

The struggle for a liberal world order transformations, learning processes and the global challenges of the long 20th century

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Abstract

This article reappraises the rise, impact and limitations of aspirations to create a *rule-based* liberal world order in the transformative ‘long’ 20th century (1860–2025). Pursuing a poly-perspectival and global approach, it illuminates dominant ideas and concepts that informed these aspirations. And it analyses how far those who became key actors in this process indeed found ways – against both authoritarian and communist competitors – to remake the norms, ground-rules and institutional foundations of international order on liberal premises, and on a truly global scale. Finally, it explores what lessons can be drawn from liberal achievements and frustrations of the long 20th century to rebuild a rule-based world order for the 21st.

Keywords

liberal order, collective security, global disorder, international concert, learning processes, legitimacy

What we are witnessing is more than a haphazard accumulation of crises and challenges to the predominantly liberal and essentially *rule-based* international order that was built, though never completed, in what here will be called the ‘long’ 20th century (1860–2025). Indeed, a much deeper rupture must be confronted – and a looming descent into systemic global disorder. Ultimately, what threatens to disintegrate are the core elements of the system of world order – based, however imperfectly, on certain liberal rules and

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understandings of cooperative international politics – that was successively forged after 1945 and only insufficiently amended after 1989. In the worst-case scenario, this system could give way to a qualitatively different ‘order’ dominated by the maxim ‘might makes right’ and by novel hyper-empires dividing the world into new spheres of influence. Yet the current calamities also throw into relief fundamental problems, tensions and double-standards that have marred western and non-western attempts to establish a rule-based liberal order from the very beginning – even if they manifested themselves differently at different times. To understand the nature and deeper origins of today’s escalating crisis of order – and to point to ways of overcoming it – it is thus imperative to widen the conceptual and historical focus. To be illuminated is the longer history of how conceptions and then an actual architecture of liberal order gained first contours, then faced massive challenges and powerful competitors, then could be renewed and made more durable, but eventually once again confronted major, perhaps existential threats both from without and from within. This is the purpose of the following reappraisal.

Both realists and neo-realists have argued that changes in the modern international system has been determined by inexorable great-power struggles and a changing global ‘balance of power’, which eventually culminated in the nuclear ‘balance of mutually assured destruction’ between the American and Soviet ‘super empires’.¹ The global Cold War also came to be viewed not only as crucial for the emergence of a particular kind of liberal order but also as the defining battlefield of a ‘short’ 20th century, which Hobsbawm called an ‘age of extremes’.² By contrast, important liberal and constructivist contributions have highlighted the growth of a modern international society and claimed that it overall expanded towards a world community, introducing new norms and practices amidst an ever higher degree of transnational interconnection and interdependence.³ This analysis seeks to offer a different, more nuanced and comprehensive interpretation. It aims to bring out a longer, more profound and essentially dialectic transformation processes – or more precisely processes of crisis and disintegration yet also of learning and reorientation – which unfolded in the catalytical eras of the two World Wars and the Cold War and remade modern international politics. To this end, it introduces the new conceptual framework of the ‘long’ 20th century. Marked by unprecedented catastrophes *and* advances, this century dawned at the world-historical watershed of the 1860s and may have ended around 2025, with the dissolution – or perhaps renewal – of what has come closest in modern history to a rule-based world order. The core argument advanced here, then, is that a fuller understanding of the making and (possible) unmaking of this fundamentally liberal but also essentially unfinished and never fully global system can be gained by reassessing both developments in this wider frame of reference.⁴

In and beyond the long 20th century, it seems most illuminating to define international *order* not just as an – evolving – system of consistent relations between the most relevant actors in the global geopolitical setting – here: mainly states, yet eventually also international institutions and non-governmental organisations – and the distribution of power and possibilities among them. On a deeper level, an international order is characterised by the constitutive political ground-rules, practices and understandings that come to prevail among these actors and within the system. And the quality and durability of this order depend on the extent to which the actors come to regard these rules and understandings as not only effective but also as legitimate – or learn to develop them further.

Analysing the transformation of world order in the long 20th century thus requires a poly-perspectival and ultimately global approach. For only such an approach can capture the perspectives of all relevant actors in the changing global system and hierarchy; and it can capture not only the perceptions and approaches of leading policy- and decision-makers but also prevalent attitudes within wider societies and (not only democratic) domestic-political force-fields.⁵

In this broader context, there have been many attempts to define what constitutes *liberal* international order and *liberal* internationalism.⁶ But a meaningful characterisation can only be worked out if it is pursued in a deeper and more *longue durée* context of international history. On these premises, one can conclude that since the beginning of the long 20th century, and then more assertively since the era of Woodrow Wilson, liberal approaches to and manifestations of international order came to be marked by the following constitutive characteristics – largely defined in analogy to liberal conceptions of state order and against ‘older’ or ‘more traditional’ and eventually also against communist precepts of order and politics: (1) the premise that like a well-ordered modern state, the international system ought to be governed by a covenant of ‘liberal’ rules for the rational, deliberative and peaceful resolution of conflicts and handling of all overarching challenges arising in the international sphere; (2) that not only modes of international cooperation and concertation but also specific international institutions ought to be created to this end; (3) that certain liberal norms, which were to be codified in international law, should inform these rules and govern international conduct, most salient among them: provisions for collective security and the protection of state integrity, minority rights and, eventually, individual human rights; norms of self-government, then self-determination; and more far-reaching precepts for arbitration and *rule-based* pacific settlement of international disputes; and finally liberal-capitalist, eventually also social-liberal maxims of international trade and world economic order.

