



ENC ANALYSIS



Managing Regional and Global Order after Ukraine: between Ideals and Reality

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About the author



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Summary

This paper examines the future of the European regional and global order in light of the ongoing Ukraine war. Following an overview of the various longer- and shorter-term tensions in the Western alliance regarding policies towards Russia in the run-up to the war – between ‘Old European’ states like Germany and France, Central and Eastern European allies, and the United States – it identifies several issues around which fissures within NATO and the EU could reappear in the future: populist electoral successes – including the United States, extreme developments in Ukraine itself, and redefined relations with the wider world – specifically, China, and the global South. It is argued that the West will likely be confronted with a number of difficult dilemmas over the longer term and that a return to the Liberal International Order as conceived at its inception, in the early 1990s, will remain highly unlikely. The argument concludes by recommending a revision of Western states’ social contracts and the development of a culture of flexible compromise over liberal dogma in relations with the wider world.

Introduction

It has often been remarked that the ongoing war in Ukraine has reinvigorated the West's sense of purpose, just as its coherence appeared to be waning.¹ While Germany has been an outlier in terms of the prudence displayed – very much in line with its full embrace of the 'Old European' approach towards the East that long posited pacification through economic and political engagement – a broad consensus seems to have emerged that the old methods of economic and political engagement with Russia have failed; instead, events appear to have validated the more hard-power approach of NATO expansion as the more adequate response to Moscow's growing assertiveness. Most – but not all – NATO members have subjected Moscow to a series of never-before seen political, economic and cultural sanctions while providing unseen levels of military support – albeit short of direct intervention – to the Ukrainian state.² With Russia's consecutive failures in its ongoing campaign, the alliance's aims have hardened from preventing a wholesale Russian takeover of the country, to *strategically weakening* the attacking side to such an extent that a repeat of that intervention would be beyond its capabilities.³

So far, so good. But will this new-found concord last? And does this new-found unity – as some contend – imply a revival of the Liberal International Order (LIO) – at least in Europe – against the assertion of some commentators that this conflict represents its final gasp?⁴ In what comes below, I will examine these two questions:

¹ Morcos, P., & Monaghan, S. (2022, 29 March). NATO and the European Union Show Unity and Resolve in Brussels. CSIS. Retrieved 4 May from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-european-union-show-unity-and-resolve-brussels>

² Euractiv. (2022, 30 April). Special Capitals: What Europeans do to support Ukraine. Retrieved 4 May from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/special-capitals-what-europeans-do-to-support-ukraine/>, Fouriezos, N. (2022, 29 April). As Support for Ukraine Accelerates, Key US Senators Explore the Next Moves to Prevent a Russian Victory. Atlantic Council. Retrieved 4 May from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/as-support-for-ukraine-accelerates-key-us-senators-explore-the-next-moves-to-prevent-a-russian-victory/>

³ Borger, J. (2022). Pentagon Chief's Russia Remarks Show Shift in US's Declared Aims in Ukraine. The Guardian. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/russia-weakedend-lloyd-austin-ukraine>

⁴ Jacobs, S. (2022). The Ukraine Crisis Is the Final Nail in the Coffin of the Western Liberal Order. *The Daily Telegraph*. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/02/21/ukraine-crisis-final-nail-coffin-western-liberal-order/>, Rodrik, D. (2022). Ukraine Invasion Signals the Death of 'Liberal' World Order. What Will Replace It? *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3169923/ukraine-invasion-signals-death-liberal-world-order-what-will>, Shani, G., & Behr, H. (2022).

A New World Order? From a Liberal to a Post-Western Order. *E-IR*. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/13/opinion-a-new-world-order-from-a-liberal-to-a-post-western-order/>

firstly, on the potential effects of the Ukraine war on the West's apparently new-found unity of purpose; and, secondly, on its effects on the LIO, and its norms and practices – on the continent, and beyond. In so doing, I shall be examining potential stress-points that may emerge or re-emerge in coming months and years in the West as Russia's aggression against Ukraine unfolds; and the extent to which it will affect – positively or negatively – the survival of these norms in the wider global order.

My argument will thus revolve around the challenges to and requirements for Western coherence, and the survival of liberal assumptions as the bedrock governing their own interactions, and their interactions with the wider world. If these assumptions posit a 'Kantian zone of peace' among interdependent, democratic states under the international rule of law as the best guarantee for a peaceful Europe, can such a zone be salvaged, indeed reinvigorated from the wreckage of the current war; and will the liberal West be able to function as the core of a broader, liberal global order by shaping the world based on these three fundamental principles, going forward?

