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# The International System and Models of Global Order

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## **Abstract:**

The international system is presented as a three-storey construct, with the international governance institutions at the top, states in the middle, and civil and political society and social movements at the bottom. Within this construct, four types of globalism contend for hegemony today: the liberal international order; revolutionary internationalism; mercantilist nationalism; and conservative (or sovereign) internationalism. Each has its own logic, but at various points normative principles and interests intersect with the logic of the others. This analytical model allows points of contention to be identified, but it also allows for areas of agreement to be recognised. It also suggests that what appears to be an increasingly chaotic international system can be understood to be one in transition from a previously hegemonic structure to a more pluralistic one in which the normative validity of others can be acknowledged. This opens up the potential for a more open type of international politics, and one which is at the same time more balanced.

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International politics today is often characterised as chaotic and disorderly, but such a view implies that we have moved away from a more ordered system in an earlier period. This may be the case, but to understand the general trend of international politics today we need to understand the character of the international system. An analytical exercise of this sort can take many different forms, including an overview of the various competing models of the system (realism, liberal internationalism, constructivism and others).<sup>1</sup> This paper takes a rather different tack and instead examines what could be called the ‘software’ of international politics by identifying four models of globalism, analogous to computer operating systems. By presenting this four-fold analytical model, we thereby introduce the grounds for a more pluralistic understanding of international affairs. Instead of the monism prevalent since the end of the Cold War in 1989, this approach suggests the need for compromise and dialogue between different models of world order. By providing an analytical framework, some of the analytical confusion that besets analysis of contemporary international politics can be obviated. This does not mean that the system thereby becomes any more ordered, but it does mean that thinking can be more systematic. Observers at least have some sort of analytical frame in which policy analysis can take place.

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<sup>1</sup> This approach is complementary to the works, for example, of Amitav Acharya, ‘After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 8 September 2017, <https://www.ethicsandinternationalaffairs.org/2017/multiplex-world-order/>; and Trine Flockhart, ‘The Coming Multi-Order World’, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2016, pp. 3-30.

## The international system

Drawing on English School thinking, the international system can be envisaged as a three-level construct.<sup>2</sup> At the top, there are the developing apparatus and processes of global governance (termed the secondary institutions of international society by the English School), with the United Nations at its apex and complemented by an increasingly ramified network of international law and normative expectations. The English School distinguishes between primary institutions of international society, comprising sovereignty, territoriality, balance of power, war, international law, diplomacy and nationalism, and these European-generated elements were expanded to the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> The so-called secondary institutions include not only the United Nations but also other bodies that seek to generalise solidarist practices in a plural international system.<sup>4</sup> They cover the institutions of international financial governance, derived initially from the Bretton Woods system comprising the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the system of global economic governance, notably the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Here also are the international legal and environmental covenants, as well as those covering the rules of war and international humanitarian practices. These secondary institutions are by definition universal, whereas the primary institutions generate practices of exclusion, with the western core imposing its own 'standards of civilisation' and acting as the gatekeeper, notably in the context of colonialism.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the secondary institutions are of western origin, but their development has been governed from the outset less by expansion than by mutual constitution.<sup>6</sup> For example, the establishment of the UN drew on various western traditions as well as Soviet, Chinese, Islamic and other ideas. As the secondary institutions strengthen and become more genuinely universal they threaten accustomed patterns of western hegemony, but at the same time provide the sinews for order after the waning of this hegemony. English School thinking suggests that the international state system evolved out of institutions like the state, territoriality, the balance of power, diplomacy and sovereignty, which formed in Europe and then expanded through colonialism and then revolutionary nationalism across the world to become truly universal, whereas many of the institutions of international society were created by the Allies during the war and reflected western values, and were at first relatively exclusive. Without challenging this genealogy, it should be noted that from the first a universalist dynamic was embedded not only in the primary institutions of international society, but also in the top-level secondary institutions, which have since become generalised as the institutions of 'global governance' and have become more delineated and gained in authority.

This is where we move to the second level. Beneath the solidarity of international governance institutions we have competing states whose relations in English School thinking are governed by the primary institutions of international society. In the original English School formulation, the international society of states devised in Europe expanded in

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<sup>2</sup> For an earlier analysis of parts of this model, see Richard Sakwa, *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 38-68.

<sup>3</sup> Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Barry Buzan, *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations* (Cambridge, Polity, 2014), pp. 32-6.

