

Article

Contemporary Challenges to the U.S.-led Liberal International Order from the United States and the Rising Powers of China and Russia

Drew Cottle

Dr, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia
d.cottle@westernsydney.edu.au

Angela Keys

Dr, Sydney, Australia
angelakeys@hotmail.com

Thomas Costigan

School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia
T.Costigan@westernsydney.edu.au

Abstract

The liberal international order, established immediately after the Second World War and led by the United States, faces potentially its greatest challenges in decades. The continuation of U.S.' hegemonic leadership of the liberal international order is being challenged by U.S. domestic factors and Trump Administration policies, and by the emergence of the rising regional powers of China and Russia. This article examines some of the contemporary challenges to the U.S.-led liberal international order presented by China and Russia, as well as developments related to the United States that have impacted upon the liberal international order.

Keywords

Liberal International Order; United States; China; Russia

Introduction

This article analyses the existing scholarly literature in order to provide an assessment of recent challenges to the liberal international order from the United States, Russia and China. Given the vast literature on this topic, this analysis is by no means exhaustive; however, this article attempts to elucidate the issues that

are arguably of greatest significance to this important topic. To this end, this article highlights some of the economic, diplomatic and military challenges that China, Russia and the United States have presented to the contemporary liberal international order. The nations of China, Russia and the United States have been selected for this study because they are recognized as major international powers. As major world powers, the actions of the United States, China and Russia could potentially have a considerable impact upon the liberal international order. This article has been structured to provide an overview of the U.S.-led liberal international order, followed by an analysis of the issues relevant to the liberal international order and the individual cases of the United States, China and Russia respectively.

The Liberal International Order

On 1st June 2019 at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the Acting U.S. Secretary of Defense, Patrick Shanahan, cautioned that the rules-based liberal international order was under threat. In comments directed at China, Shanahan ‘warned of “actors” that “undermine the system by using indirect, incremental actions and rhetorical devices to exploit others economically and diplomatically, and coerce them militarily”’ (Yuen-C 2019). Some international relations scholars might argue that Shanahan’s words more aptly describe the actions and rhetoric employed by the United States. Some contend that, under the aegis of the liberal international order, it is the United States that has exploited other nations economically, diplomatically and militarily. Parma (2018), for example, has questioned whether the U.S.-led liberal international order amounts to American ‘imperialism by another name’. Glaser (2019, p. 54) has identified a status quo bias associated with LIO analyses, and argues that many of these analyses ‘start from the premise that preserving the LIO deserves top priority’. Debate continues among international relations scholars about the liberal international order and its mythical existence (Barma, Ratner, & Weber 2013; Allison 2018), its decline or death (de Jonquieres 2017; Guillén 2019), or its endurance (Ikenberry 2018). However, the liberal international order represents more than an ideological concept or rhetorical tool; it has shaped the course of history since the end of the Second World War as well as the lives of people who experienced the military interventions rationalised by this rhetoric, both during the Cold War and in its aftermath. As Porter (2018, p. 3) asserts, nostalgia for the liberal international order denies ‘the violent coercion, resistance, and unintended consequences of “world ordering,” it sanitizes history into a morality tale and delegitimizes arguments for revision and retrenchment’.

While international relations scholars have offered various interpretations of what is known as the ‘liberal international order’ (LIO), it is generally agreed that the LIO was established immediately after the Second World War, with the United

States assuming a crucial leadership role in the LIO. Some contend that the LIO 'was a liberal internationalist system embracing collective security, economic openness and social progress' (Gyngell 2018). Advocates of the LIO argue that it contributed 'a multifaceted and sprawling international order, organized around economic openness, multilateral institutions, security cooperation and democratic solidarity' (Ikenberry 2018, p. 7).

