

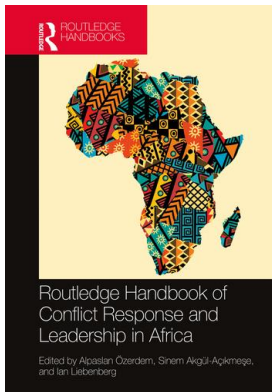
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 10 Dec 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Conflict Response and Leadership in Africa

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Decoding the Emerging World Order and Challenges to Global Leadership

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429318603-5>

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Published online on: 15 Sep 2021

How to cite :- Tark Ouzlu. 15 Sep 2021, *Decoding the Emerging World Order and Challenges to Global Leadership from:* Routledge Handbook of Conflict Response and Leadership in Africa Routledge
Accessed on: 10 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429318603-5>

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3

DECODING THE EMERGING WORLD ORDER AND CHALLENGES TO GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Tarık Oğuzlu

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide readers with a brief notion of how the dynamics of international politics have been evolving for some time and how these challenge the understanding of the issue of leadership in global politics. There is a close relationship between the structure of international relations at a given time and how leadership is exercised in some particular domains. Whether the issue at hand is the environment, pandemic, nuclear proliferation, poverty, development, disarmament, arms control, conflict resolution, or whatever, how the international political environment is structured will profoundly impact how leadership is understood, exercised, and perceived.

That said, deciphering the codes of the emerging world order constitutes the main research interest of this chapter. Are we fast moving to a multipolar world order in which the liberal international order's cardinal characteristics are contested ferociously by rising non-Western powers, most notably China? What are the key characteristics of the emerging world order? Are there differences between the leadership style and global vision of leading actors of international politics, such as the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union? This chapter tackles this issue by first explicating the key facets of the so-called liberal international order that appears to have undergirded international politics since the early years of the Cold War era up until the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Then an attempt will be made at decoding the changing dynamics of the world order over the last decade. In doing so, the focus will be on the key characteristics of the emerging world order as well as how major global actors relate to/interpret them. The main contention here is that we have been gradually moving away from a liberal world order to a realist one in which great power rivalries have come back, and realpolitik power struggles to militate against the vision of uniting humankind around universal morality and shared interests. Finally, the chapter will offer some insight as to how the current COVID-19 crisis might affect the international order and the issue of global leadership.

Liberal international order

The world is transforming at an incredible pace. As defined in the early post-Second World War era, the cardinal rules and principles of international politics are now being exposed to

unprecedented challenges unseen before. As is well known, the world order that dominated the second half of the 20th century was designed by the Second World War's victorious powers. Having defeated Nazi Germany, Western powers led by the United States set in motion a new international order that would, to a significant extent, reflect their values and interests. The liberal internationalist outlook adopted by the United States enabled successive US administrations during the Cold War era to bring into existence international institutions, such as NATO, IMF, World Bank, and the OECD, that would protect and promote core Western values and interests in different quarters of the globe (Ikenberry, 2017). The so-called containment policy adopted vis-à-vis the existential Soviet threat on the one hand and the embracement of the strategies of global primacy and openness on the other allowed the United States to become the most powerful actor in the world. The United States, along with its Western European, North Atlantic, and East Asian allies, shaped the rules of international politics and played a key role in how the issues of wealth, security, development, justice, and human rights would be defined. Accordingly, security was mainly defined from a military perspective; the United States acted as the primary security provider in Europe and East Asia, through the multilateral NATO and bilateral alliance relationships respectively; economics was based on the primacy of capitalism and free-market ideology; justice reflected existing power disparities across the globe; human rights and democracy were defined from a Western perspective in that Western rules and norms were regarded universal and sacrosanct; peace in the world arose from the enlargement of the democratic camp at the expense of other power blocs and rival ideologies.

In this world order, NATO acted as the lead security organization of the Western international community, whereas the European Union, along with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, facilitated the strengthening of the liberal capitalist economic system. It is worth noting that the federal integration process in Europe took off from the ground in no small part due to the strong support provided by the United States in line with its global interests (Kagan, 2003). Without the strong American backing and the security guarantee provided by NATO membership, the war-torn Western European countries would not have been in a position to set in motion a detailed integration process aimed at bringing into existence a 'security community' in the European heartland. During the Cold War era, the world order was bipolar in nature, pitting the US-led Western bloc against the communist bloc under the leadership of the Soviet Union.

This Western-led international order also reflected the understanding that global peace and stability would emanate from adopting Western practices of democracy and human rights by other actors within the system (Dunne and McDonald, 2013). The world order under Western leadership was assumed to have been built on the twin pillars of Western material superiority on the one hand and the allure of Western norms and ideologies on the other. Despite the strong opposition of Arab nationalism and non-aligned movement against Western values, the Western world continued to preserve its attractiveness during much of the Cold War era. The end of the Cold War era, associated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, was thought of as having vindicated the legitimacy of Western values and ideologies.

The end of the Cold War era and the degrading of communism as a rival ideology in the early 1990s led the Western powers to believe that the road to Western primacy enshrining Western values and norms was now fully opened. As Fukuyama preached, history had finally come to an end with the victory of liberalism (Fukuyama, 1992). From this time onwards, the flow of history would go in parallel to expanding liberal democracy to non-Western geographies. As many pundits expected in the early 1990s, the new world order would be unipolar and characterized by the expansion of Western forms of government across the globe.