<sup>5</sup> See Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of "Civilization" in International Society* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> This is explored by the various authors in Tim Dunne and Christian Reut-Smith (eds), *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017).

successive waves to encompass the whole world. This really was an ‘expansion’, enlarging a system into which Russia, with its characteristic ambivalence, was soon incorporated.<sup>7</sup> However, the original expansion model is based on a single level system, but with the development of the ‘secondary institutions’ and their associated sharing of sovereignty on functional issues (such as the environment), the single-planed model becomes inadequate.

Hedley Bull’s classic study *The Anarchical Society* stresses the elements of cooperation and regulation in relations between states, highlighting the way that transnational ideas generate norms and interests that are institutionalised in the form of international organisations and rules.<sup>8</sup> Bull explicitly did not ‘place major emphasis upon international organisations such as the United Nations’, and instead found ‘the basic causes of such order as exists in world politics’ in the ‘institutions of international society that arose before these international organisations were established’.<sup>9</sup> Bull’s approach retains much of the traditional thinking about a state-centric world, but this is tempered by his view that states have common interests that can be best advanced through the cooperative institutions of international society.<sup>10</sup> These are the structures of universalism and inter-state cooperation that became increasingly ramified after the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that I will use the term international society, a broad conceptualisation of the institutions of global governance. After the end of the Cold War they were anticipated to gain greater autonomy and substance. Instead, as Cold War bipolarity gave way to unipolarity, they were eclipsed by great power politics and hegemonic practices.

The third level of the international system encompasses a broad range of civil society organisations as well as the media and other forms of societal intervention. Hard-line realists typically dismiss the role that international organisations play in international politics, and even more so sub-state movements and processes. However, in the era of neo-liberalism and globalisation these can have a substantive impact on global processes. The peace movement of the 1980s failed to prevent the deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles to Europe, but fears of re-awakening the mass anti-nuclear movement are part of the calculation of responses to the end of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement in 2019. Above all, pressure for drastic decarbonisation in the face of the climate catastrophe is now part of the calculus of all rational governments. The upsurge populist movements and sentiments act as a warning to the complacency of entrenched elites. Civil society may well take its revenge on the widening inequalities of the neo-liberal era and reshape our thinking about international order.

## Models of global order

It is in this context that four types of globalism have shaped international politics in the post-1945 era. By globalism I mean ‘software’ systems that provide a consistent set of norms about the correct and most appropriate conduct of international affairs. Globalism is the claim that a particular set of norms and institutions have universal validity. It is not to be confused

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<sup>7</sup> Iver B. Neumann, ‘Entry into International Society Reconceptualised: The Case of Russia’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2011, pp. 463-484.

<sup>8</sup> Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977/1995). For a recent analysis, see Buzan, *An Introduction*.

<sup>9</sup> Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>10</sup> For the articulation of a less statist ontology of international society than Hedley Bull’s, see Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: a Comparative International Analysis*, reissue with a new introduction by Barry Buzan and Richard Little (London, Routledge, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005) identifies a dense network of ‘government networks’ that increasingly coordinate cross-border cooperation.

with globalisation, which is a particular technological, communicative, economic and cultural process that cuts across the various models of world order, although populists and other critics tend to confuse the two. The models are not tied to a specific space but to a way of doing international politics and thus represent world ‘orders’. The four models are ideal types, and the practice of international affairs typically draws from a range of repertoires that are not tied to a single model. States can choose elements from the different models, although the character of a regime and its place in international affairs will predispose it to apply one operating system relatively consistently to the exclusion of others.