Within the liberal international order, the United States provided 'hegemonic leadership' (Ikenberry 2018, p. 7). This U.S.-led liberal internationalism has, in practice, amounted to US global hegemony. The United States' Grand Area policy and the Bretton Woods conference in 1944, where the U.S. dollar was established as the world's reserve currency, provided the foundation for America's leadership role in this international system. The international system has been liberal to the extent that it allowed for international capital flows, with the U.S. financial system taking a central role in the world economy. The continuing U.S. leadership of the LIO has, from 1944 to the present, been tied to the status of the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency. In 1942, British economist, John Maynard Keynes had proposed a kind of world clearing union that would have offered a potential alternate unit of account that could be used in place of dollars (Horsefield, 1969). However, during the Bretton Woods conference of 1944, U.S. Treasury official, Harry Dexter White resisted this approach by Keynes in an attempt to secure the U.S. dollar as the dominant reserve currency (Steil 2013, p. 3). The U.S. dollar has maintained this position as the global reserve currency ever since, and remains critical to world trade.

The U.S.-led LIO has undergone major shifts since its establishment following the Second World War. The U.S. had, to a certain extent, been constrained by the bipolarity of the Cold War era. The balance of power between the U.S. and the Soviet Union had provided a degree of order and stability to this bipolar Cold War period (Allison 2018, p. 126). However, the relationship between the world's major powers changed dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the threat of mutually assured destruction (or M.A.D.) reduced, the U.S. experienced a freedom of action that it had not enjoyed before. The post-Soviet expansion of NATO eastwards, the first Gulf War in Iraq in 1991, and the 1999 air war over the former Yugoslavia are indicative of a global geopolitics that was defined by U.S. unipolarity. With no major strategic competitors to challenge the United States at the time, a 'unipolar' moment was declared (Krauthammer 1990). This era was defined by the 'disparity of power' between the U.S. and its allies and competitor nations (Krauthammer 2002, p. 5).

From the end of the Cold War until 2016, the liberal international order was shaped by the unipolarity of the United States. This period represented an era of U.S.- and Western-led intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, typi-

cally under the guise of the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) doctrine. This doctrine is problematic as it was designed to provide a pretext for U.S. intervention in the absence of a Soviet or Cold War pretext (Cunningham 2015). This allowed the United States to pursue strategic objectives under the guise of humanitarianism. The ‘responsibility to protect’ doctrine was evident in the U.S.-led air war waged over Serbia in order to put an end to the alleged atrocities of the Milosevic government (Anderson 2015; O’Connell 2010, p. 42).

In the contemporary era, especially since 2016, the world order has generally been interpreted as multipolar, with the rising powers of China, Russia and other nations challenging the supremacy of the United States in its role as global hegemon (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 8). Despite these major shifts from bipolarity to unipolarity, and more recently to multipolarity, and the consequent impact upon the U.S.-led liberal international order, important features that underpin the LIO have remained unchanged and key among these is the U.S. dollar’s status as the global reserve currency. This article attempts to explore some of the economic, diplomatic and military challenges to the LIO that have emerged from China, Russia and the United States in the contemporary period.

The United States and the Liberal International Order

The liberal international order, ‘comprised by the United Nations (UN) and other institutions and organizations’ mission of cooperating and governing according to the principles of equal sovereignty, the rule of law, human rights protection, and promoting and maintaining peace and security’, has been sustained by a commitment to liberal values (Roach 2017, p. 1029-1030). However, some contend that liberalism had been in retreat, if not in crisis internationally, in recent decades (Malik 2017). It has been observed that the ‘very countries that created international organisations are now pivoting away from them’ (Gray 2019, p. 83).

From the end of the Cold War, the apparent ‘liberalism’ of the U.S.-led world order was confronted by a transition in U.S. foreign policy toward military action in response to (perceived) problems in international affairs and international relations, and the rejection of multilateralism in favour of U.S. unilateralism. This U.S. foreign policy transition has been driven by the rise and influence of neo-conservatives upon the direction taken by the United States, both in its domestic affairs and in its leadership of the LIO. In the late 1990s, for example, under the banner of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), influential U.S. neo-conservatives had advocated for the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, asserting that his government posed a threat to the U.S. and its Middle East allies. A crucial PNAC document published in 2000, entitled *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century*, revealed a neo-conservative interpretation of U.S. foreign policy which argued that U.S. military