In fact, the 1990s had transpired in such a way as to give credence to such arguments (Mearsheimer, 2019). The former communist countries of the Soviet Bloc gradually joined the

leading Western institutions, namely the European Union and NATO; EU members deepened the integration process among one another by endowing the European Union with institutional capabilities to act as a credible actor in the realms of economics, foreign policy, security policy, defence policy, and justice and home affairs; NATO proved its resilience in the absence of the common Soviet threat by adopting new tasks and transforming into a kind of global security organization undertaking new missions in non-European geographies; the United States appeared to have been, in Secretary of State Madeline Albright's words, the only "indispensable nation" on Earth as the wars in the territories of the former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia and other places came to an end with US-led NATO military interventions; the Russian Federation under the leadership of Yeltsin sought Russia's future in closer cooperation with the Western world and signed the NATO–Russia Pact in 1997; China adopted the so-called peaceful rise strategy by acting as a benign international actor abroad and contributing to the emergence of a stable environment in its region while continuing its economic development at home; the expectation of the so-called globalists that the road to world peace would go through the incorporation of new rising powers into the existing global institutions as responsible stakeholders seems to have been vindicated by Russia and China's entry into the World Trade Organization; and the so-called Washington consensus appeared to have been the only alternative road map for a significant number of non-Western countries to adopt in their efforts to economically develop and politically liberalize. Despite the popularity of the 'clash of civilizations' thesis and failure of the West to bring the conflicts in Somalia and Rwanda to successful ends, it would not be wrong to argue that the 1990s proved to be one of the golden ages of the Western-led liberal international order.

When the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, many international relations scholars rushed to the conclusion that realism as a theoretical approach would gradually lose its explanatory power (Mearsheimer, 2018). The rise of unrivalled US hegemony, the emerging penchant of former communist states in Central and Eastern Europe to join the leading Western international organizations such as the European Union and NATO, the willingness of non-Western global powers like China, Brazil, India, and Russia to adopt free-market economies and join the World Trade Organization, the transformation of the European Community into the European Union with postmodern and post-nation state characteristics and the growing allure of liberal democracy as the most legitimate form of the political community have all contributed to the rise of liberal thinking in international relations.

The speeding up of the globalization process over the last three decades has also added up to the salience of liberal thinking in international relations as various forms of global interconnectedness have eroded the theoretical power of realism. A central assumption was that the acceleration of technological developments and free movement of human beings, goods, capital, and services would gradually culminate in the formation of a global community of humankind in which people of different geographical locations unite around common universal norms of multiculturalism, secularism, tolerance, constitutionalism, and individual freedom.

One of the major driving forces of such liberal expectations has been undoubtedly the assumption that national, ethnic, religious, geographic, linguistic, and other particularistic markers of individual identity would lose their appeal as the world shrinks and that human beings act first and foremost as *Homo economicus*. The hyper-globalists have long argued that the globalization process, despite its internal contradictions, would help lessen the wealth gap between developed and developing countries and lift millions of poor people out of poverty. As everybody wins from the globalization and liberal democratization processes, there would be no need to do politics based on 'differences' of various kinds.

The path to development that rich Western nations followed would be gradually emulated by newly developing countries of the non-Western world. The free market-oriented economic

modernization process would result progressively in liberal democratic states in many parts of the globe, which would indirectly contribute to liberal democratic peace in international relations. The so-called Democratic Peace theory would be vindicated by transforming the Hobbesian anarchical environment of the international system into Lockean and Kantian international societies as democratic and democratizing states would find it costly and inappropriate to solve their foreign policy problems through hard power instruments. As liberalism took root, states would increasingly utilize soft and civilian power tools in their foreign policies (Nye, 2004).

Realist balance of power politics, as well as militarization practices, would gradually give way to regional/international integration efforts and collective identity formation on the regional, if not global scale. Accordingly, the mere instinct of survival and self-help-oriented security strategies would be replaced by growing prospects of interstate cooperation based on common interests and ideational similarities. As the globe shrinks and interconnectedness increases, states would develop the habit of adopting a common global approach in their efforts to handle global problems. The mentality of we-are-all-on-the-same-ship would gain ground against the realist predisposition of seeking security in zero-sum logic.

As opposed to realist arguments, various regional and international initiatives spearheaded by China, Russia, and other regional powers would not aim to chip away at the existing US-led liberal international order by helping consolidate regional spheres of influencing the world. Despite the unipolar character of the post-Cold War era, neither Russia, the former superpower, nor China, the most promising rival of the United States, would endeavour to hollow out the liberal international order, for they were immensely benefiting from being steadfastly integrated into its existing institutions. Rather than acting as potential hegemonies in Europe and Asia, Russia and China would eventually transform into liberal democratic polities as their free-market economic model's adoption would accrue them spectacular benefits. As they became wealthy, they would eventually transform into democracies (Glaser, 2019).

Such a liberal turn would also lead states to seek further cooperation among one another within multilateral platforms of various kinds. The internal liberal democratic transformation would simultaneously produce liberal democratic foreign policy outlooks. States would increasingly resort to diplomacy, negotiations, consensus building, and integration as the most legitimate statecraft tools. Building foreign policy on the preservation of particularistic differences, materially conceived zero-sum gains, the imposition of one's will onto others through the use of coercive means, and the mere instinct of survival would gradually be outdated.