### *Liberal international order*

The first is the US-led liberal international order, which was born in the early years of the twentieth century and then formulated by Woodrow Wilson in terms of a commitment to an Atlantic-based system of universal order. The liberal international order is based on an expansive dynamic of universal rules and economic interactions. This has been the most vigorous international order of the modern era, transforming much of the world in its image. The liberal international order combines military, economic and political (normative) sub-orders, each operating according to a specific dynamic but coalescing to create a polymorphic and energetic international order.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to much analysis, this order evolves with the changing character of international politics in any particular era. Thus the post-war liberal international order up to the end of the Cold War in 1989 was shaped by the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union and its promotion of an alternative model of world order. The second phase between 1989 and 2014 was characterised by the apparently limitless opportunities opened up by unipolarity. In the absence of a coherent alternative, the liberal international order became radicalised in at least five ways: the Hegelian, associated with the discourse of the ‘end of history’; the Kantian, with the extreme emphasis on human rights; the Hobbesian, with numerous ill-judged military interventions intended, among other things, to advance democracy in the world; the Hayekian, which represented the triumph of neo-liberal thinking and the disembedding of market from social relations; and the cultural victory of social liberalism accompanied by the social fragmentation associated with identity politics.<sup>13</sup> Some of this radicalisation was the natural result of the absence of a viable competitor, allowing the inherent character of the liberal international order to be developed to its full extent; but some of it was hubristic, exposing a dark exclusivity and intolerance of other social orders and traditional life patterns.<sup>14</sup>

In the third phase, the one in which we now find ourselves, the expansive liberal order met its limits both domestically (in the rise of national populism and a revived leftist internationalism) and in international affairs, in the emergence of coherent alternative models of world order. In part this reflects the broader shift of economic power from the West to the East, but also from the larger failure of the expanding US-led liberal international order to find ways to incorporate the periphery without the former outsiders fearing for the loss of

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<sup>12</sup> For analysis of the three discrete sub-elements of the liberal international order, see Malcolm Chalmers, *Which Rules? Why there is no Single ‘Rules-Based International System’*, London, Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper, April 2019, <https://rusi.org/occasional-papers/Which-Rules-Why-There-Is-No-Single-Rules-Based-International-System>.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Sakwa, ‘The International System and the Clash of New World Orders’, in Peter W. Schulze (ed.), *Multipolarity: The Promise of Disharmony* (Frankfurt/New York, Campus Verlag, 2018), pp. 27-51.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Pabst, *Liberal World Order and its Critics: Civilisational States and Cultural Commonwealths* (London, Routledge, 2018).

their identity. In the Russian case resistance in the end took the form of a New Cold War, while in the case of China long-term civilisational contradictions have re-emerged.

Henry Kissinger argues that the vitality of an international order depends on the balance it strikes between legitimacy and power, with both subject to evolution and change. However, he warns ‘When that balance is destroyed, restraints disappear, and the field is open to the most expansive claims and most implacable actors; chaos follows until a new system of order is established’.<sup>15</sup> The Versailles settlement in his view placed excessive emphasis on the legitimacy component and the appeal to shared values, and by ignoring the element of power effectively provoked German revisionism.<sup>16</sup> The argument was made earlier by E. H. Carr in his *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, which in his view prepared the way for renewed conflict.<sup>17</sup> A similar problem applies today.<sup>18</sup> In the cold peace years between 1989 and 2014 the stick was bent too far towards the legitimacy (values) side, and then after 2014 the balance within the liberal international order is increasingly shifting towards the power component, as seen in various sanctions regimes.

In the post-Cold War era the liberal international order effectively claimed to be synonymous with order itself. The corollary is that international system as a whole came to be seen as the extension of domestic politics into the international domain. In the post-communist era this gave rise to what can be called democratic internationalism.<sup>19</sup> In other words, after 1989 both the power and the legitimacy components of liberal internationalism became radicalised. Exaggerated claims to hegemony undermined its claims to universality and in the end provoked resistance. In our three-storied model of the international system, the institutions of global governance are held effectively to be the property of one of the competing orders. It is this claim to universality that was challenged by proponents of alternative models of globalism.

### *Transformative (revolutionary) internationalism*

The second type of globalism is the one represented until 1991 by the Soviet Union and its allies, which for a time in the 1950s included China. The Soviet Union from the beginning represented an unstable combination of socialist nationalism and revolutionary internationalism, but with the consolidation of Stalin’s rule the former predominated. With the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1991, the challenge of revolutionary internationalism largely disappeared, although there remain some echoes of the old model in the international system today. At the same time, new sources for the transformational renewal of the international system are emerging, notably the climate emergency. The meaning of revolutionary transformation, of course, in this context has changed from the old Leninist idea of the forcible seizure of power towards the more Gramscian notion of the transformation of social relations, beginning above all in the lower level of our three-story edifice, the arena of civil society and cultural norms. The climate emergency demands new

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London, Allen Lane, 2014), p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, Reissued with a New Introduction and additional material by Michael Cox (London, Palgrave, 2001 [1939]).