The evolution of this international conception has always been bound up with the idea that a liberal world order would have to be established and maintained by states and societies that respected the same norms and rules domestically – as republics, eventually as democratic polities. And it has gone hand in hand with the notion that both inner-state and international order of this kind could and should be strengthened through liberal-internationalist education and emancipation. Eventually – thus the characteristically hierarchical premise from the era of liberal imperialism before 1914 to the aftermath of 1989 – the blessings of liberal rules, norms and institutions could spread throughout the world – from the most advanced liberal states and societies to those deemed less advanced, whether they adhered to more traditional or authoritarian or to communist modes. Thus, a multi-level tutoring and transformation process came to be envisaged, animated by a foundational ‘amelioratist’ belief in liberal progress and the improvability of global order and the human condition. Yet, as will be shown, another hallmark was and remained a marked inconsistency – a gap between liberal ideas, aspirations and *rhetoric* on the one hand and, on the other, consistent policies and strategies to implement them in practice, to translate them into a sustainable liberal *order* not only for ‘the West’ but indeed for the world as a whole.

How orders have disintegrated and been transformed in the long 20th century

In my interpretation, the way in which the long 20th century's architecture of order came to be transformed can fundamentally be understood as a *longue durée* process that comprised three formative periods. In turn, each of these periods comprised three core phases: (1) a phase marked not only by ever more all-encompassing *and global* systemic competition but also, and notably, by the disintegration of an international order that no longer provided the rules, understandings and wherewithal to manage conflicts and pressures, preserve peace and maintain a modicum of orderliness in world affairs; (2) then, as a consequence of this, a phase of fundamental crisis escalating to a systemic war and (3) and finally, a phase of ever more comprehensive *and global* learning and reordering.

The first of these salient periods began with the crisis and disintegration of the 'world order' of high imperialism; its crucible was the First World War; and it then brought the first, ultimately frustrated attempts to create a 'new world order' in 1919 and in the 1920s. The second began with the disintegration of the nascent Atlantic and global system of order that had emerged by the late 1920s under the shattering impact of the World Economic Crisis; its crucible was the Second World War; and it gave rise to the hitherto most ambitious bids to create a new international order, first an order for 'one world' premised on the fledgling United Nations system and the institutions of Bretton Woods, which then was soon superseded by a fundamentally bipolar, but eventually globally differentiated Cold War international system. It was within this system – and under the impact of the escalating confrontation with the Soviet Union and 'global communism' – that an unprecedented and overall liberal *Pax Atlantica* was forged between a novel American hegemon and the states of Western Europe, including Western Germany. This was then complemented by America's alliance system in East Asia. The third period began with the disintegration of most of the communist half of the Cold War international order, which commenced in the 1970s; its crucible were clearly the revolutionary upheavals of 1989, the implosion of the Warsaw Pact and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union; and it was followed by comparatively much more *limited* attempts to work towards a new and durable post-Cold War global order. Arguably, we are still very much in this last phase, in the long aftermath of 1989.

Fundamentally, then, the most substantial advances towards a more sustainable order could only be made after massively disruptive wars. And the overall *transformation* in modern international, national and transnational politics they effected should be interpreted as the outgrowth of three formative *periods of learning*. What is meant by learning here? At the core, it can be characterised as the capacity of key actors – of political decision-makers, diplomats and 'conceptual architects', yet also of opinion-makers and wider publics – to question and re-evaluate dominant practices, patterns and underlying assumptions that proved problematic, especially in response to deeper crises; to search for different, sometimes novel ways to think about more effective approaches to fundamental challenges and to embark on practical processes of reorientation, both individually and collectively, to meet these challenges more convincingly. In my understanding, learning is by no means linear or necessarily leads to progress; and the learning processes that became possible in the long 20th century's most transformative periods were by no

means linear either. They involved notable false starts and even ‘pathological learning’, that is, instances when counterproductive consequences were drawn. Overall, however, they pointed in a remarkably forward-looking direction, manifesting remarkable abilities to engage with previous successes and failures and to learn deeper historical lessons.⁷ But it is also essential to show that the expanding array of inter- and transnational actors who embarked on such learning processes not only had to adapt to the new and ever more complex problems posed by each of these defining eras. They also had to grapple with challenges whose deeper origins have to be sought long before 1914. The responses they managed to give – at first strikingly limited, then improving in proportion to their capacity to learn from earlier insufficiencies – can ultimately also be seen as responses to these underlying and unprecedentedly demanding challenges.⁸

The demise of the imperialist world system and the first bid to forge a liberal world order

At the dawn of the long 20th century the world witnessed a confluence of three highly consequential and indeed mutually reinforcing developments: the ‘take-off’ globalisation of capitalism; the formation of modern states and the truly global expansion of power-political rivalries between the highly mobilised ‘world states’ that now emerged, espoused civilisational Darwinism and engaged in both liberal and illiberal imperialism. In the formative decades after 1860, the competitive pursuits and alliances of these novel states finally destroyed the 19th century’s Vienna concert system of 1815.⁹ But this was also when the ascendancy not of ‘liberal internationalism’ but rather of liberal ideas of global order and international politics began. At the heart of liberal aspirations, which first mainly gained momentum in Britain and the United States, lay the idea that ‘old-style’ diplomacy and power-political competition had to be superseded through new, legalised international conduct, new rules for peaceful settlement of disputes. For some, this went hand in hand with a – self-interested – belief in the civilising force of ‘free trade’. Gladstone emerged as a powerful champion of the notion that a new international concert of advanced states ought to ensure respect for liberal standards and if necessary intervene to uphold them, notably in the Ottoman Empire. Later, juridical internationalists argued that power politics had to be civilised and peace preserved in a new way by establishing a far-reaching regime of international law, and especially arbitration, and they hoped that the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 could serve as its nucleus.¹⁰ But neither these aspirations nor those advanced by the socialists and communists of the Second International could prevent the doomsday escalation of July 1914.