Liberal-minded states extensively rely on the attractive power of their values and are therefore predisposed to transform other states within the system alongside liberal values at the centre of their foreign policies. They believe in the allure of their ideologies so much that liberal-minded states have grown extremely overconfident about their foreign policies' transformative capacity. Liberals share the view that liberal values are universal rather than particularistic and that therefore they would eventually be embraced by others in the system. Yet the more they resorted to transformational liberal policies outside their borders, the more such policies caused resistance on the part of other states. This has gradually contributed to the erosion of liberal values across the globe.

Against this background, the following section argues that as opposed to liberal expectations, recent years have increasingly witnessed the revival of realist thinking in international relations and its concomitant manifestations on the ground. Growing feelings of uneasiness, great power completion, disorder, conflict, insecurity, chaos, and uncertainties have lately become evident across the globe (Campbell and Ratner, 2018). What are the driving forces of realist revival in international relations/politics, and how do we know that realism has regained its explanatory power?

The revival of realism and the emerging world order

The *first* observation to make in this regard is that nationalism, realism, and geopolitical determinism have steadily begun influencing major global powers' foreign and security policies (Kaplan, 2018). Unlike the liberal internationalist and Kantian idealists' expectations, we are not on the verge of transcending into a borderless world in which universal principles of secularism, human rights, cosmopolitan morality, unlimited globalization, and multiculturalism prevail. The pressure on the liberal world order has intensified as illiberalism forces have taken hold in many quarters of the world.

Putinism's rise as a political ideology seems to have contributed to the erosion of liberal thinking profoundly (Oliker, 2017). Putin strongly questioned his country's Western/European orientation by disputing the legitimacy of foreign policies adopted in the first decade of the post-Cold War era. Rather than defining Russia as mainly a European/Western country and investing in the prospects of making Russia a member of Western/European regional/international organizations, Putin, following his ascendancy to the presidency in the late 1990s, has set in motion a revival strategy in which strengthening Russia's Eurasian and imperial identity as well as enlarging Russia's sphere of influence at the expense of Western penetration into the post-Soviet geography has been put at the centre of Russian foreign and security policy (Kotkin, 2016).

Defining the dissolution of the Soviet Union as one of the greatest mistakes of world politics, Putin's number one foreign policy goal has become to rejuvenate Russia's great power status and ensure Russia's recognition as such by Western powers. From Putin's perspective, enlargement of NATO and the EU towards Russia's geography and promoting Western liberal norms to post-Soviet countries through the so-called colour revolutions constituted the greatest threats to Russia's security and great power status. In Russian strategic thinking, Western institutions, most notably NATO, should not be the leading regional platforms in which European security questions are discussed. Putin being no exception, Russian security elites have been subscribed to the view that Russia has been deceived by Western powers in that NATO's enlargement occurred to the detriment of Russia's geopolitical interests and priorities.

Similarly to many other rising non-Western powers, Russia has contributed to the erosion of liberal international order through its Westphalian foreign and security policy practices abroad as well as the emphasis Putin has put on the preservation of conservative values, strong nation state identity, strong leadership and state-led economic development process at home. Worth noting is that Putin defines today's Russia as the only true representative of the Western/European civilization on the grounds that the postmodern, secular, and multicultural values of the European Union have indeed hollowed out the essence of true Europeanness. Western/European countries have been in moral decay. The only remedy to cure this illness would be revitalizing the European civilization based on Europe's traditional and conservative values as enshrined by Russia.

However, the main criticism levelled against Russia is that Russia acts as a typical *realpolitik* power that profoundly believes in the importance of material power capabilities, brute military force, and commanding spheres of influence. Russia is believed to have been acting as a 19th-century power in the 21st century. Putin's Russia has been striving to help bring into existence a multipolar world order in which Russia plays a decisive role. To Russian rulers, there are no universally agreed human rights, and the use of force in the name of "responsibility to protect" would only mask Western imperial designs in other places.

The United States appears to offer another example of the revival of realist thinking in international relations. This process has begun with the election of Barack Obama as the US president in late 2008 and accelerated since the inauguration of Trump's presidency in early 2017.

Since its foundation, US leaders have not shown strong enthusiasm to pursue ambitious policies abroad to institutionalize American dominance unless other continents, most notably Europe and Asia, came under the domination of anti-American power blocs or any global power threatened US national interests by trying to take a strong presence in America's 'near abroad' (Johnstone, 2011). However, since the early years of the Cold War era, the US has shifted towards an internationalist mentality and valued the promotion of its values to other places in the name of national security interests. Even though 'realists' and 'isolationists' have traditionally abhorred adventures abroad and argued against the use of force unless vital national interests were at stake, they have nevertheless sided with liberal internationalists in defining the US as an exceptional country in terms of its norms and values.

With Obama and Trump, the focus has once again shifted to great power politics and competition. Dealing with China and Russia now appears to be more important than focusing on humanitarian interventions, counterterrorism, and democracy promotion exercises. The latest National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, adopted in late 2017 and early 2018, respectively, testify to this new mentality. This introverted approach and increasing aversion from military engagements abroad seem to have strengthened the realist, pragmatic, and isolationist tendencies in US foreign policy.