<sup>18</sup> As I argued some time ago. Richard Sakwa, “New Cold War” or Twenty Years’ Crisis?: Russia and International Politics’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2, March 2008, pp. 241-67.

<sup>19</sup> The term comes from Nikolai Sokov, ‘The Putin-Trump Summit: In Helsinki, Three Worldviews Will Clash’, *The National Interest*, 15 July 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/putin-trump-summit-helsinki-three-worldviews-will-clash-25766>.

forms of social organisation and a thorough rethinking of growth-led models of economic development. Decarbonisation will change not only technological but also social relations. Emerging disruptive digital technologies and biotechnologies are already changing the way that people live and work, and we are only at the beginning of this new revolution. In the end, a new form of revolutionary internationalism may be the only answer to the survival of humanity on this planet.

This type of globalism returns to the aspirations voiced by Mikhail Gorbachev and others at the end of the Cold War for a qualitative transformation of international politics. Realists denounce this transformational aspiration as hopelessly idealistic and unrealistic, and they have powerful arguments to support their case.<sup>20</sup> However, the absence of ideational and institutional innovation at the end of the Cold War only perpetuated Cold War practices, which after 2014 re-emerged in full force to divide Europe once again and to roil the world. The prospect of some sort of Greater European partnership was wholly realistic, and in the end probably essential to avoid a renewed bout of Cold War. The failure (so far) of ideas for some sort of European confederation prompted attempts to give institutional form to the political subjectivity of Eurasia and the attempt to delineate some sort of political community for East Asia and Europe in the Greater Eurasia Partnership (GEP).<sup>21</sup>

More broadly, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), established in Bandung in 1955, has gained a new vitality to oppose the re-emergence of bloc politics and to give voice to countries overshadowed by the return to great power relations in international affairs. ‘Nonalignment 2.0’ has been advanced as the keystone of India’s foreign policy in the new era.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, rampant militarism and unchecked arms spending, accompanied by the breakdown in the strategic arms control regime inherited from the Cold War, is provoking the return of active peace movements. The long-term stagnation in middle class and worker incomes accompanied by the erosion of the physical and social infrastructure in the advanced capitalist democracies has prompted a new wave of leftist radicalism. The question of socialism is once again on the agenda. In short, this transformative model of globalism has deep roots in civil society and is forcing change in states and the institutions of global governance. It may well represent a revolution in international affairs as profound as any provoked by world wars and economic crises.

### *Mercantilist nationalism*

The third type of globalism is gaining increasing traction today. This is the transactional and mercantilist approach adopted by Donald J. Trump and the various national populist movements of our time.<sup>23</sup> For Trump the international sphere is simply the extension of the market into the larger domain, where a zero-sum logic predominates and in which there is a ruthless battle for market share. The strong become stronger, while the weak endure what they must. There is no room for multilateral agencies or international alliances, which in

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<sup>20</sup> William C. Wohlforth and Vladislav Zubok, ‘An Abiding Antagonism: Realism, Idealism, and the Mirage of Western-Russian Partnership after the Cold War’, *International Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2017, pp. 405-19.

<sup>21</sup> Glenn Diesen, *Russia’s Geoeconomic Strategy for a Greater Eurasia* (London, Routledge, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, Sadanand Dhume, Richard Fontaine and Teresita Scheffer, *Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century*, Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 March 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/03/12/nonalignment-2.0-foreign-and-strategic-policy-for-india-in-twenty-first-century-event-3587>.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (London, Pelican, 2018).

Trump's view only constrains the US. Values are humbug, everything is transactional, and there is no need for democracy promotion. This is a stark model of Westphalian internationalism, harking back to an earlier era before 1914 when the first era of globalisation came into contradiction with statist Social-Darwinism. The national interests of sovereign states predominated, and in part the First World War represented a revolt against the erosion of state sovereignty by market relations. Today, this logic is reprised in the arguments of radical Brexiteers in the UK, and in the sovereigntist movements in continental Europe, notably in Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France, Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands and Matteo Salvini's Northern League (La Liga) in Italy.

