into a disastrous war with casualties claiming tens of millions of lives. Since then, the norm of respect for international sovereignty has been replicated repeatedly in international relations. Beginning with the war-guilt clause from the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 that punished Germany for its interventions, to Article 2.4 of the United Nations Charter in 1945 establishing respect for international sovereignty, to the General Assembly Resolution 2131 in 1965, to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2625 in 1970, and so on reaffirming the same principle.

International norms and international law are unambiguous about states not intervening in the society of another state, with the only exception being when the state cannot, or chooses not to, protect its own people from human rights abuses. And yet, despite this clear edict iterated again and again in international relations for over 100 years, when Russia violated Ukraine’s sovereignty on February 24th, only one-third of the world’s population condemned Russian behavior at a United Nations vote on March 2, 2022. A full two-thirds of the world’s population chose not to condemn Russia’s behavior, or to remain neutral.³ Although 141 countries⁴ voted to condemn Russia’s actions, these countries represent only 36% of the world’s population despite

holding 70% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP).⁵ One-third of the world's population has decided to remain neutral—led by India, this set of states includes Brazil, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates. The other one-third of the world's population, led by China, has actively approved of Russia's violation of state sovereignty.⁶

This voting at the UN is a demonstration of power shifting in the international order. Three decades ago, the world unanimously decided to condemn Iraq for its violation of Kuwait's sovereignty in 1990.⁷ But in a similarly unprovoked scenario today, the states in the international system have been anything but unanimous. Ukraine's Ambassador to the UN, Mr. Sergiy Kyslytsya, said, "It is the responsibility of this body [the UN] to stop the war. I call on every one of you to do everything possible to stop the war,"⁸ following the invasion. But if the states in the UN do not want to condemn the war, then it is unlikely they will do anything to stop the war. The Western world led by the United States and Europe may have corralled their own forces to support Ukraine and condemn Russia, but unfortunately for Mr. Kyslytsya, the people of Ukraine, and other populations potentially at risk in the future, the rules of the UN Charter do not bear the same weight as they did three decades ago, a time when states that might otherwise object to U.S. preferences were either weak (like China) or aligned (or wanting to align) with the United States, such as the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev.

Today's international order, oft referred to as the postwar liberal international order or the U.S. hegemonic world order, has endured since its establishment in 1945 but is now under threat. There are a multitude of explanations for this weakening. Perhaps an internal decay of the order is brought about by populist leaders believing they are protecting their respective populations from perceived negative consequences of globalization and economic interdependence. It could also be external threats to the order brought on by a revanchist Russia and the rise of China. Or, the order's ongoing weakening could also be a natural progression of change in the structure of the international system resultant from shocks to the system, most typically war, but potentially explained by other events such as the 2008 global financial crisis. Regardless of the exact cause, shifts in hegemonic systems and more broadly in international ordering are likely to be fraught, if not downright dangerous.



This paper will proceed in four parts. First, it will define international order. What do we mean when we say there is international order in the system, and what do we expect today's international order to look like? Second, it will describe a set of circumstances that might explain changes, or shifts in power, to today's international order, placing us now in an era of great power competition. Third, it will briefly describe the great power rivals of the United States and chief revisionist powers in the international environment—Russia and China—and what an order led by either of those states as the hegemon might look like. Finally, it will discuss a set of considerations for the United States to think through should it want to maintain the current international order. The paper will close with a set of discussion questions for consideration, as well as a list of recommended sources to learn more.



What is international order?