Yet the unprecedented catastrophe of the Great War then indeed became the essential crucible and catalyst for attempts to replace the ‘old order’ and construct a new world order on liberal premises. The war not only provoked an unparalleled flowering of manifestoes and blueprints to this end, put forward by transnationally operating non-governmental associations like the League of Nations Union and the Woman’s Peace Party, then also by key belligerent and neutral governments. Albeit with different emphases, these argued that the time had come not only to push for liberalisation and democratisation at home – and a hierarchically structured extension of ‘self-government’, then ‘self-determination’ – but

also to establish a novel covenant of essentially liberal rules and norms, now to be secured and enforced through a new international institution. This first came to be called a 'peace league' and then a 'League of Nations'. Crucially, the deeply disruptive impact of the war seemed to create for the first time real prospects for implementing such ambitions.¹¹ Unquestionably, the American president Woodrow Wilson emerged as their most powerful champion. Often portrayed as a 'liberal internationalist', he was in fact a distinctly hierarchical 'Americanist', who adhered to core liberal-imperialist assumptions, especially with a view to the 'colonised world', yet also vis-à-vis Europe. On these premises, he now became the principal proponent of a top-down liberal design for 'a peace to end all wars' that indeed created unfulfillable expectations. Drawing on ideas of internationally-minded English liberals, Wilson essentially pursued an aspirational agenda not for a new *world* system but rather for a new *Atlantic* order, which nonetheless far-reaching global implications. As its essential 'superstructure' he envisaged an evolutionary league, founded as an institution of the victors of the war, later to expanded to include also the vanquished and those deemed capable of self-determination. This league was to act as the essential 'clearing house' of world politics, led by a new 'international concert' of the most advanced powers – and ultimately the United States – and fostering new rules of collective security, peaceful conflict-resolution and minority protection.¹²

But in what became the most complex peacemaking and reordering process in history – the Paris negotiations of 1919 – Wilson had to learn the hard way that he would have to engage in complex negotiations, above all with the likewise democratically accountable leaders of the other main victors, David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, who brought their own liberal *and* imperialist visions to the negotiating-table. In some respects, the 'Big Three' and their key advisers achieved remarkable feats in the arduous struggle to find common ground between their vastly differing agendas. But they largely failed to meet the more fundamental requirements of peace and order in the aftermath of the Great War – and clearly largely disappointed all those liberal and socialist internationalists who had hoped for a more radical departure. Crucially, the protagonists of Paris could not lay a robust groundwork for a new, truly *global* order. What they indeed concentrated on, in a strikingly hierarchical manner, was the priority of forging the nucleus of a new Atlantic order of the victors – that initially excluded both the vanquished, notably the fledgling Weimar Republic, and Bolshevik Russia – and of course also all those who remained under colonial rule and imperialist domination, whose calls for self-determination had not been recognised or even heard. Wilson had to acknowledge that the self-styled and markedly unprepared new American hegemon could not impose its design. While the reordering process of 1919 became strikingly hierarchical – with the leaders of the victorious powers making all the key decisions – it remains abidingly significant because of its truly global scale and because it involved a never-surpassed multiplicity of governmental and non-governmental actors.¹³

In the constellation the Great War had created it was simply impossible to create a radical 'new world order' anchored in a League with far-reaching authority. Nor, however, was the pivotal task to establish a new, viable global balance of power by imposing and then enforcing restrictive terms on the defeated powers. Either of these aspirations was in fact as elusive as it was counterproductive. Rather, the only realistic path towards a more sustainable postwar order could be charted by embarking on an *inclusive* and as

far as possible *balanced* negotiating and reordering process. For only such a process could generate mutually acceptable new ground-rules of international politics and lay the groundwork for what was most vital: a reformed, essentially *integrative* peace order, negotiated on terms that accommodated as far as possible the interests and expectations of all the relevant actors and could thus be regarded as *legitimate* not just the victors. Crucially, however, such a process could, at best, only be *initiated* at a peace conference immediately after the war; it then had to be *sustained* over time. In systemic terms, what had to be achieved above all was the construction of a novel Atlantic concert of liberal-democratic states at the core of the new global system and the league. To be effective, this concert had to include not only the United States, Britain and France but also Weimar Germany. It could eventually be extended to include Japan and other key powers as well, while the future of the Bolshevik regime was still unpredictable at this stage. But it still had to address the massive challenge of dealing with the self-determination claims of those who still found themselves under various forms of colonial rule and imperial domination. Within the international power-structures prevailing at the time, this problem was simply unsolvable in a mutually acceptable, non-violent manner. The recast yet persistent international hierarchies left their imprint on the League of the Victors that now came into being, and especially on its neo-imperial mandate system in and beyond the Middle East.¹⁴

