Strategies for Order in a Disorderly World

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LSE IDEAS

STRATEGIC UPDATE

MARCH 2022

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”

Introduction

International orders break down and fail when avoidable and unjust wars break out. The analysis of the causes and consequences of these wars always involves questions of blame, as well as the consideration of what alternative policies could have avoided the war. The outcome of the war in Ukraine is unclear, but already analysts and observers are laying blame for its outbreak either on Putin's aggression or on NATO expansion. These positions are mirrored in theoretical debates between realism and liberal internationalism, as applied theories. Realists claim their explanations and policy prescriptions have been vindicated by the outcome of the invasion of Ukraine, while liberal internationalists will contest this and instead take the war as evidence of a need for more liberal internationalism, to protect democracies in an unsafe world.

Unfortunately, these debates between theories that aim to simplify messy reality, with analytical explanations, tend to over-simplify when applied to complex international events, contributing to misleading controversies. This tendency confuses thinking about strategies for international order, by exaggerating claims about the promise of alternative strategies. *Blame* for causing a war is not the same as *responsibility* for precipitating the crisis that preceded it, and laying blame on some, moreover, should not be confused with *vindicating* the alternative policies of others. In the wake of the Second World War, for instance, E.H. Carr's famous polemic against interwar liberal “idealism” as a source of

what he termed 'the twenty years' crisis' was seen by many to be validated, even though his own recommended policies of appeasement were by no means vindicated by the war (Cox 2000).

Working through these and related distinctions clearly is needed to formulate strategies for international order in a disorderly world. By *international order strategy* I mean a set of foreign policies and multilateral initiatives aimed at making a stable international order that is beneficial, to the extent possible, to national as well as common international interests. My aim as such in this strategic update is to clarify the terms of these debates between realism and liberalism, as applied theories with important policy implications. In clarifying these positions and their distinctions, however, I also suggest that the limitations of the international order strategies offered by realism and liberalism as applied theories become clearer too.

1. The Limits of Realism, after the Invasion of Ukraine

I have written elsewhere that while realists identify important problems with liberal internationalism, the alternative policies they offer suffer their own serious limitations (McKeil 2022). In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these insights and limits of realism remain consistent. Realist theorists, such as John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, argue that liberal hegemony provoked Russia's invasion by straining security dilemmas through norm-motivated support for Ukraine's eventual NATO membership. After the invasion of Ukraine 2022, the analysis of these realist thinkers remains consistent, taking the invasion as evidence confirming their worst fears of the West's policies of 'sleepwalking into war' (Walt 2022). Mearsheimer's responses to the war have made it clear that Russia is to blame for *starting the war*, but his argument that NATO has been responsible for *precipitating the crisis* that provoked the war, remains consistent (Chotiner 2022; Mearsheimer 2022). As such, the merits and problems with these arguments remain consistent too.

These arguments make the controversial point that responsibility for the crisis preceding the war rests principally with NATO member states, and the United States especially, for straining security dilemmas with Russia. Although Eastern European states desired NATO membership, this does not shift the responsibility, because entry is determined by member states, who adopted the 'open door' policy. There is also heated controversy over retrospective claims about promises made at the closure of the Cold War about policies of NATO expansion. Whether promises and agreements were made, however, does not shift responsibility for straining security dilemmas through expansion, even though there may have been important reasons for doing so at the time. As an assessment

of responsibility, the argument offered by Mearsheimer is based on an explanatory claim, that great powers tend to seek hegemony within their region. Realists also point to the idea of the security dilemma, to explain how the perception of threat produced by NATO expansion precipitated a security crisis, resulting in the use of force. These explanations are not unsupported by the events, but they also are selective of them, and tend to exaggerate the assessment of the burden of responsibility shared by NATO. Responsibility for the *sources of the crisis* is not the same as responsibility for the *management of the crisis,* for instance, and beyond the broad and general causes of war, there are proximate causes too, found in the handling of the preceding crisis. These causes will only later be clarified, when it becomes clearer how the crisis was managed—or mismanaged—both in negotiations and in decision making in Moscow.

> "Responsibility for the sources of the crisis is not the same as responsibility for the management of the crisis... and beyond the general causes of war, there are proximate causes too, found in the handling of the preceding crisis"

Critics may accuse realists of indulging in the so-called strategic fallacy of appeasement by advocating closing the option of NATO membership to Ukraine or other similar counter-factual policies. "Appeasement", however, has multiple senses, and the handling of the crisis and validity of any such counter-factual policy depends on its distinctions. First, appeasement by *unilateral concessions* is not the same thing as by *mutual concessions.* Preceding the war, the US favoured the latter, rightly, but may have been unwilling to make specific concessions demanded by Russia, while Russia may have been unwilling to accept specific concessions offered by the US as reciprocation. Second, *passive appeasement,* meaning inaction, is not the same thing as *active appeasement* through diplomatic recognition or public approbation. The Biden administration made neither, rightly. Third, appeasement of a dissatisfied power *from a position of strength* is not the same as appeasement *from a position of weakness*. Unlike the maritime powers in the 1930s, the US was and is still in a position of strength relative to Russia, so was right not to make concessions by compellence. Last, however, appeasement through concession of *outworn and unjust principles* is not the same

thing as appeasement through concession of *principles vital to international order*.[1] The US stood by the principle of non-intervention, which is a principle vital to the international order regardless of US hypocrisy, but the principle of open NATO membership should not be considered a vital principle. While the US could have offered non-vital concessions, it is unclear whether Russia was willing to make reciprocal concessions.