Obama, claiming to be the first American president of the post-American world, recognized the limits of American power in bringing into existence a genuinely liberal world based on the values that traditionally defined the so-called American exceptionalism. Unlike former American presidents, Obama disputed the claim that the United States was an exceptionalist country in the sense of having the moral authority to help transform other countries in the image of American values. Having repudiated the ideology-driven neo-conservative policies of his predecessor, President George W. Bush, Obama concluded that Bush's policies contributed to the erosion of the United States' soft power credentials across the globe. Recognizing the United States' diminishing hard power capability within the context of an emerging multipolar world, particularly following the global economic crisis in 2008, Obama criticized the nation building-oriented foreign policies of former administrations and argued in favour of global restraint as well as putting the resources at the service of nation-building practices at home. Obama proved to be a more realist and pragmatic than liberal US president in the realm of foreign policy (Unger, 2016). Withdrawing American troops from the greater Middle Eastern region, resetting relations with Russia, pivoting to East Asia in such a way both to contain China and to reassure traditional allies of the continuation of American commitment to their security, engineering the opening process towards former enemies, such as Iran and Cuba, negotiating the nuclear agreement with Iran, asking the European allies to spend more money on their defence, questioning the traditional American policy of supporting Israel unconditionally, and finally embracing the tool kit of the so-called offshore balancing security strategy, Obama's presidency seems to have provided additional ammunition to the realist thinking in international relations.

It appears that the United States' turn towards a realist, nationalistic, and anti-globalist understanding of international relations was strengthened during the presidency of Donald Trump, as he was elected on the ticket of America-first nationalism, conservative realism, geopolitical reawakening, protectionist economic policies, anti-globalism, and American nativism (Haas, 2017). Like Obama, Trump had strong reservations regarding building US foreign policy based on unquestionable moral claims and the so-called American exceptionalism. He cast aside the Wilsonian claims of making the world safe for democracies. He disputed the American creed's moral foundations at home by questioning American politics' multicultural, secular, universal, and tolerance-based traits. Unlike Obama, who appears to have been liberal at home and realist abroad, Trump seemed to have downplayed liberal credentials of politics on both fronts.

Unlike many American presidents serving in the past, Trump put an overwhelming emphasis on the preservation of the constitutive values of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans and held that the United States mainly suffered from the post-war era globalization process and America's endless wars waged in the name of maintaining liberal hegemony (Walt, 2018). Acting in the footsteps of the 19th-century American President Andrew Jackson, Trump seemed to be a nativist, thinking that the US would do well not to promote its core values to others in the name of making the world safe for democracy. Unless the US took some extreme measures, such as shielding itself against the infiltration of Mexicans, Muslims, Chinese, and others into the American society, he claimed nothing would be left as truly American. To Trump, multiculturalism was a danger that needed to be avoided at home and abroad. With Trump in the presidency, the United States pursued a minimalist yet belligerent foreign policy in the Middle East while adopting an exclusionary and containment-based approach towards China and Russia. Having built a career in economics and real estate business, he has tended to approach foreign policy problems from a businessman's perspective. Scoring deals with competitors in absolute zero-sum terms has shaped his way of dealing with other states.

According to the evolving American security strategy, US allies in critical quarters of the globe, such as Japan in East Asia and Germany in Europe, would have to take more responsibility for providing security in their own region. This trend of outsourcing security to key allies in key areas suggests that the United States has already left behind the security strategy of 'global preponderance' in favour of the so-called offshore balancing strategy, according to which the US would do well not to get involved in outside theatres, unless allies fail, either alone or through region-wide security cooperation mechanisms, to prevent the rise of challengers (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016). This particular US security strategy appears to have produced two significant consequences concerning the emergent world order. First is that traditional American allies have increasingly begun questioning the credibility of the US commitment to their security. Hence their increasing attempts at forging multidimensional, multidirectional, and pragmatic foreign and security policies abroad. Second, this gradual American disengagement from the world seems to have boosted rival countries' manoeuvring capability in their own regions.

The evolution of Chinese foreign policy over the last decades also suggests that a realist turn has become more noticeable in recent years. The more powerful China has evolved in terms of material power capabilities, the more loudly it has begun questioning the decades-old American hegemony in East and Southeast Asia (Xiang, 2016). Having felt frustrated by the reluctance of the United States and other Western powers to accord China more say in the existing global institutions, the Chinese leadership took initiatives to establish China-led regional organizations and programs to have its imprint on world politics. China's military expenditures have also skyrocketed, putting China just behind the United States. The acquisition of military capabilities serving its anti-access and area denial military strategy is also quite noticeable. China's efforts to entice its neighbours through lucrative free trade agreements and public diplomacy initiatives seem to have produced positive consequences in that it is no longer an easy and cost-free exercise for those countries to view the United States as their ultimate security provider at the expense of their improving relations with China. China's efforts to probe the United States' determination to come to the aid of its allies in East Asia have also increased. As part of its realist foreign and security policy strategy, China seems to have increased its effort to help drive wedges between the United States and its allies in the region. China does not pursue a revolutionary foreign policy in the sense of overhauling existing US-led global institutions and helping bring into existence a truly alternative world order. Yet Chinese leaders think that their legitimacy's primary source comes from their success in leaving behind the century of humiliation for good. Their determination to help bring into existence a China-centric environment in East and South East

Asia has noticeably increased in parallel to the steep increase in China's material power capabilities. Transforming the existing world order from within and being the regional hegemon in East Asia through the pursuit of strategically conceived realist policies seems to define China's current international politics vision (Friedberg, 2018).