In mid-20th century Europe, while watching the region disintegrate, Guglielmo Ferrero wrote, “Order...is the set of rules that man must respect in order not to live in the permanent terror of his fellow men, of the innate madness of men and its unpredictable explosions—a set of rules that man calls freedom.”⁹ In modern practice, this means predictable, transparent, norms-based interactions among states seeking to pursue their own interests as they relate to others, with reduced risk of unpredictable outcomes or violent coercion. Modern scholars describe order as “the governing arrangements among states that establish fundamental rules, principles, and institutions...the basic framework that creates rules and settles expectations among states.”¹⁰

Order, or a lack of order, is central to understanding international relations. Assuming that order is not inherent in the international system, great powers attempt to establish an order among states to bring about peace and security. Orders can change over time—Ferrero argues that orders are generally constructed in the wake of disastrous events upending previous orders once humans have had enough of terror and wished to again curtail their “innate madness.”¹¹ Bear Braumoeller argues in line with this theory and identifies that war is the disastrous event: “war makes orders and orders make war.”¹²

For example, before the 20th century, international law and diplomatic practice allowed for the decision to go to war as the inherent sovereign right of any state. Seeing the moral and material costs of two World Wars, however, the international community’s attitude about violations of international sovereignty shifted starkly by the mid-20th century. “Wars of aggression” became criminalized. This was later codified through the Atlantic Charter in 1941, and then the United Nations Charter in 1945, defining features of today’s current world order.

The international order that exists today is sometimes called the postwar liberal international order or the U.S. liberal hegemonic order. It is a direct outflow of lessons learned and attitudes developed following World War I and World War II. The liberal international order remains significant today because it represents the longest period in modern history without war between great powers.¹³ There are a few key tenets of this order.

First, the order is “liberal” meaning that it focuses on elements of increased trade and economic interdependence between states, it enmeshes itself in a set of transparent institutions and rules such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization that establish what is expected of states in terms of diplomatic and economic relationships, and it focuses on democratic ideas and values such as support for human rights and progressive change. There are opportunities to voice concerns and establish reciprocity—while the United States is the leader, it by no means accepts the United States as the only important voice in establishment of the institutions. Outside of economics and institutions, a key component of the “liberal” order was the furtherance of democracy—liberal political values to underpin the system.

Second, the order is “international.” As the sole hegemon coming out of World War II, the United States realized a need to access the markets of the rest of the world should it want to maintain its economic growth in the future. The United States therefore sought a strategy that would create an environment internationally congenial to its desires and needs. The United States

did exclude the Soviet Union from this order, but not at first—the Marshall Plan offered aid to the Soviet Union, only to be rejected by a paranoid leader in Joseph Stalin, one of the first post-WWII examples displaying the enmity developed over time between the two great powers.¹⁴ The United States strove to create an order beneficial for all states in the system, but particularly beneficial for itself, as access and relationships with other states would improve its own economy and security.

Finally, the liberal international order is just that—an “order.” It rests on hegemonic leadership from the United States to put forward, stand by, and reinforce the tenants with its vast apparatus of economic, diplomatic, and military power.

The foundation of the American system and liberal international order remains today—in fact, it became more hardened in 1990 at the end of the Cold War. The post-Cold War era has a few defining features described by Hal Brands and Eric Edelman in a piece titled “America and the Geopolitics of Upheaval.” First, following the Cold War, the United States emerged as the unipolar power, home to 25% of the world’s GDP, 40% of the world’s defense outlays, and combined with its allies it owned 70% of the global economic power. The U.S. carrier strike group became a symbol for American preeminence. Economically and militarily the United States was unrivaled. Second, at the end of the Cold War, the U.S. ideology of democracy and free markets emerged as a clear victor. The ideological competition with communism ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. Third, great-power comity, or friendship, appeared as a norm rather than exception. There was no resurgence of Japan or Germany, and Russia and China were too weak to mount any challenges. Fourth and finally, there was “remarkable multilateral cooperation in addressing relatively mild international disorder of the day.”¹⁵ The 1990s was the apex of the liberal international order, a unipolar moment for the United States and period of peace and stability.