There is an extensive literature arguing that populism emerges when issues of social concern fail to be addressed by existing elites.<sup>24</sup> This helps explain why Salvini, like Benito Mussolini, moved from left to right. Salvini argues 'Ironically, I see more leftist values in the European right than in some left-wing parties; these parties and these movements are those that today defend workers, those who lead right battles. Thus, I do not see anything strange in looking for a dialogue with whoever today embodies the resistance to this wrong Europe'.<sup>25</sup> Russia is presented as the defender of a more conservative and traditional representation of Europe, and thus a strange alignment of Moscow and neo-nativist European national-populists has been forged. Russia thus returned to its nineteenth century manifestation as the defender of conservative cultural values and legitimate government; anti-liberal and authoritarian. This representation is at most only partially accurate, but in conditions of New Cold War, Russia was certainly looking for friends wherever it could find them, especially if it could help undermine the unity required for the biannual renewal of European Union (EU) sanctions.

The revolt against globalisation took place in the very countries who had taken the lead in outsourcing jobs and services. The benefits of globalisation had been spectacularly badly distributed, and while lifting millions out of poverty in China, destroyed the industrial heartlands of the advanced capitalist democracies while allocating increased wealth to the rich. This is accompanied by a cultural revulsion against not only globalisation but also the apparently heedless cosmopolitanism with which it became associated. This is why the *policies* advanced by elites in the Anglo-Saxon world are so readily dismissed, and instead the marginalised masses increasingly look for *meaning*.<sup>26</sup>

The putative defection of the US from the liberal international order that it had done so much to create was at first welcomed by the Russian elite as a vindication of its conservative stance, but it soon became clear that Trump's mercantilist nationalism has no room for allies or even friends, and that it lacks the intellectual or political resources to challenge the US national security establishment. Because of the Russiagate collusion allegations Trump had a fraught relationship with some of the security agencies, but overall the Trumpian insurgency quickly made peace with what Michael Glennon calls the 'Trumanite state', the vast Cold War military and security apparatus.<sup>27</sup> Russia was once again left out in the cold. It was not alone, and America's European allies faced the unprecedented

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<sup>24</sup> Notably, Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London, Verso, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Alessandro Madron, 'Lega, il salto di Salvini: Dai Comunisti padani all'amicizia con l'estrema destra', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 15 December 2013, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2013/12/15/lega-il-voltafaccia-di-salvini-dai-comunisti-padani-allamicizia-con-lestrema-destra-ue/813511/>.

<sup>26</sup> This was supplied by the Trumpian slogan of 'Make America great again', and the Brexiteer slogan 'Take back control'; they are meaningless but, paradoxically, offer meaning.

<sup>27</sup> Michael J. Glennon, *National Security and Double Government* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).



situation in the post-war era of having to give substance to the idea of ‘strategic autonomy’.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, they talk of chaos in the international system but in fact the crisis is more localised. It reflects the loss of hegemony and strains in the liberal international order, and in particular in the Atlantic power system. A rogue America threatens to spread this chaos globally.

### *Conservative (sovereign) internationalism*

The fourth type of globalism is the one now associated with Russia, China and their allies in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). This model of conservative internationalism emphasises sovereign decision-making by nation states, but it also understands the importance of internationalism. As in the two-level European Union, where the Commission and its agencies exercise elements of supranationalism while the member states retain large areas of inter-governmental autonomy in decision-making, so the international system in this sovereign internationalism model operates on the three levels of the international system presented earlier. For conservative internationalists it is the middle floor that is the most important (for Trumpians it is the only one that matters), but this does not preclude a strong normative commitment to the secondary institutions of international society on the top floor, including as we noted earlier the UN and the whole ramified network of international legal, economic, environmental and social governance.

Although many of these bodies were sponsored by the liberal globalists, exponents of the conservative model of globalism insist that they do not, as it were, belong to them. As far as sovereign internationalists are concerned, drawing in part on the Yalta principles defended by the Soviet Union, they belong to all of humanity. On the middle floor there are the competing states, representing the type of globalism defended by Trump and his ilk, for whom the institutions of global governance are little more than a nuisance. Conservative internationalists tend not to have much time for independent civil society activism, since they emphasise the legitimacy of legally-constituted governments, and strongly reject democracy promotion activities sponsored by outside powers. Nevertheless, given the need to pre-empt popular uprisings and ‘colour revolutions’, they pay close attention to popular moods.