The Liberal International Order, in Europe and Beyond

The current crisis of the LIO can be traced back to any number of possible dates, with some going so far as to argue if the order itself was inexistent, or in a perpetual state of disorder from its posited beginning.⁵ Whatever one's preferences: there is little doubt that the Western-dominated LIO has been in a state of crisis for some time now, and that the Russian invasion of Ukraine represents the latest in a long list of epicentres to its steady decline. Indeed, Europe's post-Cold War security order had always been tightly interwoven with many of its core - liberal - assumptions: the pacifying nature of democracy, free markets and a 'rules-based order' underlay much of the logic behind both NATO and EU expansion, as well as the EU's broader engagement with its Eastern Neighbourhood. Coupled with an open-door policy, the Western core's liberal conditionalities ensured its status as a norm-maker, and, conversely, the role of aspiring members as norm-takers during much of the post-Cold War era. Beyond Europe, the mental image of policymakers was all too often defined by a world with the liberal, Western 'civilised world' at its centre.

There were always important differences within what evolved to become 'the West' as we know it today, however. To the members of 'Old Europe', this above-mentioned liberal framework prevented a return to the 'bad old days' of a Europe of competing nation-states through the 'education' of their newly liberated

⁵ Luce, E. (2022). Biden Should Scrap Talk of the 'Liberal International Order'. Financial Times. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.ft.com/content/41d10062-ebe7-4fe4-ba63-c530e61b8f20>, Porter, P. (2020). The False Promise of Liberal Order. Polity Press.

brethren into – essentially – liberal civilisation, radiating outward from itself. To its Central and Eastern European neighbours, it held up the prospect of joining the Western elite of International Society, all the while ensuring security from their greatest fear: a resurgent Russia. To the United States, it presented a way to stabilise a region which had long stood at the core of its globally defined interest, within an ideological framework with which its policymakers had long been familiar – and which now, with the ‘End of History’, appeared as the only rational way of managing international affairs globally – through direct interventions, if necessary.

A fundamental divergence on regional and global order was thus built into Europe’s post-Cold War security landscape from the start, first of all with implications for relations with Moscow. In Western Europe, Russia was seen in contradictory ways, on the one hand as a potential *taker* of the liberal norms being promoted in the West, on the other hand as *too large, too alien, and too unpredictable* to ever become a fully-fledged participant in the region’s various ‘grand projects’, and itself become a ‘norm-maker’.⁶ The result was a pragmatic form of engagement aimed at trying to insert Russia into a broader conceptualisation of International Order – especially in the economic realm: as a customer – of financial services, or weaponry – or as a supplier – of energy, with economic interdependence providing it with a stake in upholding stability in a shared neighbourhood. In Central and Eastern Europe, Moscow was seen much more unambiguously, through the lens of decades, or centuries, of hierarchical rule: the EU, and, especially, NATO boundaries were, primarily, hard, protective shields against a revival of empire, a consideration far outweighing any liberal hopes for potential transformations through engagement and trade.⁷

Meanwhile, the United States - Europe’s old security guarantor – saw these processes from the very distinctive perspective of the ‘last remaining superpower’ managing stability in a region of core interest as part of its long-perceived global responsibilities. A peaceful, prosperous Western Europe based on Wilsonian precepts had after all, been at the centre of its strategic worldview since the end of World War Two; its decision to expand this logic towards Central and Eastern Europe after some deliberation fit perfectly within the proclivities of its elite.⁸ So did the combination of this rationale with a more geopolitical concern with Russian backsliding, a worry shared with the Central and Eastern Europeans, albeit perhaps based more directly on liberalism’s assumptions on the link between regime type and international behaviour than on direct historic experience.⁹ Occasional grumbles on European free-riding notwithstanding, Washington was willing to

⁶ Prozorov, S. (2006). *Understanding Conflict between Russia and the EU*. Palgrave.

⁷ Von Hlatky, S., & Fortmann, M. (2020). NATO Enlargement and the Failure of the Cooperative Security Mindset. *International Politics*, 57(3), 554-572.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00240-w>

⁸ Sarotte, M. E. (2019). How to Enlarge NATO: the Debate Inside the Clinton Administration, 1993-95. *International Security*, 44(1), 7-41.

⁹ Goldgeier, J. M., & Michael, M. (2003). *Power and Purpose: US Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*. Brookings Institution.

pay the price for maintaining its commitments on the Continent, partly as a backstop to these fears, partly because peace within the 'core' allowed it to concentrate on its hegemonic missions in the (semi-)periphery.