Yet the fledgling Atlantic order of 1919 was not just established on shaky foundations. It was also a markedly *unfinished* system of the victors that lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the vanquished, and the Bolsheviks, and all those whose demands for self-determination had been rebuffed. Fundamentally, a massive chasm had been created between the liberal-progressive norms, rules and values the victors had proclaimed and the actual practices and outcomes of the peacemaking process. If it was not addressed, this chasm threatened to undermine whatever legitimacy the settlement and rules of 1919 had. In fact, double-standards if this kind would continue to mark all attempts to work towards a truly global liberal order throughout the long 20th century. It had proved impossible to create a more viable concert of democratic states that provided effective safeguards of peace by drawing in the fledgling German republic and binding it to *mutual* guarantees and commitments. The League came into being, not as an *inclusive* and truly *global* organisation but as an *exclusive* victors' institution. Thus, there were no effective mechanisms or ground-rules for initiating what would hence be most imperative: broader accommodation processes that could turn the truncated 'Versailles system' into a more durable and legitimate world order, which also included Weimar Germany, the other defeated powers and, eventually, the Soviet Union and all others who had remained excluded in 1919. In sum, the peacemaking efforts after the Great War did not yield the best possible compromise possible under adverse circumstances. Rather, the contested victors' peace of Paris could only mark a deeply fraught 'beginning of a beginning' of attempts to forge a sustainable liberal order for the long 20th century.¹⁵

But the outcomes of Paris did not invariably lead to the rise of Hitler, the destruction of order in the 1930s and ultimately another world war. The 1920s actually became, not a 'decade of illusions' but rather a remarkable period of progress, and learning, in the history of international politics – a period in which those who succeeded the peacemakers of Paris managed to draw consequences from their shortcomings and advance

significant, overall stabilising and *liberalising* reforms of the Versailles system. Pushed forward by key actors like Charles Hughes, Austen Chamberlain, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, they mainly found expression in the Washington Conference's agreements on naval arms control and a more forward-looking East Asian *status quo* in 1922 and, above all, the Locarno security pact, which fostered a reconfigured Euro-Atlantic concert that included Weimar Germany. These advances also created critical preconditions for a first flowering of efforts to create a novel transnational network or even 'society' of organisations and associations around the League committed to strengthening international law and liberal modes of international politics, reconciliation and development. Unfortunately, however, the successes of the 1920s could not be made sufficiently robust to withstand the shockwaves of the World Economic Crisis – which also turned into a massive crisis of liberal order.¹⁶

Descent into abysmal disorder and the transformative aftermath of the second world war

Why did the post-First World War order collapse so rapidly under the impact of Great Depression? Initially, the main liberal-democratic powers that were still committed to upholding the League and the essentially liberal order of the 1920s – Britain, France, and the western-orientated governments of Weimar Germany – never worked out a concerted response to the crisis. And, crucially, the only power that could have led such concerted efforts, the United States, now withdrew even more from international responsibilities. First under Hoover, then through Roosevelt's initial New Deal, it pursued a unilateral and more radically isolationist approach. This was to have far-reaching consequences.

What now escalated was doubtless the deepest crisis of liberal order in the long 20th century, which raised the stakes in every conceivable way. Western-oriented leaders and societies were forced into a struggle not only with Stalinist communism but also with the fascist, national socialist and authoritarian regimes that now openly challenged what remained of this order. And at the same time, they had to find ways to deal with ever more constricting domestic-democratic challenges and constraints that eventually made it very difficult to assume international commitments that would have been vital for salvaging the embattled order and preserving peace. Unquestionably, it was Hitler Germany that, aided by Mussolini's Italy, decisively destroyed the system of the 1920s and precipitated the Second World War – after Japan's hyper-imperialist militarists had already begun their aggressive war in China. But it is critical to note that, while Stalin pursued his own brutal industrial 'modernisation' in the Soviet Union, it was essentially the fact that the United States, Britain and like-minded powers lacked the political will or essential domestic unity to defend the remnants of the order of the 1920s. This gave the anti-liberal aggressors the room to manoeuvre to destroy it and to unleash the Second World War. First came the Japanese offensive in China in 1937, then, culminating from 1939, Hitler's onslaught on modern order.

Yet the very depth of this world crisis and the war's even more ferocious totality also created the conditions and engendered the deeper learning processes that proved critical in its aftermath. For what now occurred was a substantial further *development* of the

conceptual underpinnings and practical programmes to construct a no longer classically liberal but essentially *social-liberal* postwar order at every level – national, international and transnational. Unsurprisingly, the greatest war in history, which this time the Allied coalition waged until the Axis powers had unconditionally surrendered, was followed not by a stable settlement in its immediate aftermath. Rather an extended period of re-ordering and indeed learning unfolded, which echoed and yet went much further than what had occurred after 1918. Early US-led ambitions to create a new order for “one world” were eventually superseded by a markedly different international architecture, which *also* reflected the altered systemic constellation of the Cold War. What Roosevelt and the architects of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods System – notably Leo Pasvolksky, John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White – originally envisaged was, in essence, a comprehensive yet also markedly hierarchical postwar system in which a by now pre-eminent US superpower would set the rules in cooperation with Britain and the Soviet Union, and the principal victors then were to act, with China, as the world’s “four policemen”. Though never uncontested, this vision can indeed be seen as the fruit of decades of grappling with the requirements of modern order. In terms of international politics and law, as manifest in the new UN organisation and its security council, it went beyond the League of Nations and the liberal parameters envisioned after 1918. And so did, in financial and economic terms, the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Lessons were drawn from the pathologies of the 1930s and 1940s. Consequently, the overarching aim became to create a sturdier and more ambitious superstructure to guarantee peace and security both globally and regionally, address the financial and socio-economic root-causes of political instability, foster more even development, and provide new protections for individual human rights. But it soon became clear that these aspirations had been too far-reaching, and that they had been based on assumptions that turned out to be unrealistic. Chiefly, this held for the assumption that, through the strained compromises of Yalta and Potsdam, it would be possible to draw all the key powers, including the Soviet Union, into a new hegemonic concert with common ground-rules – and to maintain a basic cooperation with Stalin.¹⁷