Sovereign internationalists recognise the importance of global governance institutions to manage economic and social processes, and increasingly to deal with the climate crisis and digital innovations, notably cyber-attacks and information management. Their internationalism is more than instrumental, although defenders of this position are certainly not willing to cede extensive supranational powers to international society. We are still a long way from creating a world government, but there remains a constant dynamic (as in the EU) between the two levels. In other words, contrary to the common charge of liberal internationalists that this model represents a regression to non-cooperative Westphalian statism, in fact this model of world order espouses a non-hegemonic and more traditional form of internationalism. It rejects the democratic internationalism promoted by post-Cold War liberal internationalism, based on the expansionist logic of an order that essentially claims to have ready-made solutions to problems of peace, governance and development.

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<sup>28</sup> European Union, *Shared Vision: Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, pp. 4, 9, 19, 45, 46, <http://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en>. For an examination, see Mark Leonard and Jeremy Shapiro (eds), *Strategic Sovereignty: How Europe Can Regain the Capacity to Act* (London, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019), [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ecfr\\_strategic\\_sovereignty.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ecfr_strategic_sovereignty.pdf).

Instead, the emphasis is on diplomacy between sovereign subjects, although this does not preclude commitment to the norms embedded in the institutions of global governance.

In recent years sovereign internationalism has been at the heart of the new regionalism. The Charter of the SCO adopted in June 2001, for example, declared its commitment to the principles of international law represented by the UN and stressed the ‘mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial independence of states and inviolability of state borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas’.<sup>29</sup> Similar principles are upheld by the BRICS states, and are the bedrock of ASEAN and other regional organisations. The strongest manifestation of this conservative internationalism can be found in the revived RIC (Russia-India-China) triangle, first outlined by the Russian foreign minister of the time, Yevgeny Primakov, in 1996. It is the counterpart of the idea of multipolarity. Chinese commentators stress China’s partnership diplomacy, with a network of over 100 partners representing a new type of diplomacy and reflecting China’s version of non-alignment. The IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) Dialogue Forum formed in 2003 sought to change the balance of power by reforming the UN and reordering the international system, and although its efforts achieved little the initiative demonstrated that democratic states were as interested in global institutional rebalancing as much as their more authoritarian counterparts.<sup>30</sup>

Sovereign internationalism is open to four main critiques. First, while the agenda of interventionism may have been used instrumentally and irresponsibly by the Western powers, the necessity of intervention when warranted by grave human rights and other abuses has now been formalised by the UN in the 2005 Responsibility to Protect protocol, to which Russia and other countries have signed up to.<sup>31</sup> Conservative internationalists appear trapped between their commitment to sovereignty and internationalism and have no coherent answer about the balance to be drawn between the two in any particular situation. However, the two principles are far from incompatible. China, for example, has been one of the main contributors to UN peace-keeping operations and now positions itself as the defender of globalisation.

Second, in a thoughtful defence of the liberal world order, Andrei Kortunov (the director general of the Russian International Affairs Council) argued that it represented the principles of rationality, normativity and openness, and that no alternative could begin to match its dynamism. He insisted that ‘the crisis of political liberalism does not necessarily entail a parallel crisis of the liberal world order’.<sup>32</sup> He proved mistaken in that prediction, and his survey of alternatives (the restoration of empires, the imposition of a single system of values like the communism of old or the global caliphate, or collapse into warring states) failed to examine the whole gamut of alternatives, as outlined in this paper. Nevertheless, the taint of cynicism and opportunism cannot be easily removed from the sovereign internationalist position. The right to break rules may well be an attribute of a great power, but liberal internationalism at least represented a serious attempt to constrain such behaviour.

The third critique is the most simple and yet perhaps the hardest to address, namely that behind the ostensibly attractive notion of a pluralism of systems and orders in the

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<sup>29</sup> *Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, 15 June 2001, Article 2.

<sup>30</sup> Obert Hodzi, ‘“Empty Bravado or Hopeful Illusions”: Rising Democratic Powers and Reordering of the International System’, *International Politics*, Vol. 56, No. 4, August 2020, pp. 444-56.

<sup>31</sup> For the Russian case, see Derek Averre and Lance Davies, ‘Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4, 2015, pp. 813-34.

<sup>32</sup> Andrei Kortunov, ‘The Inevitable, Weird World’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4, Oct.-Dec. 2016, pp. 8-19, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Inevitable-Weird-World-18385>.

international system, there lurks the simple defence of authoritarian systems. This argument is advanced by the burgeoning literature on the emergence of some sort of ‘authoritarian international’, in which states opposed to the liberal international order align to defend their abuse of power in what has been ‘authoritarian regionalism’.<sup>33</sup> Many of the criticisms are pertinent, but the loose use of the concept of ‘autocracy’ and neglect of the power system at the heart of the US-led liberal international order weakens the force of their arguments. Conservative internationalism may well turn out to be more pacific and more developmental than most of its alternatives.