Beyond these distinctions, however realists confuse muddy claims about the sources of the crisis and causes of the war with the vindication of their own alternative policies of 'offshore balancing' and prudential realist 'restraint'. Their arguments take a logical leap from the crisis and war to a counter-factual claim that their alternative policies would have mitigated the crisis and avoided the war. The strain on NATO–Russian security dilemmas is only one of several identifiable sources of the crisis. The political tensions between Moscow and Kyiv would have still been present, although they may have been less strained. The use of force to resolve those tensions nevertheless was always an option for Russia if other measures proved insufficient, regardless of NATO expansion policies. Putin's ideology and historical and political outlook on Ukraine as well as Russia's domestic instabilities are further variables. NATO and the United States may share some responsibility for contributing to the crisis that preceded the war, and its handling, but it is not clear that the alternative realist policies of offshore balancing and restraint would have been sufficient to dispel the crisis or avert the prospects for the use of force.

In the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, moreover, offshore balancing seems less sensible, because the presence of US forces in Europe is not simply a provision of sophisticated and expensive kit; it is also provision of a more serious commitment—nuclear hostages—to assure allies and deter adversaries. Restraint, on the other hand, depending on its definition, is sensible, in a context of crisis and instability. Of course, restraint is among the first principles of strategy, dating back to Thucydides. By restraint, realists mean abstaining from norm-motivated interventions and only applying force where vital interests are involved. In principle this is sound, but restraint is a matter of context, and vital interests and normative impulses are not always divorced in practice. In the case of Ukraine in 2022, any direct intervention in the conflict would be strategic blunder beyond compare.

Waging an indirect proxy war as a strategy for order, however, involves human costs, and lesser but still present strategic risks. Such a policy in principle is difficult to distinguish from the normative aims of aiding the Ukrainian people, and supporting democratic ideals, but the aims of indirect support for Ukrainian forces should not be to punish Russia, but rather to balance Russia, so to make negotiations necessary

1 Hedley Bull (1986) makes these distinctions.

for Russia. With these aims, such a policy should be combined with an effort to work with China and other powers, to the extent possible, to leverage Russian restraint, and broker negotiations. Avoiding a proxy war involving all the great powers should be a priority of any strategy for order.

2. The Limits of Liberalism, after the Invasion of Ukraine

On the other hand, in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, liberal internationalism appears to be enjoying a revival in practice, but suffers its own limitations as a path to order. Liberal internationalists will contest realist claims about the sources of the war, and argue that liberal foreign policy to protect democracies is more vital now that the threat from Russia is clearer and bolder. But the invasion of Ukraine should make it more than apparent that the "buy in" logic of the "liberal" international order is insufficient to constrain the use of force by states. As an international order strategy, as such, it amounts to little more than a policy for the mutual protection of democracies, to weather the storm. Rather than confirming a need for redoubled liberal internationalism, the invasion of Ukraine confirms its limitations as a path to order in a disorderly world.

The leading thinker of the "liberal" international order, G. John Ikenberry, would likely disagree. In response to the crisis of international order prior to the war, Ikenberry (2020) offered a strategy of defensive liberal internationalism. He describes it as a 'mixed strategy' of both 'looking for opportunities to cooperate with China and Russia on the playing field of Westphalian internationalism, focusing on functional problems such as arms control, environment, and the global commons, while actively seeking to consolidate and strengthen cooperation across the liberal democratic world' (Ikenberry 2020, 301). Realist critics have argued that confidence in this policy is "delusional" and "nostalgic" because it is ideologically blind to the realities of power politics and provokes norm-motivated interventionism (Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018; Porter 2020). But assessing this strategy on its own terms, as a strategy rather than as an ideology, is worthwhile. If the strategy does not work on its own terms, its other problems are at least logically less important. My assessment is that not only are the limits of the constraining "buy in" logic of the liberal order made apparent by the invasion of Ukraine, but a strategy of defensive liberal internationalism is insufficient as a strategy for making international order on a global scale. I offer three reasons supporting this assessment.

i. One reason why defensive liberal internationalism is insufficient as an international order strategy is that the functional cooperation it seeks between liberal and illiberal powers has facilitating conditions that liberal internationalism itself does not provide. Mutual willingness to make reciprocal concessions, for instance, as well

as issue linkage, are classic requisites of functional international cooperation. Reciprocal concessions integrated through issue linkage, however, arguably also require what Kissinger (2014) called a broader ordering "image" shared by the relevant powers. Such an image is a facilitating condition of functional cooperation around common global challenges because there needs to be—at least at a notional level—a larger and shared picture or idea of a stability that is mutually acceptable and within which a feasible and lasting functional cooperation can be understood to fit into. Mutual concessions and issue linkages otherwise would be purely transactional, with limited ability to resist the desire for advantage and fear of disadvantage. An introduction of new mechanisms of adjustment and dispute resolution would be insufficient, too, if the order they serve is itself contested. A mixed strategy of defensive liberal internationalism may look for opportunities for cooperation on common global functional challenges but offers no strategic substance for facilitating such cooperation when those opportunities arise.