These divergences came to a head in the 2000s, with the successful incorporation of Central and Eastern Europe's states into NATO and the EU, and calls from now-independent former Soviet republics like Ukraine, and Georgia, for 'more of the same'. Wary of offending Russia, 'Old Europe' advocated stabilising the former Soviet space, and integrating it *politically* and *economically* with the Western core through mechanisms *short of full membership*, like the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, and 'strategic partnerships' with Russia: in its eyes, positive-sum propositions no-one, including Moscow, could object to.¹⁰ Central and Eastern European states, by contrast, viewed interactions with the former Soviet space as a way of pushing their military-strategic NATO 'shield' further Eastwards, and – like the United States and the United Kingdom – included further enlargement in their priorities. After all, Ukraine and Georgia's motivations chimed perfectly with their own outlook: an at least rhetorical adherence to the spread of liberal norms as a *moral* imperative, in addition to the more nakedly geopolitical consideration of putting more distance between themselves, and a perceived – existential - threat. The former imperative – the spread of liberal normativity – was one they shared with the United States: the extension of what had appeared to be a successful strategy in 'liberally pacifying' Central and Eastern Europe towards the former Soviet space appeared entirely cogent, all the more so in light of Russia's apparent – albeit reluctant - acceptance of NATO enlargement as a 'fait accompli'.¹¹ In fact, under the George W. Bush administration, this normative messianism became part of a muscular neoconservative interventionism with implications far beyond European shores.

Many of these differences remained relevant up to the very eve of the ongoing Ukraine war, and, in fact, centred on how to balance relations with Russia, and Russia's pro-Western neighbours. Ever since they burst into the open in the denial of the Membership Action Plans for Ukraine and Georgia in Bucharest, 2008, the fissures outlined above appeared, and reappeared to haunt Western approaches to Moscow: during the Euromaidan protests, the Minsk negotiations, Nord Stream 2, in the direct run-up to the Russian attack.¹² They were, in the meantime, exacerbated by additional complications within the Western 'camp': Brexit and the weakening of the liberal West's ideological coherence by populist strongmen throughout the same decade. Today, Hungary, Poland and Turkey are still ruled by

¹⁰ Lobjaskas, A. (2009, 6 May). Eastern Partnership - The EU's Accidental Sphere of Influence. RFE-RL. <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1622923.html>

¹¹ Menon, R., & Ruger, W. (2020). NATO Enlargement and US Grand Strategy: a Net Assessment. *International Politics*, 57(3), 371-400. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00235-7>

¹² Wintour, P. (2022). Biden Lays Bare NATO Divide over Russian Aggression against Ukraine. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/20/biden-lays-bare-nato-divisions-over-russia-aggression-in-ukraine>

parties and politicians that could not be termed anything except illiberal, and Donald Trump's period in office provided a good indication of the kind of chaotic transactionalism associated with the still-looming danger of a populist takeover in the hegemon at the LIO's very core.

War in Ukraine: a Liberal Rebirth?

Recent months have seen a reinvigoration of purpose in both pillars of the post-Cold War liberal project in Europe: NATO and the European Union. The initial shock of Putin's aggression has tempered the differences that marked much of both projects during the previous years. While a reluctant consensus has emerged on the impossibility of Ukraine joining the alliance even in the medium-term, even those states formerly invested in political and economic engagement with Russia – France, and, especially, Germany – have moved towards geopolitical assertiveness. Nord Stream 2 – a major bone of contention since its conception – is, for all intents and purposes, dead.¹³ Finland and Sweden are knocking on NATO's doors.¹⁴ The emphasis today is on unity and resolve: two elements which, some say, may lead to a complete defeat of Putin's Russia and a return to a perhaps improved version of the 'peace and security' promised by the LIO – but never quite achieved – in previous decades.¹⁵

But there are distinct limits to the extent to which this 'reinvigoration' of the West can represent a rebirth of the LIO, both within Europe, and beyond, for two reasons. Firstly, the vision of an ultimate victory of the LIO inevitably resulting from the Ukraine war is fundamentally flawed. For reasons I outline below, the new-found unity of purpose is still vulnerable to any number of internal and external developments, including continued polarisation, and the re-emergence of populism in core states, a Russian victory – however defined – or – paradoxically – a Russian collapse, or a dramatic escalation on the battlefield. Secondly, if the German vision of a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals held together through mutually beneficial trade and light-touch integration is dead, so is the American and East European view of peace achieved through the unfettered expansion of liberal normativity, or its promotion in, or imposition on the wider world. As a consequence, the likely outcome of this conflagration is not the state of liberal End-of-History perfection hoped for by some in the West, but a messy compromise in a much more differentiated world, where a more fragile and vulnerable West will