The European Union, the poster child of the post-nation state kind integration process aimed at transcending the centuries-old *realpolitik* security practices in Europe, has also been going through a serious soul-searching process in recent years. The rise of traditional security threats in Eastern Europe, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in Ukraine, the growing vulnerability of Europeans to never ending migration movements from the wider Middle Eastern region, the strengthening of populist and nationalist sentiments across mainstream European public opinion (Mude, 2016), the questioning of EU's postmodern characteristics by an increasing number of Europeans on the ground that the EU's bureaucratic integration process has mainly fallen short of bridging the democracy deficit in the continent, as well as offering Europeans long-term social and economic security, and the erosion of US security commitment to European allies within NATO seems to have all led many European circles to reprioritize their national identity at the expense of common European identity and to reenergize their efforts to come up with credible strategic security options in a world of growing disarray. The British withdrawal from the European Union has offered further ammunition to the argument that for the EU to remain a credible, influential, and autonomous global actor in the emerging century, rather than being seen as a playground by other global actors, it needs to adopt a strategic approach to global issues and buttress its security and defence capabilities in a *realpolitik* fashion (Pishchikova and Piras, 2017).

Second, the growing tendency to find solutions to diverse foreign and security policy challenges worldwide through great power cooperation and other traditional interstate cooperation schemas has also contributed to the revival of realist thinking in international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001). Collective security practices, long-term alliance relations, durable strategic partnerships, and multilateral platforms based on common values and interests have eroded in recent years. This erosion can best be observed within the United Nations as the calls for reformation of the United States have intensified in recent years. The structural factors that gave birth to the UN in the early years of the Cold War era have long ceased to exist. Today's UN does not reflect the power distribution that existed in the late 1940s. The number of occasions in which all five members of the United Nations Security Council united around a common position has been in steep decline since all these powers acted in concert against Kuwait's occupation by Saddam's Iraq in 1990. The predisposition of the existing veto holder members of UNSC to preserve their institutional prerogatives on the one hand and their inclination to sideline UN mechanisms in favour of ad hoc meetings structured in informal mini-lateral platforms on the other seem to have diluted the multilateral character of global governance in general and UN mechanisms in particular. The liberal hope that solutions to global challenges would be best found through collective organizations has been proven wrong during the coronavirus pandemic as well.

Today, ad hoc cooperation practices have increased. In addition, countries, irrespective of their power capabilities, geographical locations, and internal characteristics, have become more predisposed than ever to establish pragmatic and interest-oriented cooperative relations with one another. Memberships in diverse international and regional organizations, no matter how different value preferences such organizations evince, have become common in international relations. Turkey's efforts to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union while simultaneously pursuing membership in the European Union can be seen as a vivid demonstration of such pragmatic and realist thinking in foreign policy. Similarly, the idea of compartmentalization has gradually permeated foreign policy practices of many countries,

implying that they see each other as both rivals and partners at the same time. No matter how states are ruled internally, what matters in today's world is to be on good terms with as many countries as possible so that states ensure their territorial integrity and societal cohesion against challenges from all directions. This is a U-turn from the heyday of liberal optimism as practiced in the first two decades of the post-Cold War era. NATO is the prime example of loosening alliance bonds based on shared identity and waterproof common threat perceptions (Sayle, 2019). It seems that NATO further suffered during Trump's presidency as he continuously lashed out at the alliance on the grounds that allies have been freeriding on the United States for long enough and that it is now the time to pay back. In addition, Putin's efforts to divide the transatlantic alliance by cultivating stronger and cordial relations with potential Putin admirers have made it difficult for 30 NATO members to subscribe to common threat perceptions and security policies. Russia's goal has been to help weaken the transatlantic solidarity within NATO and increase the costs of pursuing anti-Russia policies in the European countries that either share common borders with Russia or substantially depend on Russia for trade.

Third, the balance between security and freedom has been increasingly defined in favour of security. The Kantian expectations of achieving universal human freedom being realized in a globalizing world based on common values and principles have mostly failed to occur across the globe. The practice of achieving security and welfare within the territorial boundaries of nation states and putting national belonging at the centre of one's multiple identities has strengthened over the last decade. Recent years have seen that the rise of transnational terrorism, unfettered market globalization, intensifying transboundary migration movements, and erosion of state structures mainly in third world countries have worsened security anxieties in both developed and developing countries. This suggests that people in many countries have turned to their state authorities as to the most credible and reliable providers of security and welfare. Establishing strong state structures to meet people's security, health, and welfare needs has become too popular an idea in recent years. The COVID-19 trauma has undoubtedly contributed to the attraction of the nation state as the most legitimate political community.

Promoting liberal democracy abroad, particularly on the part of liberal Western powers, and working for the emergence of a truly global community of humankind has given way to attempts at strengthening strong state structures and cultivating internal legitimacy through nation building at home. At a time of growing ambiguities and uncertainties, many states worldwide do now put territorial defence and preservation of national sovereignty at the centre of their foreign and security policies. Scaling down foreign policy ambitions abroad and prioritizing nation-building attempts at home will likely continue in the years ahead.