Perhaps a critique or modification to Brands and Edelman, Michael Mastanduno updates the description of the postwar U.S. hegemonic order. Mastanduno argues that the order is not truly international. It is limited politically and circumscribed geographically—the United States relies on regional hegemony in Western Europe and East Asia. Germany and Japan are “lynchpin” partners who enforce the tenants of the order. Additionally, the barriers to entry are high for states wishing to be a part of the order given the requirements of a democratic political system and market-driven economic system—it’s not as international as it could be. Despite great claims of institutionalization of the order, this has only occurred in Western Europe through NATO. East Asia does not have the same institutionalized multilateralism.¹⁶ Mastanduno’s description of the liberal international order advocates a view that is less all-encompassing than the individual terms of phrase realize, but the United States as the preeminent hegemonic power is a fact unchanged.

The bottom-line is that the world order provides the appropriate standard operating procedures for states in a given system. Since 1945, the United States has led this order to meet its own economic and national security needs. And, since 1990, the United States was able to forge its place even more deeply by “winning” (or not losing) the Cold War.



A Shift in the International Order

While hardened and forged so thoroughly following the Cold War, there is now “near-consensus that the liberal international order led by the United States ...is fraying.”¹⁷ Brands and Edelman provide a host of explanations for the changing international order today. First, the rise of China has shrunk U.S. and western primacy. The United States still maintains an economic and military edge on China, but the extent of this primacy has diminished. From 2004 to 2015, U.S. wealth and military spending has declined almost 10% respectively, with its allies’ defense outlays also falling. Meanwhile, the relative positions of America’s competitors have improved significantly. Chinese global wealth has tripled, and its military spending has increased fivefold.¹⁸ Russia might be suffering militarily in its current war with Ukraine; however, it underwent significant military reformation, particularly among its special operations units, propelling it far forward compared to the military’s decimation at the end of the Cold War.

The international community, or rather the United States and other Western powers, have acknowledged their relative loss in power and recognize the era of today as one of great power competition. Rather than great power comity of the post-Cold War with few problems requiring international cooperation, today China has taken steps to assert its dominance in East Asia and Russia is undoing key aspects of the post-Cold War settlement. The Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy recognized shifts in the distribution of power internationally and sought to address them by “mak[ing] America great again” internationally, focusing more unilaterally on American power than previous approaches had, with a particular emphasis on competition with China.¹⁹ The Biden administration’s interim National Security Strategic Guidance²⁰ and National Defense Strategy have similarly focused on challenges to the current international order. NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept²¹ likewise identifies threats from Russia and competition with China as key factors structuring the international system.

Among this new era of great power competition, a global ideological struggle has returned. The spread of democracy has stalled—while democracy tripled from 39 to 120 states between 1974 and 200, every year since 2006 more countries have experienced a decline in freedom rather than increases.²² States like Hungary, Russia, Iran, China, and Syria model authoritarian regimes with success.

Finally, the shift in the distribution of power and acknowledgement of great power competition and ideological competition has intensified global disorder. The lack of cooperation at the foundational level has magnified the threats the international community faces from various quarters, including nuclear proliferation, particularly among rogue states, international terrorism from actors of the Islamic State, the challenge of cyber warfare and cyber espionage, threats from climate change, and so forth.



World Order through the lens of China and Russia

Mastanduno writes that a world order led by a different hegemon, potentially China or Russia, would look significantly different than the one the United States established post World War II. He writes, “hegemonic-order theory emphasizes that hegemons are not interchangeable project managers; each hegemonic order bears the distinctive stamp of the values of its leading state and the relationships it produces.”²³ Whether Russia or China ultimately want to lead the world order according to their terms, it is a valuable thought exercise to consider what each state wants to see in the current order, or what values it would impose if it could.