> "An introduction of new mechanisms of adjustment and dispute resolution would be insufficient, too, if the order they serve is itself contested."

ii. Second, demand for an alternative order from global south states limits the global reach and depth of liberal internationalism. A regrouped and defensive liberal internationalist strategy struggles to address the longstanding concerns and economic grievances about liberal hegemony held by many global south states and populations, for instance. Defensive liberal internationalism, from the perspective of global south states, is hardly different from liberal hegemony. Recalculated incentives of investment and finance carrots within liberal governance packages for instance may offer a strategy for competing with China, but do not in themselves amount to a strategy for producing international order as such. A forward-looking and broader global economic order strategy is needed to develop an international order inclusive of the interests and international order preferences of global south states. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, for instance, the notable

speech of Martin Kimani, Kenya's Permanent Representative Ambassador to the United Nations, offered a vision for international order based on multilateralism and regionalism: 'We agreed that… we would still pursue continental, political, and economic integration… We chose to look forward to a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known' (Kimani 2022). This suggests that a strategy of global multilateral and integrative overlapping regionalism is more promising and needed as a strategy for international order because it would include the global order demands of global south states, which make up the majority of the global population, the majority of states in international society, and a steadily growing global network of power in the 21st Century.

iii. Third, defensive liberal internationalism is insufficient as a long-term international order strategy, because it alienates illiberal powers and does not offer means for reconciling what Hedley Bull (2002) called conflicting "moral cultures".[2] Ikenberry has argued that as a long-term strategy, defensive liberal internationalism aims first to regroup liberal powers, then to leverage their combined strategic weight to incentivise illiberal states to nominally want to adopt its basic rules in the long-term, if not to join the club. This strategy may seek to avoid interventionism, but from the perspective of Russia or China, it may nevertheless still appear more "offensive" than "defensive". Strained relations will endure when the preferred normative purposes of illiberal great powers are perceived to be undermined or threatened by the idea of "Westernisation" that the liberal order represents. "Defensive" liberal internationalism may offer an international order strategy that strives to make parts of the world safe for democracy in an increasingly disorderly world, but it does little to reconcile or manage the need for order between liberal and illiberal great powers holding conflicting normative purposes.

These points do not amount to the claim that a defensive liberal internationalism has no merits or benefits whatsoever, although they do suggest it includes inherent costs, problems, and limitations as an international order strategy. The main point is that liberal internationalism does not amount to a strategy for making and sustaining order on a global scale. It is at best a strategy for consolidating the US-led Atlantic and Pacific orders. This is a modest path to order in an era facing not only common global challenges, but also returned prospects for great power war. The "liberal" international order has been a major source of order in the liberal Atlantic and Pacific worlds and within that space is arguably a security community with enduring ties. Beyond that world, however, it has diminishing limits, especially in a context of declining US

2 See, also, (Phillips and Reus-Smit 2020).

> The low rules density of the cyber domain invites added uncertainty to this context of global disorder, while simultaneously speeding up destabilising strategic interaction

hegemony. Building up a critical base of power in the Atlantic and Pacific to use as a carrot and stick mechanism against illiberal powers is insufficient as a global international order strategy. Defensive liberal internationalism as such falls short of a wanted international order strategy proper. Its harsher critics attack it as a self-defeating path to order due to its internal contradictions and ideological imperatives. Yet, as liberal hegemony declines, however gradually, less blame can be laid on it for the global disorders troubling world politics, because other powers will have increasingly greater roles and responsibility for the making and unmaking of global order.

Conclusion

Russia and China have included language in joint statements speaking of a 'new era' of international relations, much of which involves a perceived decline of US-led liberal hegemony. Yet, this is also an era increasingly defined by gathering global disorder, meaning an era defined by greater instability, prone to more frequent and more intense outbreaks of war and conflict. The low rules density of the cyber domain invites added uncertainty to this context of global disorder, while simultaneously speeding up destabilising strategic interaction, and facilitating a dizzying information war further confusing public discourse.

In an era marked by gathering global disorder, clear debate concerning strategies for international order is needed. Debates between realism and liberalism suffer from exaggerated claims to offer viable and sufficient international order strategies. My aim in this discussion has been to contribute to clarifying these debates. Through this discussion, however, I have suggested that under scrutiny it becomes clear that in a disorderly world neither realism nor liberal internationalism offers a sufficient path to a stable international order.

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In the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, Aaron McKeil aims to clarify debates between realism and liberalism, as applied theories. While he finds that each position is not without merits, under scrutiny neither is found to offer a sufficient strategy for order in a disorderly world.

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Australian, Japanese, Korean & U.S. ships take part in Pacific Vanguard 2020 in the western Pacific Ocean.

(Image edited to fit jigsaw frame.)

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