The transformation of the wider Middle East region into a textbook example of Hobbesian anarchy over the last decade demonstrates quite vividly that neither freedom nor democracy can take root in an insecure environment in which there are no functioning state mechanisms (Kausch, 2015). Unfettered globalization and growing interconnectedness have also made it clear that insecurities outside borders never stay there. In today's world, crises have contagious effects. Turkey's growing security anxieties in the context of the never-ending Syrian crisis show it convincingly that threats recognize no borders and that strong state structures at home are what is required to deal with the new kind of threats that thrive on technological developments, porous borders, and fluid identities. Defeating COVID-19 has so far been planned and implemented at national levels, as many realists would easily foresee.

Fourth, the gradual decline of Western powers' importance in global politics has hollowed the liberal international order. Rising non-Western powers are not subscribed to liberal values as much as Western powers. Having been emboldened by the West's gradual decline, non-Western powers now play more decisive and influential roles in recent years. Neither China's

Belt Road Initiative nor Russia's Eurasian Economic Union project is grounded on liberal values and dreams (Layne, 2018).

According to many rising powers, in today's world, the post-war era's international institutions no longer represent the current power configurations legitimately, let alone operate smoothly. The G-7 first gave way to G-8 with Russia's incorporation, and then the G-20 has come closest to the world government in the aftermath of the global economic crisis in 2008. Some pundits even posit that today's world would be better characterised as a world of non-polarity or a G-zero world, with none of the global powers having the ability to shape the course of global developments on its own. Yet some others think the 'multipolar world order' would sound like a more appropriate term given that recent developments have made it undoubtedly clear that solutions to global security and economic problems cannot be found without the active engagement of key global powers acting in concert.

Rising non-Western powers are today grouped under different institutional settings. Whether one is talking about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, IBSA, or others, common to all such institutional platforms is that their members share a disdain for the legitimacy of Western norms and rules, as well as a strong desire to help bring into existence new international/regional orders whereby their interests and priorities would be reflected more convincingly. This is what China has been trying to do in East Asia, Russia in Eurasia, Brazil in southern America, India in South and South Eastern Asia, Turkey in the Middle East, etc. None of these rising powers openly confront Western powers. Yet what they try to do is help increase their manoeuvring capabilities in their regions at the expense of established Western powers. They are not forming counter-military alliances against the established Western powers but try to soft-balance them through international organizations and other bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. They are crying out for more respect than they have so far received from the Western powers.

Many rising powers seem to share the view that a universal understanding of human rights is just a fabrication of established Western powers in their attempts at extending their global influence. The idea that the enlargement of democracy to erstwhile non-democratic places would usher in a more peaceful and stable world order is a distortion of reality. Universal human rights cannot be sustained in today's diverse global setting. Different societies have their own particular conceptualization of how human rights should be defined and how the relationship between state and society should be instituted. Going after universal moral codes would be rowing against the tide, for each particular society appears to have its own understanding of morality and ethics. For example, while liberal Western powers tend to put individual rights at the centre of state-society relations and try to keep the role of the state in societal affairs at a minimum, many rising powers of the Eastern world are predisposed to have a society-centred understanding of morality in which individuals are expected to put themselves at the service of the society in which they live and contribute to the institution of orderly relations within their communities. Many rising powers do not buy into the argument that liberal democracy is the ideal and most appropriate model of government. To many of them, economic development and individual happiness might arise from strong state involvement in economic activities and strong political leadership at the helm of the state and society.

This moral challenge levelled against the legitimacy of liberal-democratic philosophy can best be noticed in the aid and trade policies of non-Western rising powers in the underdeveloped parts of the world. Unlike Western powers, non-Western rising powers, China being the most important one, appear to have adopted a no-strings-attached trade and aid policy in their African continent engagements. These rising powers do not ask many poor African countries to transform their internal structuring from A to Z as preconditions for delivering aid and trade concessions to them. The logic of conditionality simply drops out as the primary mechanism

in managing development aid and trade issues between rising non-Western powers and many underdeveloped countries.

In addition, the notion that the international community would be responsible for getting involved in countries' internal affairs where the rulers are in abject violation of universal human rights and fail to satisfy their people's fundamental needs, such as security, is vehemently resisted by many rising powers. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the so-called responsibility to protect doctrine in 2005. Since then, the international community has increasingly referred to this principle while undertaking military interventions in some places, the latest of which took place in Libya in March 2011. According to many rising powers, including the ones which have democratic regimes like India and Brazil, the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in states' internal affairs should be preserved as sacrosanct. The idea of responsibility to protect should not allow Western powers to get directly involved in the internal affairs of those with any attempt to form a 'league of democracies' or to bypass the well established international organizations, such as the United Nations, which should be avoided at all costs. Legitimacy and legality of international humanitarian operations should rest with the United Nations.

Global leadership and power plays in the post-COVID era

As the coronavirus pandemic has made clear, we are now quickly moving towards a new world order in which neither the United States nor China appears to be eager to play the role of a responsible global leader. Reluctant to adopt credible initiatives to help coordinate responses globally to defeat COVID-19, both superpowers seem to have put their national interests first and are engaged in sharp power competition with a view to gaining the moral high ground in the eyes of global audiences. This suggests that the ongoing American–Chinese geopolitical competition will increasingly take on more ideological or normative dimensions than ever before (Johnston, 2019).

