

LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER: OUTLINING THE THEORETICAL CONTESTATION

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ABSTRACT

This research endeavours to comprehensively examine the intricacies of the international order with a specific focus on the contemporary status of the Liberal International Order (LIO). The study undertakes a comprehensive historical analysis of the LIO, offering insights through various paradigms in the study of international relations. Furthermore, this paper seeks to reaffirm the continued relevance of the LIO by examining the significance and efficacy of its formal institutions, primarily international organizations. Moreover, a critical facet of this investigation involves an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted challenges that currently afflict the global order and assessing their impact on the principles of liberal internationalism. By adopting an analytical approach, it seeks to assess the resilience and adaptability of the LIO in response to these challenges. Ultimately, the study provides a nuanced assessment of the role of international organizations within the theoretical framework, offering a coherent portrayal of the current international order. Through this comprehensive analysis, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the contemporary dynamics shaping the global arena.

KEYWORDS

Liberal International Order, Global Power Dynamics, World Order, International Order

1. INTRODUCTION

While the notion of Liberal International Order, or LIO, was conceptualized by early scholars of international relations such as Norman Angell, Alfred Zimmern, and Lionel Curtis (Persaud, 2022), it was formally initiated by Woodrow Wilson (Dornan, 2011). The theory evolved from the ideas of liberal leaders like President Franklin Roosevelt along with Prime Minister Winston Churchill via the Atlantic Charter (Kundnani, 2017), and was further developed post-cold war by scholars like Robert Keohane and G John Ikenberry.

Throughout history, there has been a phenomenon known as 'liberal ascendancy,' as described by Ikenberry (2018), where liberal states have transitioned from positions of relative weakness and insignificance to become powerful leaders on the global stage. The concept of LIO emerged due to the inability of the realist theory of international relations to explain the post-World War II world order by concepts such as the balance of power or hegemonic theory. The liberal world expanded along with its institutions, ultimately resulting in the United States of America assuming the center stage of the world order.

However, the LIO faces new challenges after more than 70 years of existence. The emergence of populist, nationalist, and anti-globalization movements within its primary constituents, the expansion of alternative entities characterized by state-centric economies and authoritarian

regimes, and the increasing peril of climate change further exacerbate the longstanding challenges facing the Liberal International Order (LIO).

2. THE LIBERAL NOTION

Other than in a strictly economic sense, the term liberal international (or world) order is fairly recent, despite its widespread use today. Instead of using the term "liberal international order," Keohane uses the terms "liberal economic arrangements" and "liberal international political economy," quoting Gilpin's analysis of the US and UK's roles in creating and enforcing "the rules of a liberal international economic system" (Keohane, 2005). The liberal order gained its most comprehensive interpretation after the end of the Cold War and comprised economic interdependence, multilateral rules and institutions, democratic political systems, and values and norms, owing to the end of communism and the advancement of democracy along with capitalism under an internationalist US leadership. All nations prepared to abide by the norms are welcome to join the liberal international order. The concept of LIO can be understood by a breakdown of its three terms.

Firstly, *orders* are 'patterned or structured relationships among units' (Ibid: p. 228). While rules, standards, and decision-making processes are characteristics of the liberal system, calling it 'rule-based' is inaccurate. On the other hand, *internationalism* may be understood only in consonance with the link between liberalism and the Westphalian international order formed in the nineteenth century. Both were the result of colonial and imperial relationships, but despite existing alongside the Westphalian order, the LIO is distinct from it in several aspects. The idea of state sovereignty served as the foundation for the Westphalian system, whereas the "liberal vision" for a democracy includes "open markets, international institutions, cooperative security democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law" (Ikenberry, 2011: p. 2). In other words, the international system we currently refer to as 'liberal' is, in actuality, built on an earlier foundation of an 'order' that can better be described as more realist than liberal. Rather than simply substituting the previous system, the post-World War II liberal international order was constructed upon its foundations. As a result, according to Ikenberry, the liberal international order may be conceptualized in terms of layers or "strata" in geology, with the Westphalian system acting as a type of "bedrock" on top of which other kinds of orders have evolved through time, becoming progressively more liberal (Ibid: p. xii)