Then, between 1947 and the late 1950s, a crucial transformative change occurred. The creation of the novel *Pax Atlantica* and fledgling Atlantic community was of course massively influenced by the escalating confrontation between the American and Soviet superpowers. But its underpinnings, ground-rules and political culture were also, on a deeper level, yet again the outgrowth of longer-term learning processes. While the United Nations became stifled by Cold War divisions, these processes gave rise to new, different approaches to collective security, peace preservation and inter- and transnational cooperation in the spheres of political, economic and social reconstruction, all intended to renew liberal democracy and what should be termed social-liberal market economy. The foundations of the new system were laid through the European Recovery Program, the subsequent Organization for European Economic Co-operation and, above all, the North Atlantic alliance. But the newly resilient concert of liberal democracies that now emerged – and became the key mechanism of liberal order – was the result of much deeper and broader transformation processes. New rules and understandings regarding common defence, democratic development and socio-economic order were cultivated within this concert and between the states and societies that became part of this order. And on the

European side of the Atlantic even more far-reaching were made, with decisive US support, to advance towards a supranational union on social-liberal premises. To a lesser yet still remarkable degree advances in this direction were also possible within America's East Asian alliance system – which contrasted sharply with what occurred in the self-proclaimed US sphere of influence in Latin America.¹⁸

The making of this unprecedented Atlantic – and East Asian – peace system of the post-Second World War era is of immense and indeed global significance in the broader history of modern liberal order. For this system essentially evolved into the closest approximation yet of what could be called the critical *constitutive nucleus* of a rule-based global peace order. This not only but it *essentially* depended on the willingness and capacity of the leading power within this system, the United States, to assume the role of a benevolent hegemon, a 'first among equals' in the evolving global architecture of peace and order. Indubitably, violations of its standards and norms occurred. Excessive Cold War ideologies gained ground. Distinctly illiberal measures were adopted, especially against communists and more radical socialists in the struggle against what now came to be termed communist 'totalitarianism', first during the witch-hunts of the McCarthy era, later against anti-Vietnam and anti-nuclear protest movements. Overall, however, the novel Atlantic system flourished and gained a remarkable degree of stability and legitimacy. And it had the potential to become the core element of a more sustainable global order – if ways could be found to apply its principles and ground-rules equitably on a global scale.¹⁹

In the formative stages of the Cold War, George F. Kennan, who became a key author of the initial US policy of international concertation *and* containment vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and 'world communism', had argued that the chief prerequisite not only for prevailing against Stalin *but also for ultimately creating a more viable world order* was to ensure that the system and values America and its allies represented would be maintained and cultivated in an exemplary manner. Kennan's conception clearly focused on what he regarded as the geopolitical 'centres of power' in Europe and East Asia. He saw Latin America and other parts of the world from a distinctly hierarchical vantage-point, which allowed for more draconian methods. Essentially, however, his approach was designed to strengthen the global attractiveness of the 'western model' and not only to contain Soviet influence but also to erode communism from within. Then, it would be possible to fashion a new order. Significantly, however, Kennan also remained profoundly sceptical about the capacity of the American republic and other liberal-democratic states to develop and pursue effective long-term strategies and enlightened public debate, which he deemed indispensable for fulfilling the massive world-political responsibilities they now faced. Such fundamental concerns seem newly pertinent in today's crisis-ridden world.²⁰

Liberal order and the dynamics of the global cold war

Yet Kennan's grand strategy could not convincingly address one pivotal question that now arose again, and with new urgency, in the second half of the long 20th century – in a transformative period that witnessed the last rearguard defence of the remaining 'classic' empires, the onset of mostly violent decolonisation processes and the globalisation

of a Cold War. It lay behind the struggle that now came to be fought not only by an American 'hyper-empire of liberty' and a Soviet 'hyper-empire of justice', and eventually a rising communist China, but also by countless other actors forced to choose sides – or declaring themselves non-aligned.²¹ And it was essentially threefold: (1) how far, and how, a viable and legitimate *global* peace order could not only be conceived but also created in a realistic manner?; (2) what kind of norms, rules and practices ought to govern this order – liberal, communist, progressive socialist or in some way authoritarian? and (3) how far could those norms, rules and practices be valid and applied equitably, around the world, and not just in certain privileged spheres? This question posed daunting challenges for political leaders in the 'Free World', especially for those at the helm of the American superpower, which now came to act as a markedly illiberal hegemon beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere.