This brings us to the fourth critique, the fundamental question of ‘good governance’. The term certainly contains a host of normative assumptions, yet the idea of the rule of law, defensible property rights, informational openness and the adequate defence of human dignity from oppressive authority, are not just the concern of the liberal international order, but too often have been rejected as just another manifestation of Western imperialism. Revolutionary Marxists had earlier thrown out the baby of civil society with the bathwater of capitalist exploitation, so too some of the more particularist of the sovereign internationalists are too quick to reject standards of governance when in fact their commitment to internationalism would only be strengthened by recognition of governance problems. In certain international aspects this has been recognised, and the China-led multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), for example, has adopted rigorous and transparent lending criteria. The rejection of the false universalism propounded by too many of the liberal internationalists does not mean that there are not universal values embedded in the top level of the international system. This is not the exclusive reserve of the liberal international order but part of the patrimony of humanity. Implementation everywhere is patchy, but defenders of sovereign internationalism are particularly challenged to live up to their stated commitments.

### **Solidarism, hegemony and neo-revisionism**

The models of globalism outlined above suggest that liberal hegemony is not a necessity for the development of international society or for internationalism more broadly. This framework outlines a model of pluralism in international system whose key value is pluralism itself. This is a pluralism founded on the belief that each state has to resolve its own challenges, and that historical experience cannot be transplanted from one context to another, the assumption of the democracy promotion activities of the expansive liberal international order. This does not mean that comparative lessons cannot be learned, but it rejects attempts to transfer reified programmatic archetypes. This is the conceptual basis for the rejection of norm transfer as an appropriate framework for relations between states. It does not mean simply the restoration of spheres of influence and the defence of state sovereignty of the Westphalian sort. Instead, resistance to western hegemony is accompanied the advancement of universal norms by proponents of the transformational and conservative models of global order. In other words, such a scheme not only suggests that there can be order without hegemony, but that there can also be forms of non-hegemonic solidarity.

English School theorists define solidarism as ‘the disposition either to transcend the states-system with some other mode of association or to develop it beyond the logic of coexistence to one of cooperation on shared projects’. By contrast, the sovereign internationalist definition of pluralism is closer to the contrasting English School view of pluralism as ‘the communitarian disposition towards a state-centric mode of association in

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, ‘Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 4, October 2018, pp. 151-65.

which sovereignty and non-intervention serve to contain and sustain cultural and political diversity'.<sup>34</sup> Solidarism promotes the benefits of international community, an inherent feature of the rules-based norms of the secondary institutions of international society, while horizontal relations between states are inherently pluralist, except when combined in various sub-orders. Pluralism is achieved by the recognition of diverse developmental paths and the sovereignty of historical experience that combine to create distinctive security and civilisational complexes, each of which taken together is today conventionally described as a project for world order.<sup>35</sup>

This is rather more than the pluralism generated by the realist paradigm, which focuses on great power politics and has little time either for the solidarist elements represented by the shared commitment to international society at the top floor level of global governance, or for the pressures generated by civil society demands on the ground floor. Conservative internationalists stress the pluralism based on the procedures and legal principles enshrined by international society, arguing that this does not require allying with the liberal internationalist order. However, it means that conservative internationalists can autonomously align with the liberal international order and some proponents of revolutionary transformation in defence of the international governance mechanisms, against the destructive impact of the national populists.