China

President Xi Jinping seeks “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and “great changes unseen in a century.”²⁴ Chinese leadership understands its potential power—a country of 1.3 billion people and a culture 4,000 years old means that China has the capability to reach heights of great power and wealth. It views the current hegemonic shift as something brought about by self-destruction of the United States and views this as an opportunity to insert itself more forcefully into international affairs after decades of “hiding” its capabilities and “biding” its time; an opportunity to finally demonstrate its recovery from the century of humiliation at the hands of the West and Japan. China wants to supplant the United States as the hegemon both regionally and globally by creating new institutions in its image with autocratic norms that favor the concentration of political authority as well as greater regimentation of society and regulation of economic activity. These illiberal norms would upend our current system by increasing opacity and favoring China most of all with a zero-sum mindset. Unlike the U.S. liberal international order, China is less observant of a rising tide lifting all ships. For China, prosperity by others takes away from its own prosperity.

China is working to field a world-class military in the People’s Liberation Army with bases around the world and with capabilities in space, the poles (the Arctic and Antarctic) and the deep sea.²⁵ It wants to be at the center of the fourth industrial revolution setting the norms for and employing artificial intelligence and quantum computing in both military capabilities and ordering institutions. China is more calculated in these goals, willing to set things into motion now that will develop over time to enable its global hegemony. According to Chinese expert Rush Doshi, “A fully realized Chinese order might eventually involve the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Japan and Korea, the end of American regional alliances, the effective removal of the U.S. Navy from the Western Pacific, deference from China’s regional neighbors, unification with Taiwan, and the resolution of territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas.”²⁶

Russia

President Vladimir Putin of Russia believes that the West sidelined Russia during the formation of the post-Cold War era, and he seeks to restore Russia’s rightful place as a great power. Russia desires, at minimum, a multipolar world where the United States is less dominant, and Russia is treated as one of a handful of great powers. Rather than partake in prevailing global institutions, Putin wants to deal with nations individually on security and business matters. To achieve this, Putin has pursued two distinct strategies to ensure a geopolitical end state which is

favorable for Russia. First, for Russia, success is defined as a fractured and disorganized EU and NATO. So, Russia deliberately endeavors to foment discord between alliances and partnerships to prevent unified political willpower from consolidating against Russian interests. Second, the Kremlin's intelligence apparatus attempts to sow discord among Western democratic institutions to discredit them and to degrade their populations' faith in their elected leaders. This perspective has implications for the international order as Russia views true state sovereignty as something reserved for only great powers.²⁷ Pivoting to Asia, Russia respects the sovereignty of China and nonintervention in domestic affairs between the two great powers. While respecting spheres of influence in Europe and East Asia respectively, it remains to be seen how Russia and China would handle flashpoints such as competition for natural gas and fishing claims in the Arctic.



To strengthen the international order?

At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States published a strategy of containment in the oft-cited document NSC-68. The goal was to “contain” the Soviet Union and allow the United States to thrive in all other parts of the world. The document reads, “...beyond thus affirming our values, our policy and actions must be such as to foster a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet system, a change toward which the frustration of the design is the first and perhaps most important step. Clearly it will not only be less costly but more effective if this change occurs to a maximum extent as a result of internal forces in society.”²⁸ The United States “won” the Cold War this way—rather than dominating the Soviet Union it allowed the USSR to collapse in on itself, torn apart internally due to weaknesses of its own making.

Global interdependence today would not have us be so lucky when considering the Chinese system. While not without its weaknesses, China is interconnected globally in a way that prevents a policy like containment. So, the United States finds itself at a crossroads of resource allocation: how should it prioritize efforts to address challenges from China and Russia while maintaining military alliances and protecting global institutions amidst the demands of its significant problems at home? The United States needs to make an assessment of the strength of the liberal international order—is the fraying perceived or real? If real, should it focus on great power rivalry directly with China and Russia, or should it focus on revamping its current alliances and institutions to reassert its strength, or should it work to strengthen its internal democratic values in the hopes that this regime structure will be able to out-compete regardless of the competitor?



Discussion Questions

- Are we in a period of shifting hegemonic power, or is the decline of the United States and the liberal international order perceived as more significant than it truly is?
- Is the United States hegemonic world order the best order suited to handle the challenges of the 21st century? How might a Chinese-led world order compare in dealing with the challenges of the day?