Even though some argue that we are still far from a situation in which the US and the Soviet Union faced each other as existential enemies during the original Cold War years, we are quickly moving to that stage, with China and the US increasing their efforts to inflict damage on their material and nonmaterial interests each passing day. Indeed, the degree of economic interdependence between the US and China far outweighs the degree of economic interdependence that existed between the US and the Soviet Union. Unlike the Soviet Union, China owes its spectacular economic growth to its institutional incorporation into the US-led liberal international order. China's access to Western markets, Western foreign direct investment in its domestic economy, Western technological transfers to its firms, outsourcing of Western manufacturing jobs to the country, and the vast dollar reserves at its disposal have long led many to argue that the probability of China overhauling the current order would remain much lower than the likelihood of China transforming into a responsible stakeholder. The high economic interdependence between the two countries appears to have produced the perception that the US and China are on the same ship and that any shipwreck would make them both sink.

Both superpowers also believe in the merits of economic capitalism for pushing further growth and development. Although the US has thrived on market capitalism while China has relied on state capitalism, the degree of divergence between the American and Chinese models of capitalism is much less than the degree of incompatibility between American capitalism and Soviet communism. Unlike the competing American and Soviet claims to global primacy during the Cold War years, what we observe today is one established hegemon abdicating the role of global leadership while a rising superpower still shirks global responsibilities before proving its claim to hegemony in its own neighbourhood.

Unlike the American–Soviet example, today’s US and China engage each other through various bilateral and multilateral platforms. Saving their togetherness within the United Nations Security Council, the then Soviet and American leaders preferred to deal with each other bilaterally. This is just the opposite of how US and Chinese leaders have interacted with each other since the early years of China’s opening up to the global economy in the late 1970s. The multilateral elements of American–Chinese relations have spectacularly increased following China’s membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001.

However, the post-COVID-19 era does not augur well for the future of US–Chinese relations, and many pundits have already rushed to the conclusion that we are now watching a new Cold War unfold between two behemoths. Let alone their growing military expenditures, the US has intensified its efforts to help contain China’s rise through Quad-like initiatives, while China is doing its best to drive wedges between the US and its traditional allies across Europe, East Asia, and Southeast Asia (Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, 2020). In addition, China has, in recent years, improved its relations with Russia. Having felt excluded by the West, Russia and China have become much closer to each other than before. Though a traditional security alliance has not been in the making yet, each passing day witnesses more joint military exercises, energy cooperation, and diplomatic coordination between the two nations.

The fabrication of the China threat in American society also seems irreversible now. Many opinion polls recently show that majorities of Republican and Democratic constituencies in the United States define China as the number one existential threat. A Joe Biden presidency would not change the anti-China hysteria in American society. China’s performance during the coronavirus pandemic seems to have corroborated Americans’ fear that the communist leadership in Beijing is doing everything to hollow out American primacy and dent the American image across the globe. A similar psychology reigns in Beijing with Chinese leaders accusing their American counterparts of not playing a responsible role during the pandemic and putting China in the cross hairs. There is now an undeclared war between the two nations. US President Donald Trump’s efforts to decouple the American economy from that of China and his contribution to the erosion of China’s centrality in global supply chains are now viewed as hostile actions in the Chinese capital. Both countries are now competing with each other to recruit as many followers as possible all over the world. Europe, Central Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia have been increasingly transformed into playgrounds for the two countries. Both countries have now weaponized their military, economic, and ideational power capabilities to score goals against each other.

The thing to worry about is that the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the Cold War dynamics in American–Chinese relations and added a more ideological and normative flavour. Their political values, economic policies, governance models, and cultural traditions will increasingly become ammunition in this geopolitical competition. This is as much a hard power competition as it is a soft and sharp power one. Unlike the original Cold War between the US and Soviet Union, the new Cold War between the US and China will have more catastrophic consequences because humanity is living in a more globalizing and shrinking world, and technological developments will multiply their corrosive impact.

Whereas soft power emanates from attraction and strongly hinges on credibility, sharp power stems from well designed propaganda and public relations efforts aiming at cultivating a positive image about one’s self, as well as activities of manipulation and disinformation targeting external audiences. When it becomes a tool to be employed in interstate competition, soft power can no longer be considered soft or innocent nation-branding efforts.

To test how it feels, take a brief look at how Russia has been waging political warfare against liberal democracies in the aftermath of the Crimean crisis in 2014. There is a war between Russia and the Western powers, and this war is being fought more politically than militarily. Apart

from the ongoing proxy wars in Syria, Libya, and other conflict-riven failed states, the growing power competition between Russia and liberal democracies has been evolving more in political than in military platforms. Lending support to pro-Russian political parties and movements across Europe and the United States, helping manufacture a positive image about Russia and its policies through the employment of all available media platforms, and resorting to disinformation campaigns to tarnish the image of the West all over the world can all be considered as textbook examples of how sharp power has increasingly become a part of Russian statecraft.

