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# World Order Revisited: Resilience and Challenges

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**Summary**

Despite many hiccups along the road and differing conceptions of what form it would take, throughout the post-Cold War period both Russia and the European Union remained committed to the aim of creating a single European space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. That is, until 2014: Russia's annexation of Crimea and the onset of the Ukraine crisis put a definitive end to such hopes. Since then, it has become popular to speculate as to whether the liberal international order itself is threatened by this new confrontation between Moscow and Western capitals. Indeed, it is not without cause that Russia's newfound revanchism is seen as marking a breaking point in the order's history.

In 2014, Russia became the first major power to challenge, on a fundamental level, Western political leadership on the world stage. This did not take the form of mere criticism of Western actions, as in the cases of Kosovo, Iraq and Libya. This was an outright revolt against the notion that Washington and Brussels had a monopoly on deciding how Europe was to be organized. It is now clear that competing institutions and rival norms – or at least rival interpretations or applications of norms – exist in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood.

Even if the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is one day harmonized with the EU, Moscow's line is that this should be a merger of equals that follows the precedent of the EAEU's coordination with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), not a continuation of the EU's Brussels-centric model for the enlargement of the European order.

It is revealing that the failure of the Brussels-centric approach to European integration is seen as a fundamental challenge to liberal international order itself. This suggests that, in the Western mind, the survival of today's world order is at least partially dependent upon sustained Atlanticism and American unipolarity, in addition to the continued

hegemonic status of liberal democracies in international affairs. But even more importantly, it points to a cardinal Western belief that – to paraphrase the University of Kent's Richard Sakwa – the spread of the liberal order is equivalent to the spread of order, full stop.

What is not often acknowledged is that the end of the Cold War marked the first genuine attempt in history to consolidate a liberal *world* order – to take the norms and institutions of the Western liberal *international* order of the Cold War era and render them global. (The interwar order featuring the League of Nations can be thought of more as a proto-liberal order, boasting few formal international institutions and relying more on a loose commitment to principles than on entrenched, rules-based mechanisms.) The descent of Ukraine – a society genuinely torn between West and East – into a war marks the definitive failure of this project.

> The events leading up to and following Ukraine have not fundamentally altered the global balance of power overnight, but they have had an impact on the balance of *influence*.

The relative legitimacy of Western hegemony, already eroding gradually since the Iraq War, has taken a substantial hit as Russia and China have become more assertive. Moscow boasts its own, more polycentric interpretation of what forms the European and global security orders should take, while Beijing is advancing its own international institutions and economic integration projects, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI.

In other words, great power rivalry is back. In fact, thanks to the growing strategic partnership between Russia and China, geopolitics may be making a comeback as well, pitting these two major powers of the Eurasian Heartland against American naval power and Washington's Rimland allies in Brussels and Tokyo. Moscow has announced a "pivot to the East" and has voiced support for a "Greater Eurasian" integration project to accompany the EAEU, while Beijing seeks to connect Asia with European markets through the BRI, thus returning Eurasia to the centre of global affairs.

That said, certain elements of the contemporary order appear to remain robust. If a commitment to rules-based institutions and free trade ranks among its key features, then the EAEU, AIIB and BRI can be seen as complementing the prevailing order rather than challenging it. Meanwhile, other organizations traditionally associated with the liberal order (such as NATO, the EU and the UN) remain intact despite various difficulties.

> What we have seen, then, since 2014 is the gradual decoupling of the liberal order and American hegemony, with the former becoming progressively more autonomous, while the latter – rather than serving to underpin a global consensus – is now pursued as an end in itself.

The resulting diffused hegemony and shared responsibility for managing global affairs could, in a sense, be interpreted as a democratization of international relations, even if the cost has been the entrenchment of both Russo-American and Sino-American rivalry over the course of the Trump presidency.

Liberalism assumes that individuals are rational and self-interested, and liberal internationalism assumes the same of states. The fact that major powers are now asserting their interests with greater confidence need not have existential consequences.

> The end of the "end of history" does not equal the end of the contemporary world order, whose historical foundations run deeper than the immediate aftermath of the Cold War.

Moscow and Beijing may have their grievances, but neither seeks to overturn the principal institutions and norms that support the international system. Indeed, China's opening to the United States under Deng Xiaoping and Russia's "return to Europe" upon the fall of the Iron Curtain resulted in these two Eurasian giants internalizing certain liberal economic and political norms, indicating that they have voluntarily accepted components of the Western-led order, even if they reject – either entirely or in part – the notion of Western leadership itself.

Elements of resilience aside, however, there remain strong forces driving imbalance and instability. The global balance of material power is situated uncomfortably between a United States in relative decline and a Chinese state that has not yet truly become a comprehensive global power. The balance of legitimacy (or "normative" power), for its part, is under assault on the one hand by Washington's abdication of global leadership, and on the other by Moscow and Beijing's desire – either immediate or gradual – to push back against American unipolarity by attempting to revise the European and Asian regional orders to which they respectively belong.

Moreover, Russia continues to deliberate over where its future lies as a nation-state at the northern tip of Eurasia or an empire with a sphere of influence in Europe, with Moscow's insistence that its "Greater Eurasian" integration project remains open to European participation pointing to the unresolved nature of the perennial question in

Russian society of just how European Russia is. And China, finding itself in the paradoxical situation of being a rising power and yet boasting no formal allies (other than the troublesome North Korea), retains a sense of victimhood and historical perspective from last century that renders it insecure about its increasingly influential role in the world.

> The two Eurasian giants know what they are *against* – overbearing American hegemony and Western interference in their internal affairs – but both struggle to articulate clearly and substantively what they are *for*.

With leading world actors preoccupied with domestic reforms or crises, this situation will persist over the short-to-medium term, likely well into the next decade at the very least. This represents a tricky situation for those small states situated between the principal players. Able to benefit from competition between major powers when the rules of the game are clearly defined, they must now contend instead with uneasy interactions between evolving and/or fledgling integration projects. In Eastern Europe, these states are situated in a geopolitical flashpoint featuring rising tensions between Russia and the West and an ongoing hot conflict in Ukraine.

Careful statecraft will be required to ensure that the EU and Russia's shared neighbourhood becomes a pillar of regional order instead of a vacuum. With Washington, Brussels, Moscow and Beijing all consumed to varying degrees with internal debates and challenges, the time is ripe for smaller states to play a leading role in securing the foundations of world order.

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