Lastly, within the LIO paradigm, the term 'liberal' is the most challenging and contentious, raising several questions: Is this meant to represent a politically liberal viewpoint (as in against authoritarianism) or an economic one (against economic nationalism), or simply an opposition to realism in the context of international relations? It may be a combination of all three, but this is debatable, with several individual concepts challenging each other such as economic liberalism posing a challenge to political liberalism or 'hyperglobalization' undermining democracy (Rodrik, 2012). The term 'liberal' largely indicates a belief in the inherent equality of all people, holding freedom and self-determination to be the ultimate ambitions of humanity at its (philosophical and normative) heart, similar to Kantian ideas (Kant, 1897). It is mostly based on a classic or enlightened view of liberalism that emphasizes individual freedom and equality.

Ikenberry (2001) defines liberal international order as an open, rule-based international system, whereas international order may be seen as an agreement between nations that outlines the conditions of their cooperation. As previously noted, the more fundamental characteristics of a liberal international order, such as the nature and position of sovereignty and political power, can vary substantially among liberal orders. Scholars dictate that LIO comprises five multidimensional elements (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999).

Firstly, *security co-binding* is an attempt by liberal governments to address anarchical concerns in the international realm. Whilst realists think that states must strive for balance in order to eliminate anarchy, liberals address the challenge by binding and locking each other into institutions and therefore, mutually restricting one other. Co-binding restricts prospective threats into predictable and restricted order, obviating the need for balance. NATO is an excellent illustration of co-binding because it is a complex trans-governmental political process, not just a traditional realist alliance. Secondly, hegemony in international relations refers to an unequal power structure, with "penetrated American hegemony" being a vital aspect of the Liberal International Order (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). While hegemony is sometimes seen as a continuation of neorealism, American hegemony is much more than a basic hierarchy of superiors and subordinates. Instead of depending on coercion, it contains liberal features like transparency, cooperation, consent, and a decentralized structure with numerous access points to policy making. Hegemony, rather than being a tool of oppression, creates a framework in which transnational connections can flourish and additional countries can be joined to the LIO (Huntington, 1973). Thirdly, the existence of *semi-sovereign* and *partial nations* such as Germany and Japan may appear to be a realist oddity, yet they play an important role in the LIO. Realists expected both countries to return to their pre-war stature as major powers, but the fact that they didn't and have willingly eschewed nuclear weapons acquisition in favor of multilateral military cooperation reiterates the resilience of the liberal order. Fourthly, the prevalence of an *open economy* is a significant feature of the Western liberal order. Whilst realists (Mearsheimer, 2019) claim this helps hegemonic stability theory, liberals argue that the open economy contributes not just to the social goals of 'embedded liberalism' (Ruggie, 1982) such as social welfare, but also to political grounds, such as how it assists capitalism's development. Free trade pushes other countries to shift their interests and personalities toward liberal and democratic values, resulting in a more strategically and politically advantageous framework. Finally, *civil identity* is the fifth and final feature of a LIO. Realists (Ruggie, 1982) argue that national identity is the most essential identity an individual can have because it provides legitimacy to nations and a foundation for resource mobilization in the face of external threats. Liberals, however, argue that no sustainable political order can exist without a strong feeling of community and shared identity. They also believe that political system, identity and culture are intertwined and rely upon each other. The Western political order is based on a popular civic identity which is separate from religious, racial, ethnic and cultural identities. Consensus on a number of norms and principles—most notably, tolerance for pluralism, private property-based economic systems, human rights, constitutional governance, and liberal democracy—is at the core of the Western democratic identity.

The LIO is not based on certain fixed principles or ideas but manifests itself under liberal ideas such as open and free markets, the presence of international institutions, democratic society, progressive change, collective and cooperative security, etc. In addition to supporting the growth of free trade and global capital mobility, the LIO is credited for advancing democracy and human rights, as well as jointly defending the West against an aggressive Soviet Union. Most scholars concur that the LIO made it possible for Japan, Western Europe, and North American nations to work together in previously unheard-of ways after 1945 (Lake et al., 2021).