At the outset of his short-lived threshold presidency, Kennedy affirmed his aspiration to globalise a US-led liberal order and draw 'the rising peoples' of the postcolonial sphere into it. He proclaimed that the 'center of freedom's defense' was the American 'network of world alliances', extending from NATO to SEATO, and that a central US task in the 1960s was to 'strengthen' the alliances that had been 'constructed' in the 1940s and 1950s. But his main responsibility was to 'promote the freedom doctrine'. Situating the United States 'on the side of liberty', Kennedy argued that 'particularly since the end of the Second World War, liberty has been winning out all over the globe'. Yet he also emphasised the 'great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe – Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East' where peoples sought 'an end to injustice, tyranny, and exploitation' but above all 'a beginning'. Such a new beginning, which he defined as making postcolonial states and societies more like the United States, Kennedy would seek to further through an Act for International Development, the Alliance for Progress in Latin America and other aspirational programmes. And he stressed that in order to gain global legitimacy the United States also 'finally' had to 'practice democracy at home, in all States, with all races' and 'protect the Constitutional rights of all citizens', regardless of their colour. Yet on all of these frontiers of freedom, Kennedy would not be able to make more than initial advances.²²

Following in his footsteps but fundamentally emulating Roosevelt, Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson held that it was America's duty to renew the bases of the *Pax Americana*, to take the lead in ushering in a new era of stability and prosperity not just in the United States and the 'free world' but also in 'developing continents'. He no longer viewed Khrushchev's Soviet Union but rather the expansionism of polycentric 'world communism' as the main challenge, particularly in the so-called 'Third World', acting on the premise that '[t]he world today is a vast battleground between two systems of thought and two philosophies of society'. And he shared the core liberal assumption that communism posed a fundamental 'totalitarian' threat to the pluralist and capitalist order the United States represented. This he saw in urgent need of reform, arguing that if the US political and economic system could not offer its citizens more equal opportunities for economic security, social development and racial equality, it would become even more vulnerable to communist influence and lose its authority both vis-à-vis its allies and in the developing world.²³

Consequently, major reform programmes in the domains of civil rights, social security and education, lay at the heart of Johnson's aspirational Great Society agenda, leading not only to the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, but also to the launch of 'war on poverty'. Then, Johnson came to pursue a 'New Deal for the World' and now declared a global 'war on poverty'. At the core, he saw the creation of a Great Society at home and the invigoration of international society, against communist ideologies yet against unregulated capitalism, as two aspects of an overarching endeavour to respond to 'the inescapable interdependence of us all in a world of modern weapons, communications, and close economic linkages'. Yet while Kennedy's actions had already begun to undercut US credibility in Latin America and among postcolonial nationalists in Africa and Southeast Asia, Johnson and his administration would go much further in undermining the legitimacy of its grand aspirations, and provoke an unprecedented corrosion of US leadership, by escalating the war in Vietnam. This war, and the massive protests it sparked across the world, came to overshadow their broader political aim of transforming Vietnam and the wider region through a Marshall Plan for Southeast Asia.²⁴

In many ways, the turbulent era of the global Cold War thus revealed stark intrinsic and structural limits of aspirations to globalise liberal modes of order; and it unquestionably revealed persistent inequities, double-standards, gaps between principles proclaimed and actions pursued, particularly in the geopolitical and ideological struggles in the Third World and what now is called, inadequately, the 'Global South'. This became an even starker problem when Kissinger held the reins of US foreign policy. Yet despite these obvious limitations, the emergence of the liberal-democratic Atlantic peace system – and to a lesser extent the advances made in America's alliance system in East Asia – stand out as remarkable achievements. They proved enduring precisely because it was based, however imperfectly, on longer-term policies substantiated through negotiations and debates between democratically accountable decision-makers. And they evolved again, and developed further, in the crisis-ridden 1970s, in the era of extending *détente* and the remarkably successful Helsinki process. Preceded by Brandt's *Ostpolitik* and then decisively influenced by the Finnish president Urho Kekkonen, this remarkable process not only ushered in a renaissance of liberal principles and conceptions of human rights and but also expanded their remit in the Eastern Bloc, affording dissident groups such as Charter 77 and the *Solidarność* movement new opportunities to invoke the Helsinki Accords in pursuit of their aims. And the social-liberal western order still proved resilient and capable of evolving in the more antagonistic 1980s, which eventually set the stage for qualitative changes that not only Gorbachev but also Reagan's second term brought.²⁵

This underlying capacity for learning and evolution can also be seen as the deeper reason for the comparative durability of the social-liberal Atlantic peace system and its complements, and for the successful ways in which its protagonists initially dealt with the revolutions of 1989 and the disintegration of its key rival power and system. Indeed, it should be stressed, there was thus a lot to build on, learn from and develop further in the aftermath of this third watershed of the long 20th century. Why, then, were the re-ordering processes that now began in many ways less successful than those after 1945? Why did 1989 not bring a triumphal transformation of world order on liberal premises?

From the caesura of 1989 to the deepening crisis of the post-cold war liberal order

When reassessing the *caesura* of 1989–1991 and the challenges that policy- and decision-makers confronted after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, one cardinal challenge emerged. In this special postwar constellation, it was more imperative for the victors than it had been for their predecessors in 1918 and 1945 not to become complacent and eschew the deeper lessons of the revolutionary changes. It was essential not merely conclude that the liberal side had triumphed, that history had come to an end and that all that had to be done now was to remake not only the formerly communist world in the West's image. Instead, while it was certainly plausible to build on the advances and rules of the liberal system the western-oriented partners had created, there was now a much harder task to confront, that of constructing, finally, a truly global system of order. Called for was a system that not only furnished rules, norms and mechanisms to cope with the conflicts and difficult transition processes that predictably marked the years after 1989 but also provided a framework for regulating the unprecedentedly dynamic globalisation process that now rapidly gained momentum.