- What are some feasible and actionable changes that the United States could make to the current world order (current institutions, alliances, and so forth) to make it more sustainable and amenable to the entirety of the international system?
- To what extent does the United States require the cooperation of Russia and China to maintain the current world order?
- Is cooperation a possibility for great powers given the sheer threat of economic and military power they pose to one another?
- What would a Chinese or Russian world order look like? What conditions would make either of these world orders sustainable?
- Given the current era of great power competition, will it require a war to upset the current international order or can the order naturally evolve to favor China and Russia more?



Suggested Readings

- Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, “How Hegemony Ends: The Unraveling of American Power,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/how-hegemony-ends>.
- G. John Ikenberry, “The Next Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/next-liberal-order>.
- Dani Rodrik and Stephen Walt, “How to Build a Better Order: Limiting Great Power Rivalry in an Anarchic World,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2022 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/build-better-order-great-power-rivalry-dani-rodrik-stephen-walt>.
- Walter Russell Mead, “The End of the Wilsonian Era: Why Liberal Internationalism Failed” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2021 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-08/end-wilsonian-er>
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- Joseph S. Nye, “Will the Liberal Order Survive,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2017 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive>.
- Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, *An Open World: How America Can Win the Contest for Twenty-First-Century Order*, Yale University Press: 2020.
- Michael Mastanduno, “Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending U.S. Hegemony after the Cold War,” *Security Studies* 28(3) at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604984>.
- National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017 at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
- Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 2021 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

¹ Farnaz Fassihi, “[As U.N. Security Council Met to Stop Military Action by Putin, Russia Attacked Ukraine](#),” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2022.

² Scott Silverstone, “Shifting Power and the Preventive War Option,” *International Politics Classic and Contemporary Readings 2nd Edition*, edited by Scott P. Handler and Robert T. Person, 2021, 261.

³ Mark Green, “[Countries That Have Sanctioned Russia](#),” *The Wilson Center*, March 10, 2022.

⁴ “[Russia can count on support from many developing countries.](#)” *Economist Intelligence Unit*, March 30, 2022.

⁵ Mark Green, “[Countries That Have Sanctioned Russia](#).”

⁶ “[Russia can count on support from many developing countries.](#)”

⁷ “[Resolution 660 \(1990\)](#),” *United Nations Digital Library*.

⁸ Farnaz Fassihi, “[As U.N. Security Council Met to Stop Military Action by Putin, Russia Attacked Ukraine](#).”

⁹ Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Reconstruction of Europe*, Hespisedes Press: 2008, 379.

¹⁰ Rebecca Lissner and Mira, *An Open World: How America Can Win the Contest for the Twenty-First Century*, Yale University Press: 2018, 8.

¹¹ Ferrero, 379.

¹² Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age*, Oxford University Press: 2019.

¹³ John Ikenberry, “The Rise of the American System,” *Foundations of International Relations 4th Edition*, edited by Robert T. Person, Michael A. Robinson, and Hannah M. Smith, 2022.

¹⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Oxford University Press: 1997, 41.

¹⁵ Hal Brands and Eric Edelman, “[America and the Geopolitics of Upheaval](#),” *The National Interest*, 2017.

¹⁶ Michael Mastanduno, “Partner Politics: Russia, China, and the Challenge of Extending US Hegemon after the Cold War,” *Security Studies*, 28:3 (2019), 484-486.

¹⁷ Brands and Edelman, 436.

¹⁸ Brands and Edelman, 436-437.

¹⁹ [National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017](#).

²⁰ [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance 2022](#).

²¹ [NATO 2022 - Strategic Concept](#).

²² Brands and Edelman, 438.

²³ Mastanduno, 483.

²⁴ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Oxford University Press: 2021, 263.

²⁵ Doshi, 5.

²⁶ Doshi, 4.

²⁷ Hannah Smith, "*Russia's Utilization of Private Military Companies*," Yale University, 2020.

²⁸ [National Security Council 68](#).