¹³ Weise, Z. (2022). Germany Shelves Nord Stream 2 Pipelines. Politico. Retrieved 4 May 2022, from <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-to-stop-nord-stream-2/>

¹⁴ RFE-RL. (2022, 13 April). With Eye on Russia, Finland, Sweden Move toward NATO Membership. Retrieved 4 May from <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-finland-sweden-membership-russia/31801570.html>

¹⁵ GOV.UK. (2022, 29 April). The Return of Geopolitics: Foreign Secretary's Mansion House Speech at the Lord Mayor's 2022 Easter Banquet. Retrieved 4 May from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-mansion-house-speech-at-the-lord-mayors-easter-banquet-the-return-of-geopolitics>

have to operate within a post-liberal geopolitical logic, rather than the global ‘rules-based order’ as imperfectly conceived in the early 1990s.

In spite of all consolidation around Ukraine, and recent successes in warding off populism in the Western ‘core’, systemic problems within liberalism endure: the hollowing out of democratic politics, and uncontrolled inequality and precarity are now joined by the greatest cost-of-living crisis in decades to create potentially fertile grounds for populist trouble in the future. It is important to remember the extent to which the United States’ co-ordinated engagement with its transatlantic allies is a product of the 2020 election; and, also, that repeats of the latest election in France – where the takeover of a power at the core of the EU project by Europhobic, populist force was avoided *for now* – cannot be taken for granted. It is equally significant that we are currently only at the beginning of one of the greatest declines in global prosperity in the post-World War Two era.¹⁶ With the economic consequences of the Ukraine crisis forecast by many to have a lasting effect - especially in Europe - ¹⁷ and countries like Germany undergoing a ‘Zeitenwende’ by having to shift scarce resources towards their long-underfunded military budgets,¹⁸ the resilience of Western societies in adapting to these new circumstances will remain key in maintaining the coherence of the Western alliance: the coming to power of any populist force in a major power-centre would put not just the current consensus around Ukraine, but the whole institutional infrastructure of the liberal West under serious jeopardy.

The coming elections in the United States – later this year, and in 2024 – will present crucial chokepoints. Their significance goes beyond a return to the transactionalism, and the neglect and side-lining of domestic and international institutions during the – *as yet first and only* - Trump presidency.¹⁹ The ‘norms and values’ that hold together the Western alliance can manage the ‘exception’ of illiberal regimes in minor states and perhaps even middle powers like Hungary’s and Turkey’s. To see the great power at its very core descend into what would probably become a deep constitutional crisis would make it very difficult indeed to hold things together over the medium- or longer term. The divergence in priorities and values seen during a period of acute geopolitical disturbance would be unprecedented; and it would be precisely the kind of turmoil the Kremlin is likely hoping for in its currently quite desperate position.

¹⁶ Guénette, J. D., Kenworthy, P., & Wheeler, C. (2022). Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Global Economy. World Bank Group.

¹⁷ Borrell, J. (2022, 14 March). The War in Ukraine and Its Implications for the EU. European Commission. Retrieved 4 May from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/war-ukraine-and-its-implications-eu_en

¹⁸ Kunertova, D. (2022). European Defence Policy: Zeitenwende, Ltd. CSS - ETH Zurich. <https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse304-EN.pdf>

¹⁹ Schake, K. (2019). Back to Basics: How to Make Right What Trump Gets Wrong Searching for a Strategy. Foreign Affairs, 98, 36.

This comes in addition to possible stresses on Western cohesion emanating from developing events on the ground: the current consensus on limiting NATO involvement to the provision of weaponry and intelligence may be put under strain in any number of scenarios. The first uncertainty concerns possible divergences in 'old' Western and Central/Eastern European reactions to both Russian success, and failure: might a collapse of the Ukrainian defences lead to calls – by, for instance, CEE states and the UK - for a move beyond the mere provision of weaponry, or for engagement and an acceptance of the *fait accompli*? Conversely, would successful Ukrainian advances in the East and the potential cornering of the Putin regime result in continued consensus, or would voices emerge against going all the way in light of what would probably become a staccato of angry threats from Moscow? And what if the Putin regime further escalated the already ongoing crimes against humanity throughout the territories it would end up controlling? Would the 'united front' hold, or would there be a divergence between the urge to 'do something' in the face of the ultimate crime, and a refusal to intervene in the light of the nuclear element – an element that apparently no maintains its Cold-War status as the absolute deterrent for significant parts of the Western policymaking community? It is fair to assume that differences on such questions would resurface should the momentum of war move too far either way.