The collective-action conundrum that hindered earlier attempts to counter common security risks was resolved with the LIO's assistance. Although the number of civil conflicts increased following the conclusion of the Cold War, none broke out among the LIO's core members (with the exception of Northern Ireland). The liberalization of global commerce and money was also facilitated by cooperation. The nations that made up the LIO's core enjoyed historically high rates of economic development and living standards thanks to a considerably enlarged division of labor. It is equally significant to note that the order established a worldwide human rights

framework which despite many areas still having issues, has significantly improved human rights standards in many nations (Fariss, 2014).

Ikenberry also identified three primary LIO models or versions: 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0. The first is associated with the ideas presented to the post-World War I international settlement by Woodrow Wilson and Anglo-American liberals; the second is post-World War II liberal internationalism; and the third is a sort of post-hegemonic liberal internationalism. Realists, on the other hand, disagree, believing that any order prior to the disintegration of the USSR was just a 'bounded order,' not LIO (Ikenberry, 2009).

3. THE REALIST CONTESTATION

John Mearsheimer, a realist scholar, defines LIO by defining each word (Ruggie, 1982), for example, order refers to a collection of international institutions that aid in the control of member states' interactions. Different sorts of institutes, such as security organizations like SEATO, NATO, or Warsaw, economic organizations like the IMF, World Bank, or NAFTA, environmental organizations like the Paris Peace Conference, or multidimensional organizations like the United Nations, may be included in an order. For an order to be classified as an international order, he argues it must encompass all big powers, if not all countries in the system. Because of their limited membership, what is generally described as an international order is thought to be a 'bounded order.' To be a liberal international system, the dominant state must be a liberal democracy, with the goal of establishing "a vibrant world order made exclusively of liberal democracies that are deeply involved economically with one another"(Mearsheimer, 2019).

Realists believe that the seed of LIO's own destruction was planted on the day of collapse of bipolarity and therefore its decimation was decided on the day of its triumph. Liberalism's openness allows for the development of ideologies that could jeopardize its place in the international order. Professor John Mearsheimer discusses how in four ways (Lakner & Milanovic, 2016). Firstly, in the name of humanitarian aid and in order to make China a responsible stakeholder in the western liberal order, the liberals have turned China into a great power and have elevated it to the status where it is competing with the USA. This change in power and Russia's ascent are causing the globe to move from unipolarity to multipolarity, which is a point of concern for the LIO, as it can only operate in a unipolar world. Second, LIO greatly promoted democracy, which led to their unnecessary intervention in various losing conflicts such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. They also tried to promote democracy in China and Russia, but this merely aggravated relations and provided them an excuse to undermine the LIO. Thirdly, globalization has resulted in unequal wealth distribution. Finally, the most powerful ideology today is nationalism, which runs counter to LIO's fundamental beliefs.

Another significant challenge is Russian and Chinese preference for the "Westphalian order" (Matsumoto, 2015), i.e. principles of sovereignty and non-interference, over LIO. China constantly ignores its civil commitments and brushes human rights issues under the rug; they've forged a balance that only favors them, rejecting basic LIO ideals such as democracy and human rights while accepting economic liberalism. China continuously rejects its civil obligations and sweeps human rights concerns under the rug, they've created a balance which benefits only them and reject fundamental concepts of the LIO such as democracy and human rights, and accept economic liberalism. The Russian problem continues to pose a threat to the LIO. Russia not only violates the liberal international order, but also defends it by citing the liberal system's normative frameworks and criticizing the West for failing to uphold them (Romanova, 2018). Putin's Russia, according to Fukuyama, is "resentful" and wants to undo the "entire post-1991 European order" (Fukuyama, n.d.). Martin Kimani feels that "the multilateral principle of international

politics lies on its deathbed tonight" as a result of the war in Ukraine (Statement by Ambassador Kimani to UN Security Council, February 21, 2022).

According to Amitav Acharya (Acharya, 2020), the dilemma has deeper roots in what he refers to as the hegemony-diversity divide in the LIO. He believes that the desire for both diversity and hegemony creates a fundamental tension within the LIO, particularly in non-western countries. He analyzes the three liberal theories and concludes that not only does the gap showcase the limitations of the theory, but the limitations of LIO itself.