But it was precisely because of how the Cold War had come to an end – in such marked contrast to the previous global wars – that the underlying assumptions and lessons that shaped not only western but also non-western approaches, designs and thinking about the postwar order in crucial respects *impeded* more substantial advances towards a more durable and legitimate global system. Above all, this was due to rather facile and self-serving notions of how inexorable the global expansion of liberal – and now increasingly *neoliberal* – modes and rules of political, economic and social order would be – and how beneficial for everyone they would prove, if given free rein, regardless of where one stood on the *de facto* highly asymmetrical playing-field of world politics. During an actually fleeting 'unipolar phase' after 1989 there were thus hardly any serious debates about alternative scenarios and more profound challenges in the wake of the postulated 'victory of western liberalism' – and ever more unfettered neoliberal capitalism.²⁶ This clearly placed decisive limits on the kind of deeper learning processes that were required at that stage. While demanding that all others, especially East Europeans and the successor states of the Soviet Union, yet also those who represented the rest of the non-western world learn from the west and adapt or even copy western modes and rules, leading decision-makers and wider publics in the west did not engage in anything approaching a substantial and self-critical re-evaluation of what they could learn from the East European revolutionaries, from other members of the 'international community', and from the past. Nor was there a deeper reflection about how they could reform and improve their own political and economic order. And all of this impeded more far-reaching efforts to work towards a more balanced and legitimate global order.²⁷

Yet although there was never any prospect to create a durable 'unipolar order' under its auspices, the American superpower and its key allies were nonetheless called upon to assume burdensome hegemonic responsibilities. Not least, these pertained to fostering global acceptance of liberal-democratic domestic and international rules. Further, new policies had to be developed to meet the crucial challenge of accommodating a struggling post-Soviet Russia – while recognising that this would be a drawn-out process, and

the limits of what could be achieved if there was no political will within Russia to face up critically to the past and seek a new place in the recast international order. Similar challenges arose, though on quite different premises, with a view to a Chinese power newly assertive after the watershed of the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989. More broadly, there was no new 'clash of civilisations'. But what clearly did emerge quite soon after 1989 were deeper *political* fault-lines that became apparent when the Cold War's structural strictures had disappeared and the new dynamics of neo-capitalist globalisation and political-cum-ideological rivalry not only brought accelerated growth but also novel pressures and divisions between those who set the rules and benefited most and those who fell behind and felt powerless.²⁸

Nonetheless, one should acknowledge significant achievements and constructive advances that were made at this juncture. Most noteworthy were the Euro-Atlantic process of German reunification as well as the seminal, albeit in crucial respects overly ambitious eastward extension of the European Union. No less significant were the fortification of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe through the Paris Charter of 1990 and the creation of the OSCE in 1994 – important advances that could build on the Helsinki process of the 1970s, whose broader significance for the 'long' 20th century thus has to be underscored. Equally important were the efforts to maintain the North Atlantic alliance and to extend it to those East European states that were eager to join it. And even the much harder process of trying to create, through the NATO-Russia Founding Act and subsequent agreements, a new framework for the heavily burdened relations with post-Soviet Russia deserves to be mentioned here.

It is probably fair to say that in the formative years between 1991 and 2014 not enough attention was paid to this crucial longer-term task. Especially two key questions were neglected: how to offer Russia realistic incentives for a longer-term strategic cooperation; and how to deal appropriately with a former superpower undergoing painful internal changes and nursing resentment and feelings of humiliation. But any meaningful progress towards a new cooperative framework or Russia's 'integration' into a broader post-Cold War order obviously depended on the willingness of both sides to take substantive steps in this direction, and on a basic compatibility of both sides' underlying strategic rationales and self-conceptions. And a sober assessment leads to the conclusion that, after a relatively brief window of opportunity, there was no real political will to pursue a constructive relationship on the Russian side. Particularly once Putin began to consolidate his regime, there was no longer any realistic possibility of accommodating his oligo-imperialist pursuits within a rule-based framework of order.²⁹

Even more than with a view to Russia, it had long been assumed by many leading policymakers and analysts in the West that by drawing China into the neo-liberal, increasingly hyper-capitalist economic-cum-political globalisation processes that soon gained a new dynamic of their own after 1989 it would not only be possible to promote a sea-change in the Chinese economy, towards capitalism, but also foster political reforms, broadly in the direction of liberal democracy. Yet the latter assumptions and expectations were essentially proven wrong, the more obviously the more the communist leadership in Beijing managed to consolidate its power and chart its own path of combining a capitalist economy with an authoritarian 'communist' political regime. Hence arose the question that for a long time was not addressed with sufficient depth and clairvoyance – how

to deal with a rising authoritarian Chinese economic and strategic superpower whose leading figures, and none more than eventually Xi Jinping, made ever clearer that they were unwilling to abide by ‘western rules’ and willing to challenge them, particularly when it came to Taiwan and the future of the geopolitical order of East Asia, yet also on a global scale.³⁰

In sum, for all the notable achievements it brought, the initial post-Cold War era must be regarded as one of the most consequential periods of ‘limited transformation’ and learning in the sphere of international order in the long 20th century. Despite the qualifications made above, this had a markedly limiting impact on negotiating a tenable place for Russia and China in a reformed global order – though one should also recognise the limits of influencing internal developments in both states and societies. And it had a similarly limiting impact on an even more complex task that can only be mentioned here in all brevity: that of initiating a serious process of not only reforming the United Nations but also defining new, non-hierarchical relations between the ‘Global North’ and the ‘Global South’. In both respects, it would be difficult to overstate the massive repercussions of the Bush Jr. administration’s hegemonic-imperial overreach in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, which culminated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. For this not only corroded America’s global authority, and the Atlantic alliance but also eroded the wider legitimacy of – not only western – liberal understandings of human rights and international politics.³¹

Final perspectives. The disintegration of liberal order at the end of the long 20th century – or its social-liberal renewal?