capability had been weakened after the Cold War (Donnelly, Kagan & Schmitt 2000). The document's authors blamed both a cut in military funding and the perceived weakness of the Clinton administration for this position (Donnelly, Kagan & Schmitt 2000, p. 3). The influence of neo-conservatives was evident in the foreign policy of President George W. Bush, particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The neo-conservatives prioritised military force to solve what they viewed as foreign policy problems, and took unilateral action, rather than opting for multilateral methods. This militarized unilateral approach resulted in disastrous foreign policy outcomes (Walt 2015), and even more disastrous consequences for the populations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the contemporary period, the influence of neo-conservatives is apparent within the Trump Administration through, for example, the appointment of neo-conservative 'hawk', John Bolton, as National Security Advisor. President Trump's approach to foreign policy indicates a neo-conservative influence; however, there are a number of domestic factors that have shaped United States' foreign policy into a form that often conflicts with the liberal principles that underpin the international order. These factors include the expanded executive powers of the president and the diminished ability of the US Congress to constrain the president on foreign policy decisions; the undermining or sidelining of key bureaucratic institutions instrumental to the making of foreign policy, such as the State Department; and the steady militarization of US foreign policy since 9/11 (Goldgeier & Saunders 2018, p. 145; 151-153).

President Trump's 'America first' approach is surely not what advocates of a liberal internationalism imagined for the leadership of the liberal international order. The explicit nationalism of the Trump Administration arguably represents a considerable challenge for the liberal international order, potentially undermining the position of the U.S. as the global leader of the LIO. President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), for instance, demonstrated a deeply nationalist attitude towards foreign policy. Trump's 2017 NSS provided a retrograde view of the position of the U.S. in the world, positing simplistically that if the U.S. returned to an era when the government did not encroach on free enterprise and taxes were low, the strength of the U.S. will be restored (Trump 2017, p. 2). Moreover, Trump identified China and Russia as top competitors to U.S. leadership (Trump 2017, p. 2).

Since his inauguration, President Trump has guided the United States to reject some of the liberal international order's most important international agreements and institutions. In 2017, Trump announced his intention to withdraw the United States from its commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change. Commenting on the Paris Agreement, Trump stated that, "It would once have been unthinkable that an international agreement could prevent the United States from

conducting its own domestic affairs” (Shear 2017). In addition to undermining global action on climate change, Trump has led the United States to rescind its membership of crucial international cultural and human rights organisations. In 2017, Trump announced that the U.S. would withdraw from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (Adamson 2019). The U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO was expected to financially weaken the organisation that was established after the end of the Second World War to foster educational, scientific and cultural ties between nations in order to ‘reduce the threat of conflict’ (Coningham 2017). The Trump Administration’s 2018 withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council was viewed by human rights activists as a development that ‘could hurt efforts to monitor and address human rights abuses around the world’ (BBC News 20 June 2018), and saw President Trump deemed ‘not a credible leader on human rights’ (Joseph 2018).

International treaties aimed at ensuring international security, the protection of human rights, the regulation of arms sales, and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons have not been spared from President Trump’s revocation. In 2018, Trump provoked condemnation from some European nations after he announced the withdrawal of the U.S. from the multilateral agreement known as the Iran nuclear pact (or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) and re-imposed sanctions upon Iran (Marcus 2018). In 2019, Trump abandoned an agreement that the U.S. had not yet ratified: the United Nations’ Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). The ATT required signatory states to monitor their arms sales to avoid contravening arms embargoes and ‘to ensure the weapons they export do not end up being used for genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes or terrorist acts’ (BBC News 27 April 2019). Announcing the abandonment of the ATT, Trump stated that, “We will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy” (Chappell 2019). In 2019 too, Trump declared that the U.S. was withdrawing from a 1987 nuclear non-proliferation pact with Russia: the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which had been considered ‘a central part of the international nonproliferation regime’ (Bidgood 2019).

There are indications that the Trump Administration may yet seek to distance the United States from other instruments of international liberalism. For example, National Security Advisor, John Bolton, condemned the International Criminal Court in a 2018 speech entitled, ‘Protecting American constitutionalism and sovereignty from international threats’ (Tisdall 2018). Bolton also stated in 2018 that the Trump Administration “will commence a review of all international agreements that may still expose the US to purported binding jurisdiction dispute resolution in the International Court of Justice” (Gaouette & Crawford 2018).