4. CHALLENGES TO LIO

The Liberal International Order is still considered a contentious idea despite its numerous achievements. It may be split into numerous sub-orders, mostly along issue-specific or regional lines, and there are a number of unique regional orders that can all be broadly categorized as "liberal." While LIO has had a long and difficult road, it is fair to say it is in crisis.

The chief crisis is in the *changing nature of American hegemony*, as scholars such as Ikenberry (Ikenberry, 2018) believe that the "foundations of post-war liberal hegemony are crumbling." He analyzes the shift and the diffusion of American hegemony in the global power spectrum along with that of the 'liberal triad' i.e. USA, Europe and Japan. The shift from unipolarity, however, doesn't necessarily mean a shift towards multipolarity or a China-led world order but simply veering away from the American-led hegemonic order. This is deemed a point of contention by realists such as John Mearsheimer whose main argument against LIO is that it can only be manifested in a unipolar world order. The world was in a bonded order from 1945 to 1989, according to realists, and the US expanded the western-led bounded order into the LIO after the USSR collapsed, the only country opposing the LIO. This was only possible since the US was the only hegemon in a unipolar global order. Therefore, they believe that the LIO is not an old established theory since the 1940s but simply a unipolar world order forged after the end of the Cold War.

The second major crisis involves the *turbulent domestic politics of liberal democracies* across the globe. The issues plaguing these states of LIO include rising inequalities, economic stagnation, financial crisis, corruption, etc whilst democratization of new states have been put on the back burner. Critical theorists are unsurprised by the current situation, as it is the textbook definition of a legitimization crisis, as articulated by Juen Habermas (Habermas & McCarthy, 1975). The state has become weaker due to its incapacity to manage social welfare and globalization, which has caused the entrenched nature of LIO to erode and stoke unhappiness and resentment among its populace. There is a divide of forces as a result of these innate crises. Populist and nationalist movements have grown in response to the challenges posed by political and economic liberalism to nationalism. These movements have emerged not only in newly developed LIO members like India, Brazil, and the Philippines, but also in developed democracies like the United States and Europe.

There has been a *cleavage of internal forces*, be they in the form of right- left or urban-rural which has further undermined the social purposes of the liberal international order. The 2008 financial crisis shook the foundations of LIO, and while it was resolved, it resulted in increased economic volatility and insecurity. There has been a discernible reduction in middle-class income growth, which has been further clarified by Milanovic's differential gains model (Lakner & Milanovic, 2016), which claims that the majority of the world's real per capita income has been concentrated in two very different sectors i.e., the one percent which comprises the trunk of the elephant curve, showcasing the massive wealth gained and the other comprises workers in

developing countries having low-end manufacturing and service sector jobs which comprises the hump of elephant's back.

Lastly, it is indisputable to say that *nationalism* is the most popular ideology within the current political climate. One of the most crucial aspects of LIO is the existence of an open economy, which essentially demands the establishment of a global community with the assistance of free trade agreements and non-tariff barriers. This has been challenged in numerous ways during Covid-19, such as nationalist ideas calling for border closures, storming the US capitol, anti-immigration laws, Brexit, or a lack of humanitarian aid and weak business. What began as a security society built on shared ideals has now deteriorated into a simple trading, commerce, and multicultural cooperation platform.

5. OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

When asked about LIO's future, Ikenberry (The Stockdalecenter, 2021) cites three fundamental crises that must be addressed in order for the liberal order to survive. These issues are intertwined and developing at the same time. The 'Crisis of Geopolitics,' or global power transfer, is the first topic to address. The Western system, which has dominated for decades, if not centuries, is being challenged by newly developed countries such as China. The fundamental point of dispute is a clash of ideals, with each side hoping to make the world a safer environment for their preferred institutions and beliefs. The second is the 'Crisis of Modernity,' which entails an increase in human, economic, and environmental interdependence. Climate change, health pandemics, and weapons of mass destruction are the "three horsemen of apocalypse," which threaten not only interstate relations but mankind as a whole. These risks create complexity in the LIO, which must be addressed through reinventing ways to deal with modernity's issues. Finally, there is the 'Crisis of Liberal Democracy,' which includes structural flaws like rising inequality, financial polarization, class concessions, disintegration of the growth coalition, polarization, populism, and so forth. Ikenberry feels that these three crises must be addressed in order for LIO to have a bright future. Realists, on the other hand, believe the order of the future to be somewhat like the Cold War order, between the US and China. While there will be a thin international order, it will not be a LIO. Despite the existence of the aforementioned challenges, liberal thinkers remain optimistic and believe in the four sources of resilience of LIO (Lake et al., 2021b).