Roughly two decades later, at what could well be the dusk of the long 20th century, a far deeper crisis not only of liberal precepts but indeed of global order has arisen. Two closely interlinked phenomena have overshadowed all earlier ordering advances: the erosion of international law and the norms and practices that undergirded the rule-based international order that could be established after 1945, however incomplete it remained; and a regression to notions and practices of unbridled power politics. Under Biden, the United States had reassumed a robust liberal hegemonic role. But Trump’s second presidency has not only come to pose the gravest threat to the future of the north Atlantic alliance since its creation; it has also cast the world into a hitherto unimaginable spiral of destabilisation. The European Union and a fraying community of democratic states thus face not just Russia’s unrelenting aggression and the systemic competition of an authoritarian China; they also confront an unprecedented American challenge. This confluence of developments has also affected the ‘Global South’, notably provoking distinctly illiberal populist tendencies among the so-called BRICS states. And it has corroded global order at a historical ‘time of turning’ when, arguably, more than ever before a multiplicity of interconnected global challenges – from international security to equitable development, from climate change to politically and economically driven migration – urgently require not less cooperation but indeed *more* concerted global responses and, crucially, more effective *common* rules and mechanisms of world politics.

At present, however, the world is clearly further away from a unified global system, let alone a system on social-liberal premises, than at any time since the end of the Cold War. The United Nations and the other global institutions that were created after the Second World War are paralysed and dysfunctional in crucial respects. And so are the mechanisms that were eventually established to provide more targeted 'global governance', from the G7 to the G20. All of them are in dire need of substantial reform, while the very conditions of worsening disorder that have caused their paralysis make such reforms impossible, at least in the foreseeable future.

Yet a complete disintegration of global order is by no means inevitable. Despite the destructive impact of Trump's, Putin's and Xi Jinping's varieties of rule-defying power politics, and the general rise of antiliberal forces across the world, there is no inexorable slide towards a world in which the strongest powers simply impose their will. Alas, the descent into this kind of neo-imperialist politics is likely to get worse, and produce more conflict and chaos, before serious steps can be taken to reconstruct a more sustainable order. And fundamental reorientations are indeed urgently needed. If they want to prevent a longer-term dominance of Trumpism, those in Europe and America who still believe in its abiding value have to intensify efforts to reinforce the battered Euro-Atlantic political and security community – and to strengthen its European pillar – so that it can eventually be renewed 'beyond Trump'. At the same time, they have to do far more to make democratic states more resilient against mounting external and internal challenges. Similar imperatives apply to those who seek to reinforce trans-Pacific ties of collective security. However daunting it may seem, the guiding aim should be to reinvigorate central elements of the long 20th century's liberal order, to make them more robust and thus to prepare the ground for a future moderation of systemic rivalries *from a position of strength*. The Russian aggression in Ukraine, which may well expand into Eastern Europe, and China's aggressive policies against Taiwan must be contained as forcefully as possible. But the longer-term aim should be to forge more constructive relations with these powers again, yet only once they are willing to accept indispensable international ground-rules.

But there is an even more fundamental challenge. Any more tangible advances towards a sustainable *global* rule-based order especially depend on the willingness of western decision-makers and wider societies to embark on even harder learning processes. They have to recognise deeply entrenched patterns of complacency, ideological propaganda and self-serving illusions, which have reached new heights in the era of authoritarian populism. And, crucially, they must draw deeper lessons both from the transformative reordering processes after 1945 and from the missed opportunities of the more limited efforts after 1989. The critical longer-term task is to engage in a more inclusive and egalitarian process between the 'Global North' and the equally diverse 'Global South', or rather the 'Global Majority', to lay new foundations for an actually functioning global concert system for an inexorably interdependent 21st-century world. Such a concert should be open to all states and societies willing to commit themselves to robust rules and practices of collective security, the protection of the integrity of states, the peaceful settlement of disputes and more equitable social-liberal rules of trade and economic relations. This also requires more realistic bridge-building efforts towards those states and societies that are now pursuing authoritarian paths, or are tempted by them. In

the longer run, what could thus be developed, and institutionalised, is a new, more integrative system of regional and global cooperation for the 21st century.

Ultimately, one of the most important lessons of the long 20th century is that the deeper and more disruptive a crisis becomes, the more pronounced can also be the potential for more substantive learning and renewal. In the current world crisis, applying this lesson calls not just for resisting the politics of “might makes right”; it commands a more profound and a more genuinely global remaking of international order – as the only realistic way to escape from today’s downward spiral. Above all, it calls for more sustained efforts in and beyond the Euro-Atlantic sphere to reinvigorate intergovernmental and transnational cooperation between liberal-democratic states, particularly in the realm of collective security. It calls for more concerted efforts to address the root causes of political polarisation and the erosion of liberal-democratic government. And it indeed calls for more effective global measures to regulate a hyper-capitalist ‘neo-liberal’ disorder that not only deepens dangerous inequalities in ‘more developed’ economies but also creates ever greater global inequities. Quintessentially, then, what should be envisioned, and pursued, to salvage global order and foster genuine peace at the end of the long 20th century is nothing less than a social-liberal *New Deal for the World* of the 21st.

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