President Trump’s belligerent rhetoric has proven a challenge for the liberal international order. The Trump Administration has endorsed Brexit, ‘actively encour-

aged the breakup of the EU, questioned enduring US global security alliances such as NATO, and seen the advocacy of an economic nationalism that threatens to reverse globalization' (Stokes 2018, p. 133). Some analysts have viewed Trump's actions in office as, in effect, an abdication of America's leadership role within the liberal international order (Hopewell 2017, p. 303). It has been asserted that the 'most important requirement for building a liberal international order is to spread liberal democracy far and wide' (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 31). However, Trump has been criticised for his praise for foreign dictators, and it has been argued that he has 'jettisoned democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal' (Posen 2018, p. 25). More broadly, Trump is seen to have 'outlined a deeply misguided foreign policy vision that is distrustful of U.S. allies, scornful of international institutions, and indifferent, if not downright hostile, to the liberal international order' (Cohen 2019, p. 138).

President Trump has been similarly combative with regard to international trade. Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal with eleven other nations in 2017, deeming it "a potential disaster" for the United States (Taylor 2018). Trump has threatened to withdraw the United States from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or to 'simply ignore any of its rulings that do not go in Washington's favor' (Hopewell 2017, p. 303). However, it is Trump's instigation of a trade war with China that arguably represents one of the greatest contemporary challenges to the liberal international order and potentially threatens international security and stability.

In 2018, President Trump imposed substantial tariffs on billions of dollars worth of Chinese goods, prompting China to retaliate and introduce similar tariffs on U.S. products. Tensions between the U.S. and China have escalated into a trade war and diplomatic relations between the two nations have deteriorated. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce has reportedly 'warned that the dispute may even lead to "the largest trade war in economic history to date"' (Wong & Chipman Koty 2019). The tensions between the U.S. and China have adversely affected stock markets and seen growing apprehension that 'the trade war will derail global economic growth' (Chapman 2019). The head of international trade at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Pamela Coke-Hamilton, provided an assessment of the potential consequences of a further escalation of the U.S.-China trade war: "There'll be currency wars and devaluation, stagflation leading to job losses and higher unemployment and more importantly, the possibility of a contagion effect, or what we call a reactionary effect, leading to a cascade of other trade distortionary measures" (BBC News 5 February 2019). The emergence of the U.S.-China trade war obscures what many have observed: the 'interdependency' and 'mutual dependency' of the Chinese and American economies (Watkins 2019, p. 12; Fox 2014, p. 88). Nonetheless, the

U.S.-China trade war has signalled that, while the United States under Trump has attempted to continue to act unilaterally, China may be unwilling to yield to the dominance of the United States as world hegemon.

China and the Liberal International Order

In recent years, China has been viewed as a rising world power largely due to its significant economic growth in a period that has seen the world's economic superpower, the United States, 'in decline relative to China' (Fox 2014, p. 88). On purchasing power parity, China's GDP in 2001 was '39 per cent of that of the US'; by 2008 it was 62 per cent, and by 2016, 'China's GDP was 114 per cent that of the United States' (Frankopan, 2018, p. 26). It has been asserted that China's economic ascendancy has proven a concern for the United States because the U.S. fears that it will be supplanted as the world's pre-eminent power (de Montbrial 2019, p. 106). In this way, China could be seen to represent a threat to the liberal international order simply because the United States views as a threat to its own power globally.

The 'primacy of the U.S. dollar' (Brunnermeier, Doshi & James 2018, p. 169) and its status as the global reserve currency is fundamental to the U.S. leadership of the liberal international order. Since World War II, the U.S. dollar has occupied a unique position as simultaneously the domestic currency of the U.S. and the main currency used to conduct world trade and hold reserves. However, the rise of China in the contemporary period has meant that some have viewed China's currency and its financial power as a possible challenge to the United States, with China considered a contender for 'reserve currency succession' (Fan Lim, 2019).