What sovereign internationalists reject, however, are definitions of hegemony that limit the autonomy of sovereign powers in the international system. This is where contradictions with Russia and China, as the most consistent defenders of sovereign internationalism, begin. After 1989 it was assumed that the liberal international order was the only remaining viable global order (or operating system in the terminology suggested above). The emergence of alternatives came as a shock to its defenders, and soon drew a response from the radicalised Hobbesian element in that order. The military-industrial component soon rallied behind the Trumpians to confront the challenge. This is why the US *National Security Strategy* of 18 December 2017 warned against the 'revisionist powers of China and Russia'.<sup>36</sup>

But what does revisionism mean in the current international context? Are Russia and China really out to destroy the foundations of world order as shaped since 1945? Rather than being a fully-fledged revisionist powers, a better term to describe their ambitions is 'neo-revisionism'. This reflects their dissatisfaction with how international affairs are currently run, but it does not mean that the Kremlin and its allies are out to destroy the international system as presently constituted. The fundamental idea of conservative internationalists is to change the practices rather than the principles of the current international order. The fact of American primacy is accepted, either through exercising 'leadership' in the liberal international order, or through 'greatness' in the Trumpian mercantilist model. America's overwhelming military and economic predominance is recognised, but this does not mean, as far as Moscow and Beijing are concerned, that all other states have to welcome a diminished role in international affairs. Their fundamental demand is to become accepted co-managers of international affairs. It is on this terrain of sovereign internationalism that the current battle lines are drawn.

The neo-revisionism of Russia and China differ significantly in their practices and the resources that they can devote to the cause. Russia has been forced into a more full-frontal challenge, because of the perceived intensity of the threat emanating from the enlarging Atlantic system. China hitherto had the luxury of a more leisurely adaptation to a period of

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<sup>34</sup> Buzan, *An Introduction*, p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> This model in part overlaps with the idea of regional security complexes, in which contiguous states establish a regime of intense security interdependence, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017, p. 25, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

confrontation, until faced with immediate challenges in the South China Sea, Taiwan and in the trade war initiated by the US. These differences should not obscure the fact that neither Russia nor China will accept a position of subaltern globalism. They are now united in an anti-hegemonic alignment which has the potential to turn into something deeper and more institutionalised, although both sides for good reasons are hesitant to take this step. The alliance politics before 1914 and the bloc politics before 1989 warn of the inflexibility of alliance systems (a stricture that probably applies to NATO as well).

The idea of neo-revisionism fits into the two country's view of the international system as a whole. As we have seen in our discussion of the conservative internationalist model of the international system, Russia and China accept the normative order represented by the institutions of international legal, economic and security governance in what we call the 'top floor' of the system, above all the UN. Both countries seek certain reforms of these institutions, including the way that the Bretton Woods institutions are constituted and run, but neither is out to destroy them. However, under the threat of sanctions and trade wars, both countries have accelerated the drive to outflank some of these bodies, above all by creating an alternative network of financial institutions. This alternative architecture at present is not destructive of the old institutions, although they may in the end marginalise the order in which they are embedded.

Neo-revisionism in this context means, first, the reassertion of interests, typically couched in the language of sovereignty, and thus repudiates the unmediated universalism of the US-led liberal international order. Both Moscow and Beijing reject the idea that the definition of national interests can be out-sourced to an external power, or that concern over the patterns of power and authority in their neighbourhoods is somehow illegitimate. Second, the idea that the US-led liberal international order is synonymous with order itself is rejected. This entails an ambitious attempt to universalize universalism. The idea is to free the top level institutions from their perceived instrumental subordination to the US-led Atlantic power system. Third, on simple empirical grounds Moscow and Beijing point out that this 'order' is at best extremely disordered, in part as a result of the radicalisation of that order after 1989. Attempts at nation-building following regime change have invariably been catastrophic. The hubristic assertion of the power of the Atlantic alliance has been at best misdirected and at worst folly. Russia in particular, faced by the relentless onward march of NATO to its borders and into the Balkans, believes that beneath the benign carapace of globalisation lies an aggressive globalist power system.

Russia is a former superpower that is unlikely to regain its former glory, while China is a re-emerging power that is confident of achieving far more than ever before, but both are neo-revisionist. Does this mean that neo-revisionism is little more than the prelude to full-scale revisionism, or does it suggest that both are ready to accept suboptimal outcomes? Revisionism here means not only challenging the existing balance of power and the structures of the international system, but also the ability to generate norms and to impose rules. To that extent neo-revisionism by definition contains elements of revisionism; but the 'neo' element should not be downplayed. It is a revisionism that is tempered by acceptance of power realities and constrained by self-imposed limitations. It is a model of global of global order that can work with liberal and transformational internationalists, while recognising that the economic and political sovereignty asserted by the national populists is an attempt to rebalance the stick of globalisation that had been pushed too far. Recognition of four contesting models of globalism is not necessarily a recipe for conflict but provides a formula for common platforms and cross-order coalitions.