To begin with, LIO has been extremely successful in reducing international violence and global poverty, leading in universal support for the order's continued existence. The LIO has aided in unprecedented levels of international cooperation, particularly in the fields of collective security, trade, and finance, as previously stated. The people who profit from this collaboration have a vested interest in it continuing because the advantages exceed the disadvantages. Secondly, the LIO has grown strong interests in the current global standards, notably on the economic front, and will strive to maintain those norms. The trade war between the United States and China, as well as the international economic turbulence that followed the pandemic's emergence, demonstrate how intertwined the global economy has grown as global value chains have disintegrated. On the commercial front, a lot of corporations today have international assets that give rise to complicated political interests, which makes it more difficult to define who is "us." Therefore, in order to continue benefiting from their prior investments, they have a stake in preserving international openness. Third, different international orders, treaties, and regimes have been institutionalized, ensuring their continued existence which act as 'stabilizers' in case of catastrophes like the Great Depression or the 2008 financial crisis. This demonstrates that, even if the LIO's current challenges make it less robust, certain aspects will endure for a long time. Finally, the LIO has achieved international legitimacy or over time, garnering support from a wide range of countries. Following several generations of prosperity and consideration of the

fundamental political tenets that facilitated its formation, the LIO has developed a normative character that will diminish logics of consequences and increase logics of appropriateness.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In its seven decades of existence, LIO has faced several challenges and a multitude of criticism from the international community. These internal and external threats combine to pose a serious threat to the principle of multilateralism as well as the LIO's main multilateral institutions. The LIO continues to evolve in accordance with the global order as long as its norms continue to change. The threats to the LIO that are addressed above revive the discussion over the importance of the United States as a key stakeholder and leader of the LIO's fundamental principles for the order's survival. Democracies worldwide are facing internal crises of cleavage of population and rising nationalist forces, such as storming of the US capitol, Brexit etc.; and external crises such as weakening business and stagnation of economies.

NATO was based on the principle of collective security, 'one for all and all for one', but it has dematerialised to such an extent that it stands at the sidelines as a silent spectator witnessing Russian demolition of Ukraine. The 'democratic' principles of human rights are unseemingly forgotten in case of war-torn countries. The chief institution of liberal order, the United Nations, has failed continuously to provide the aid it was created to do so, for example, in case of Syria, by failing to fulfil its principal function in maintaining international peace and security, as well as by abdicating its responsibility to carry out its responsibilities in accordance with the UN's Purposes and Principles (Benarbia, 2021). The UN has also been unsuccessful in performing its responsibility to protect, or R2P, such as in the case of Libya (2011) wherein the civil war still continues or Yemen or Syria or Myanmar. NATO continues to expand itself, threatening Russian security and then seems to be surprised when Russia attacks, a prime example lies in the Ukraine war. In exchange for Soviet agreement to German reunification, American negotiators promised not to extend NATO eastwards in 1990. This vow lost its normative status because it was not inscribed into a binding international agreement (Shifrinson, 2016).

These challenges give rise to questions like 'will the LIO come to an end?' or 'Will the international order dissipate into a Westphalian order?' The answer may be neither. The most important character of LIO as seen over the years is that it is not stagnant. It has evolved whenever faced with adversity, be it the League of Nations, the Anglo-American settlement after WWII and the establishment of the US-led post-war system, the unipolar American led world order after the end of the Cold War, globalization of liberalism, crisis of capitalism etc. The challenges have acted as pivots, simply pushing LIO in a different direction. While the world is most definitely in a pivotal stage, it remains to be seen whether the order will bounce back or erode into a new world order.

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