However these differences are resolved, the old liberal logic of an ever-expanding Kantian 'zone of peace', and of a world order based on liberal-internationalist principles will be hard to maintain, or restore in the future. Depending on Ukraine's status at war's end – anywhere between the two extremes of its conquest by Moscow or victory over Russia – a hard boundary will have been drawn for the previous mechanisms by which order was ensured on the continent, either East or West of contemporary Ukraine. The template based on a continuous expansion of liberalism on the European continent will likely have run its course: the most Kantian of regional projects – the EU – will have had to transform into something more openly geopolitical, or see itself consigned to irrelevance, not least because both a 'victorious' (in the Pyrrhic sense) or defeated Russia will likely continue to pose a major problem for the Liberal West and the LIO. In either guise, it will likely remain a disruptive force to any form of order that might ensue: it will either be too arrogant or too weak, too isolated or too chaotic to be receptive to liberal norms in the foreseeable future.

The question would then inevitably revolve on what to do next: would there be a long-term consensus on when to remove sanctions, or on reducing Russia to larger version of North Korea by maintaining sanctions *ad infinitum*? It is easy to imagine major fissures opening up within the West on relations with Russia, either out of fear – for an uncontrolled collapse – or out of greed – for its ample natural resources. When it comes to fear, as the North Korean experience shows, dealing with an isolated, nuclear-armed rogue regime – which Russia is well on the road to becoming – is challenging, even if that regime does not claim great power status,

and the number of directly relevant actors is limited to six;²⁰ in Russia's case, one will have to multiply the number of actors by several times, and add potentially disastrous *great/regional power* failure into the mix. As regards greed, the days of energy dependence may be past, but, as the Russian elite appears to know, its resources do represent a major temptation for industrialised economies. And in a world where the Ukraine conflict has been semi-resolved, or frozen into an indefinite status-quo, dangling them before Western states as the shock of the 2022 invasion fades and economic necessity bites may prove a profitable dividing tactic should the situation settle into something more stable.

Finally, any number of differences could emerge in relations with China. There appears to be an emerging consensus on a move away from a type of globalised interdependence blind to hard geopolitical realities, and a more blinkered faith in the inevitability of democratisation; but China still remains the world's largest single market by population, and the question as to how far exactly Western allies must go in de-coupling from an economy still so central to its supply chains remains an open one. The idea that the resolve shown by NATO and the West will have a dissuasive effect on its designs on Taiwan, and its stated interests in the Asia-Pacific region is also flawed. There is no indication whatsoever that China's red lines – Taiwan's independence, claims on the South China Sea – will fade or harden depending on events in Eastern Europe.

In fact, a long-term conflict in Europe may just as well lead to *more* rather than *less* assertiveness on its part as it sees Western powers – and their finite resources - tied up in a major war. Neither is there a straight line between today's new-found purpose in Europe, and an expansion of responsibilities towards a strategic theatre halfway round the world. The point that NATO should expand its responsibilities towards Asia is already controversial in itself, while the question as to whether Europeans will deliver on their promise to step up to the plate in terms of defence expenditures remains open – and yet another potential source of tensions going forward, along with the future of a European Defence Policy, and the division of labour between the EU and NATO.²¹ Will the old free-riding problem continue to haunt the West, just as the United States' and others' global responsibilities come calling at the opposite side of Eurasia, putting it before an unpalatable choice?

Even over the longer term, a move towards a complex geopolitical competition between the West and other power-centres – one replete with pitfalls and dilemmas - will thus likely be the result of the current conflagration, rather than a return to a liberal 'rules-based order' as understood for most of the post-Cold War era. NATO, an alliance with thirty members and an institutional history of decades, will have potential fissures and conflicts aplenty to be managed. How realistic, then, are proposals for a grand global alliance of democracies or a 'network of

²⁰ Arms Control Association. (2022, January). The Six-Party Talks at a Glance. Retrieved 4 May from <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>

²¹ Michaels, J. H. (2021). 'A Very Different Kind of Challenge'? NATO's Prioritization of China in Historical Perspective. *International Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00334-z>

liberty’ – voiced by, among others, Liz Truss?²² Two points of contradiction can be identified in such ambitious schemes: firstly, between the need for legitimacy and the danger of hegemonic imposition over those states and societies which, for a variety of reasons, might choose to stay outside such initiatives; and, secondly, between the need for geopolitical effectiveness and the liberal ‘norms and values’ which such ‘networks’ would likely claim to advocate.