China's economic growth has certainly had important international consequences for the country's currency, the renminbi. China succeeded in 2016 in having the renminbi approved by the International Monetary Fund 'as one of the international reserve currencies included in the IMF's Special Drawing Right' (Mazarr et al. 2017, p. 107). The Special Drawing Right (SDR) comprises a basket of currencies: the renminbi, together with the U.S. dollar, the Japanese yen, the euro, and the British pound sterling (International Monetary Fund, 2019). As well as elevating the significance of China's currency to world trade, China's growing economic power enabled it to create the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which was founded in 2016 (Strategic Policy Issues 2018, p. 31). The AIIB has been interpreted as a means by which China has been able to restrain Western power, and U.S. power in particular, 'while remaining anchored in the liberal order structures' (Alcaro 2018, p. 157). In addition to the AIIB, China has established other international organisations 'amenable to the exercise of Chinese power', including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), 'the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building (CICA), and the New

Development Bank for BRICS' (Mazarr, Heath & Stuth Cevallos 2018, p. 81).

China's economic rise has permitted it to vastly increase its military spending, yet China's military still does not rival the size of that of the United States. Nonetheless, regional and international tensions have increased with China's growing utilisation of its military, specifically in relation to 'China's naval expansion, construction of artificial islands and military deployment in the South China Sea' (Duncombe & Dunne 2018, p. 29). China's uncompromising stance on the South China Sea has caused discord with the United States as well as its regional neighbours, especially Vietnam, the Philippines and Taiwan (de Graaff & van Apeldoorn, 2018, p. 119).

China's ambitious international infrastructure project – 'the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', generally known as the Belt and Road Initiative – has been viewed as a method by which China has been competing with the United States for international leadership and influence in the contemporary era (Mazarr, Heath & Stuth Cevallos, 2018, p. x). Through China's Belt and Road Initiative, Latin America and Africa, for example, 'have experienced massive Chinese economic penetration' (Alcaro 2018, p. 157). However, some have suggested that the Belt and Road Initiative has actually been motivated by the need to address domestic economic factors, 'such as industrial overproduction and unemployment' within China (de Graaff & van Apeldoorn, 2018, p. 119).

The implications of China's involvement in the liberal international order have been much debated by international relations scholars. Whether the incorporation of China into the global institutions and international agreements of the liberal world order has consequently undermined, enhanced or threatened the existence of the LIO continues to be contested. Would a rising China ultimately disrupt and defy the LIO and contest the United States' leadership of that international order? Although China has risen rapidly to a position as one of the world's leading powers, it has been asserted that China has sought to 'help run the existing global system, not overturn it' (Ikenberry 2008, p. 19). Some have concluded that China is not in any position to contest the leadership of the LIO, as America's economic and military power, and U.S. soft power, continues to exceed that of China, and China has neglected the articulation of 'distinctive values to underwrite the world order' (Zhao 2016, p. 14, 16-17). The integration of China and other rising powers within the LIO has even been interpreted as an important achievement for the United States as, 'by involving new powers in the current structures and making them responsible stakeholders, the US can bind those new powers into the current architecture, thus securing its own influence' (Veziroglou 2013, p. 635).

It has been observed that China has largely complied with the rules of the global institutions of which it is a member, and that China has generally participated as a supporter of the current liberal international order (Mazarr, Heath & Stuth Cevallos 2018, p. 69-70; de Graaff & van Apeldoorn 2018, p. 114). However, it cannot be overlooked that China remains one of the world's largest authoritarian powers, and in the last decade it has become even more repressive and autocratic (Joshi 2018, p. 9). Some have cautioned that incorporating autocracies like China into the existing LIO potentially advances the 'credibility of authoritarian alternatives to the neoliberal order' (Lee 2019, p. 57). Others contend that the liberal international order is sustained by unipolarity and that the rise of China as a global power has correspondingly weakened the US-led LIO (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 42). China's participation in the LIO may represent an attempt to obscure or distract from the nation's authoritarianism. However, China's apparent commitment to liberal internationalism and the LIO's global institutions and covenants could also be viewed as an effort to mask crucial problems that persist domestically. The mass migration, urbanisation and industrialisation that drove China's vast economic growth have in turn created 'the high levels of internal turmoil and the extremes of inequality that are giving rise to major political and economic instability' (Parmar 2018, p. 154; 168). China's position as a global power is predicated on its economic success; however, China's economic power faces its own problems and 'contradictions such as overcapacity and a spiralling debt' (de Graaff & van Apeldoorn 2018, p. 113).