Investing in creating alternative truths and contesting conventional understanding of social realities constitute other examples of how sharp power is exercised. As universalism has begun giving way to relativism and as various practices of the globalization process have been increasingly replaced by different protective nationalism practices in recent years, sharp power wars have inevitably turned out to be propaganda wars. It is undoubtedly clear that the shift from a US-led unipolarity toward a contested multipolarity has eased this process. This process will likely accelerate in the post-COVID age. The competition between the United States and China will intensify. What will shape this growing competition will increasingly revolve around how many followers China and the United States will each have in the following years. The two powers have already engaged in a propaganda war concerning the success of the measures that each has adopted to defeat the coronavirus.

The truth is that no one is in any position to verify the authenticity and legitimacy of the narratives that American and Chinese governments radiate around the world. Should we name the coronavirus the Chinese virus as American President Donald Trump wanted us to do? Is China helping others defeat the virus as a good international citizen, or is China's mask diplomacy and financial assistance to needy countries aimed at salvaging China's tarnished image in the early days of the pandemic? Is it the Chinese or American model of governance that performs better? What about the performance of the World Health Organization (WHO)? Has it actually transformed into the Chinese Health Organization as many China-bashers would have us believe, or are China's increasing contributions to global governance, most notably in the realm of efforts to defeat global pandemics, what we need as Trump's America abdicated its global leadership and became more introverted with each passing day?

It is now becoming more difficult each passing day to assess any actor's truth claims in any power competition. Objectivity is becoming increasingly contested. Multipolarity is aggravating this problem, too, because as material power is dispersed among many actors, the number of alternative truths also multiply. In such an environment, it will become more difficult than ever to separate soft power from sharp power.

Conclusion: implications for global leadership

Since the global financial crisis in 2008, the dynamics of the world order have been changing profoundly. Western powers' primacy has been in decline, whereas non-Western powers, most notably China, have been spectacularly increasing their sway in global politics. The multiplication of actors and the growing complexity of many issues render it quite challenging to exercise effective leadership in today's world. We are now witnessing a Cold War-like competition unfold around the globe that might potentially result in an armed confrontation between the established global hegemon and its most powerful rival (Allison, 2017). As the United States has increased its efforts to curb China's growing influence and as China seems to have left behind its peaceful rise strategy in favour of a more assertive and aggressive foreign policy stance, the spectre of instability, uncertainty, conflict, and chaos has tremendously increased in global politics. The COVID-19 crisis has aggravated the American-Chinese competition and demonstrated

that doubts on the existing multilateral platforms for providing effective leadership in global governance have climbed. In today's world, neither the United States nor China appears to have the appetite, let alone capability or legitimacy, to offer effective leadership in global governance. Existing multilateral platforms and mechanisms have come under strong challenges, with the United States abdicating its global hegemony and China doubling down its efforts to help bring into existence a China-centric world order.

In such an international environment, the so-called middle powers can play effective leadership roles in global governance, provided that they join their forces and coordinate their strategies (Nolte, 2010). Looking from the perspective of many middle powers, being exposed to contradictory signals coming from Washington and Beijing is the most unwanted experience. Whether it is because of their material power capability or behavioural underpinnings of their middle power identity, such powers would not want to feel sandwiched between global giants.

Middle powers will certainly lose as the tension between the US and China escalates. These powers are not as powerful as the global in terms of having the ability to shape the course of international developments to their liking. Most of today's middle powers appear to have workable relationships with the US and China. Many of them have the US as their number one external security provider, whereas China is the number one economic/trade partner. Their nightmare would arise if they found themselves in a quandary of having to choose between Americans and Chinese. China and the US are bullies and think they are entitled to their own sphere of influence. They are carnivorous powers adept at playing the time-tested game of realpolitik. They have the ability to survive in the jungle of international relations.

On the other hand, many middle powers are herbivorous powers that could only survive in an international environment closest to what many would define as a zoo. From the perspective of many middle powers, doing international politics within a zoo environment is less costly and more comfortable than doing so in the jungle environment. A Kantian world would serve the national interests of many middle powers more than a Hobbesian one. Middle powers would do well if they could tie the hands of the great powers using all kinds of the ropes and chains available to them. Domestication of international politics through multilateralism, international organizations, international law, diplomacy, and other global governance mechanisms should be the common interests around which all middle powers unite. This also seems to be the global vision of the EU as an international actor. Unless the European Union transforms into a credible international actor speaking with one voice and bringing all its members around a common vision, its chances of preserving its liberal character amidst the emerging realist world will be quite difficult.

The capacity of middle powers in general and of the European Union as a *sui generis* middle power in particular to provide effective leadership in global governance would increase if they combined their capabilities to form a league of multilateralists that would act in unison as an alternative third bloc or adopted strict neutrality (Jones, 2020). Their ability to resist the realpolitik pressures coming from either the US, Russia, or China would increase should they act together. Financial and trade globalization, multilateralism, international law, and rules-based global governance should continue to define the international order's central tenets if middle powers want to survive in the emerging cold war between the US and China. Germany, Japan, Canada, Australia, Turkey, India, South Korea, ASEAN members, and other potential middle powers should take the lead in bringing into existence an alternative international order which would serve the interests of humanity much better than a new cold war. Finding solutions to problems marring effective governance across the globe, particularly in Africa, would become more feasible if the emerging world order evolved in a liberal fashion and key actors adopted a globalist mentality.

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