The assumption appears to be that where the West leads, the rest will follow. But with the West itself potentially facing tensions in coming years, not to mention the rest’s increasing sense of independence decades after decolonisation – UNGA votes notwithstanding – ‘keeping things together’ may prove too much of a challenge if ambitions exceed reality, especially when such a network comes to be perceived as an attempt to re-assert global hegemony by the West. The idea that 70 years after decolonisation, formerly colonial Western democracies could automatically count on their counterparts in the developing world to do their bidding may very well be overly optimistic; there is a danger of the kind of heavy-handedness that might end up in a resentment born from perceived neo-colonial imposition, especially if such a network were to be centred on an exclusive number of wealthy, developed nations.

Conversely, geopolitical competition may also lead to many more of the kind of uneasy compromises with dictatorships seen during the Cold War than was the case in the immediate post-Cold War era. That this could be done while also pushing global liberal normativity appears far-fetched. Liberal democracies will be faced with an uneasy choice between emptying the notion of a global ‘liberal-democratic alliance’ of its meaning through a compromise on their norms and values, or acknowledging the post-liberal nature of both the existing order, and their broader, geopolitically driven alliances: Turkey’s blocking of Finland and Sweden’s NATO membership bids could be seen as an early and partial harbinger of such dilemmas. In any case, the LIO as we’ve known it will be a thing of the past. And it would perhaps behoove the West to add a measure of humility in light of the task at hand, for instance, by moving away from the pretence that it, and it alone, represents the ‘civilised world’, or the ‘International Community’: turns of phrase which, in themselves, betray an outdated mindset that might not chime well societies of the global South, or provide clarity of vision in a fundamentally modified world.

Conclusion: Muddling Through

The likely future scenario for the International Order is one that is inherently messy, and unpredictable. In between the far-fetched idea of unfettered Western unity and liberal hegemony, and a complete collapse in reaction to the fissures outlined

²² GOV.UK. (2021, 8 December). Building the Network of Liberty: Foreign Secretary's Speech. Retrieved 5 May from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-liz-truss-building-the-network-of-liberty>

in the previous section lies an imperfect world, where authoritarian challenges like Russia – and China – are ‘managed’, but where neither the West, nor these authoritarians disappear from view. It is one where Western democracies manage crises – within, and between themselves, and with their primary rivals – but where compromise and uneasy choices will be required to maintain the overall cohesion of alliances and the viability of broader policies.

In this less-than-ideal world, Western governments will have to be sensitive to their own, and their allies’ internal stress points – particularly in light of the socio-economic imbalances to have built up during the previous three decades, now exacerbated by Russia’s war in Ukraine. The political and socio-economic reasons for the upsurge in populism – the hollowing out of liberal democracy, inequality and precarity, and others – have not been addressed, and are bound to become more pronounced potential sources of discontent regardless of the presence of an external threat like Russia, especially once the initial shock at the invasion recedes and the conflict turns in to a long-term ‘normal’, now exacerbating all these tensions with permanently lower living standards for the many. A new social contract, beyond neoliberal economic dogma, might become an inescapable necessity in that light.

Between themselves, they will have to be mindful of the old tensions – outlined above – which may re-emerge as the conflict of the century moves on, and act preemptively – by fulfilling commitments already made, and avoiding the kind of free-riding previously seen within the NATO alliance. All sides will have to circumvent a dogmatic adherence to their own narrow certainties and aim to uphold their core domestic norms and values even in the face of setbacks in individual liberal democracies. With the wider world, this will require another compromise: the ditching of liberal assumptions of global peace-making spread of democracy and interdependence, in favour of a much more hands-off, respectful engagement with a ‘rest’ no longer preached to from a position of unfettered political, moral or civilisational hegemony.

As the above shows, these tasks will be exacting. But all other things being equal, it would still present the best chance for the most precious liberal norms – those pertaining to political liberty and pluralism – to survive in the face of the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine. It would be far from perfect; but to seek moral perfection in a nuclear, post-liberal world may, in itself, be morally counterproductive because of the consequences this may entail. Sometimes, ‘as good as practically possible’ is as good as it will get, and knowing one’s limits is always a virtue.