As a rising power, China has undoubtedly succeeded in terms of economic growth rates, and by enabling an estimated 850 million Chinese to escape from poverty (Weiping 2018). However, the rise of China and other authoritarian nations, such as Russia, has come at a significant cost as it has also driven 'the global normalisation of authoritarian values' (Lee 2019, p. 64).

Russia and the Liberal International Order

Whether Russia does indeed constitute a rising power is *debatable*, however, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia has inherited a position as a major power within the post-Cold War liberal international order. In the contemporary period, Russia has been viewed as a resurgent, albeit weakened, great power (Mearsheimer 2019, p. 42). In comparison with the United States and China, Russia today is not a great power economically; nonetheless its role as Europe's energy supplier is crucial to both the European states and Russia's finances (Hannibal 2014, p. 73). The United States' now diminished 'ability to shape global affairs as it did after 1945 or 1989' has partly been attributed to the growing international influence of Russia, China and India (Goldgeier 2018, p. 18). Russia's position as a global power is underpinned not by its economic strength, but by its military power. Moreover, it is Russia's readiness to exercise its

military power that has seen it deemed a threat to the liberal international order.

In the past decade, the liberal international order has been impacted by the revival of 'an assertive, illiberal Russian nuclear superpower, which is willing to use its military to change both borders in Europe and the balance of power in the Middle East' (Allison 2018, p. 130). Russia had signalled its preparedness for military action through its brief 2008 war with neighbouring Georgia, and Russia disregarded condemnation from European nations when it formally recognised 'both of Georgia's breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as independent states' (Larsen 2012, p. 102). However, it was Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea that served to confirm its 'plans to project power in the near abroad' (Karagiannis 2014, p. 400). Russia further demonstrated its military power when it launched air strikes in Syria, with Russia's involvement interpreted as transforming Syria's civil war into a proxy war waged by Russia and the United States (Stent 2016, p. 106). Russia has asserted that its intervention has targeted Islamic State terrorists, but analysis of the air strikes conducted revealed that Russia has primarily aimed its bombs and rockets at armed groups opposed to Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad (Ilnicki 2015, p. 57-58).

In addition to its overt military activities in Georgia, Crimea and Syria, Russia has also engaged in clandestine 'political-military interference in eastern Ukraine in early 2014' (Gardner 2016, 490). This clandestine interference was part of a campaign by Russia that was intended to bolster separatist forces within eastern Ukraine (Maull 2019, p. 15). The conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region has since evolved into a civil war, in which Russia's destabilising role has included 'diplomatic and economic pressure, propaganda campaigns, and low-intensity proxy warfare, including military occupation' (Malyarenko & Wolff 2018, p. 204).

Russia's actions in Syria, Georgia, Crimea and the Donbas region of the Ukraine have challenged the liberal international order by causing a deterioration of relations between Russia and Europe, with some European Union member states said to view Russia as their chief threat (de Montbrial, 2019, p. 118). Relations between Britain and Russia were further strained by the 2018 poisoning in Salisbury of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, allegedly conducted by Russian agents (Wintour 2018). The LIO was also challenged by Russia's alleged interference in the United States' 2016 presidential election, which has been identified as an example of the methods by which authoritarian states 'seek to weaken democratic rivals and alliances to undermine the ideological appeal of open societies, in turn consolidating their own power' (Joshi 2018, p. 15). Russia's intensification of military, diplomatic and economic ties with China, as well as Russian relations with other 'likeminded authoritarian regimes' in Iran, Syria, Venezuela and Belarus, are also indicative of the contemporary threat to the LIO that is posed by the rise of authoritarian states (Götz & Merlen 2019, p. 136). Similarly, Russia's ability

to impede potential United Nations' interventions through the use of its veto power on the United Nations Security Council has been seen as symptomatic of broader global governance problems within the LIO, whereby 'authoritarian and postcolonial emerging powers have become leading voices that undermine anything approaching international consensus and, with that, multilateral institutions' (Barma, Ratner & Weber 2013, p. 62).

Differing interpretations of Russia's engagement with the liberal international order abound, with some asserting that Russia fundamentally rejects the LIO (Strategic Policy Issues 2018, p. 31). Within the international relations literature on Russia and the liberal international order, three broad perspectives have been discerned which depict Russia, respectively, as a 'revanchist power', a 'defensive power', or an 'aggressive isolationist' (Götz & Merlen 2019, p. 133). However, Russia is arguably best understood as a reactive – if not 'reactionary' – power (Krickovic 2018, p. 5).

As a reactive power, Russia's military activities in Georgia, Syria and the Crimea and Donbas region within the Ukraine have occurred in response to perceived threats. Russia's intervention in Syria, for instance, reflected its concerns about its status internationally and a 'desire to assume greater regional and international influence, thereby affirming its legitimacy as a Great Power' (Duncombe & Dunne 2018, p. 29). Russia's actions in Georgia and the Ukraine have been linked to growing Russian fears about its borders 'following Western military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Iraq' (Radin & Reach 2017, p. x). United States' policies of 'regime change' during the period of George W. Bush's presidency were of particular concern for Russia (de Montbrial, 2019, p. 116-117). Russian officials, it has been argued, 'believe that U.S. military operations in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya indicate that future military action by the United States may not be constrained by the U.N.' (Mazarr et al. 2017, p. 103). With regard to the Ukraine and Georgia specifically, Russia had been alarmed by the 2008 assertion by NATO – prompted by the United States – that Georgia and the Ukraine would become NATO members in the future (Clunan 2018, p. 51). Russia also considered the United States responsible for orchestrating 'pro-democracy "colored" revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s', as well as the ousting in 2014 of the Ukrainian president (Clunan 2018, p. 51; de Montbrial 2019, p. 117).

Russia's military actions in Georgia, Crimea, Syria and the Ukraine's Donbas region have proven to be major challenges to the liberal international order. However, some analysts have distinguished geostrategic and domestic political factors as determinants of Russia's foreign policy with regard to these actions. The annexation of Crimea, for example, was motivated by the acquisition of 'a significant area of maritime territory that belonged to Ukraine, which contains

gas and oil reserves' (Biersack & O'Lear 2014, p. 263). The strategic proximity of the Ukraine to Russia has been a factor in Russia's aggressive policies toward its neighbouring state (Götz 2015, p. 3). Russia's military interventions in Crimea and Syria were intended to 'distract public attention from political and economic problems at home' (Götz & Merlen 2019, p. 140). In assessing the threat posed by Russia to the liberal international order, it must be noted that 'the prioritisation of foreign policy over domestic reforms explains the intensity of Russian discontent and its occasional aggressive manifestations' (Romanova 2018, p. 76).

Conclusion

Russia, China and the United States have presented diverse challenges – economic, diplomatic and military – to the liberal international order in the contemporary era. Nonetheless, the liberal international order continues to endure, as does United States' leadership of the order, albeit in a mediocre style of leadership under the indifferent guidance of President Donald Trump. Indeed, President Trump's indifference potentially serves to underscore what G. John Ikenberry has long argued: that the LIO 'is not really an American order or even a Western order', but 'an international order with deep and encompassing economic and political rules and institutions that are both durable and functional' (Ikenberry 2008, p. 19). The challenges posed to the LIO by China, Russia and the United States should perhaps be considered within the broader context of the 'ebb and flow' of international orders, where, as Julia Gray has observed, the 'unacknowledged history of international cooperation is one of setbacks, false starts, exits and dissolutions' (Gray 2019, p. 83).

Bio

Drew Cottle

Dr Drew Cottle is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and History in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University in Sydney, Australia.

Angela Keys

Dr Angela Keys is an independent researcher and writer based in Sydney, Australia.

Thomas Costigan

Mr Thomas Costigan is a PhD Candidate in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts at Western Sydney University in Sydney, Australia.

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