



The international system and the clash of world orders

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Abstract

In 1945, humanity came together to create the Charter International System. It expressed the hope that after the most catastrophic war the world had yet seen, a superior system of international relations could emerge. The ‘spirit of 1945’ gave rise to the United Nations and its foundational Charter, reinforced subsequently by numerous declarations, protocols and conventions. The system delivers many public goods, including the system’s specialised agencies, but above all by establishing the normative and legitimate framework for the conduct of international politics. The Charter system today faces unprecedented challenges. The tension between the multilateralism and normative aspirations for peace and development represented by the Charter system and the competitive practices of international politics has become a contradiction and possibly an antinomy—an irreconcilable difference. The creation of competing blocs (world orders) in Cold War I prevented consensus on fundamental matters, however, all sides proclaimed their allegiance to the Charter system. When the Soviet bloc disintegrated in 1989–1991, the Charter system faced a new challenge—the quest for global hegemony of the remaining world order, the Political West led by the US. This bloc claimed certain tutelary privileges, formulated initially in terms of a ‘liberal international order’ and later in the form of the ‘rules-based order’, over the Charter International System. This resulted in conflicts and even wars, but is today countered by the emergence of a Political East. Cold War II today is more challenging and dangerous than the first, primarily due to the threat posed to the very existence of the Charter systems and its norms.

Keywords Charter International System · United Nations · International politics · Political West · Political East · Sovereign internationalism · Democratic internationalism

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1 Introduction

An international system endows an era with the normative framework for the conduct of international politics. An international system is a combination of norms, procedures and institutions, with the latter not necessarily formalised. In the sphere of international politics, constellations of states create distinctive world orders, reflecting their vision of how states should be governed and interact. In 1945, following a second catastrophic world war in a single generation, the world came together to create the Charter International System, with the United Nations at its heart. An international system in the modern era is universal, while the separate world orders are unique, reflecting the distinctive cultures, civilisations, ideologies and geopolitical concerns of their creators.

During Cold War I, the US created a political order of its own, the Political West, while the Soviet Union established a communist bloc. The dissolution of Soviet communism and the disintegration of its associated world order in 1989–1991 gave rise to a single-order world (sometimes characterised as unipolarity). Without the constraining influence of a near-peer competitor, the Political West became radicalised and proclaimed its universality. In so doing, the Political West (otherwise known as the liberal international order or the rules-based order, although the terms are not entirely synonymous) established itself as a rival to the international system in which it was ostensibly embedded. This in turn generated a counter-movement, with Russia, China and some middle powers in the lead. China formally rejects bloc politics, despite its alignments with other states. Consequently, it will not establish a ‘world order’ of its own based on alliance ties, although it does not rule out dependencies. A ‘Political East’ is in the making, balancing the Political West while repudiating the logic on which it is based.

In keeping with realist thinking, Henry Kissinger (2014) famously failed to distinguish between order and system. As far as realists are concerned, the shifting patterns of alliances, hostilities and balances of power in international politics represent the essential elements that define international relations. This is a rather immiserated representation of international affairs. The Charter International System is certainly nothing akin to a world government, but it does provide the normative framework in which international politics is conducted (cf. Bull 1977/1995). Even the staunchest realists acknowledge the fundamental role of international law, though they prioritize state interests. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that international affairs are also structured by two other significant domains (in addition to the international system and international politics): the world of international political economy, and the sphere of transnational civil society and social movements. Their distinctive dynamics and interactions with the other domains will not be addressed in this paper. The focus, instead, will be on the divergence between systemic norms (the values and ‘spirit’ represented by Charter internationalism) and the practices utilized in contemporary international politics. The Charter International System faces the deepest crisis since its inception, and as a result international politics is becoming increasingly ‘anarchic’.

2 The international system and international politics

The post-1945 Charter system learned from the failure the League of Nations in the interwar years. The League failed to respond adequately to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 followed by the full-scale invasion of China in July 1937. It was unable to avert the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 or provide any meaningful intervention in the Spanish Civil War the following year. In April 1946 the League was formally disbanded, with its assets and archives transferred to the newly formed UN. The creation of a Security Council with five permanent members (the great powers of the time: China, France, UK, US and USSR) sought to remedy the failings of the Versailles system and the League of Nations. They aimed to achieve this goal by providing a stronger steering committee for international politics. In the event, the list of failures of the UN system is also an increasingly long one. Beginning with the US invasion of Panama in 1990, a series of US post-Cold War interventions have been conducted without even the fig leaf of formal UN sanction, and in many cases represent overt breaches of international law. The 1999 78-day bombing of campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led to the forced change of an internationally recognised border through the separation of Kosovo. This demonstrated the growing divergence between declared norms and avowed practices. US-led interventions in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, accompanied by destabilisation operations in Syria and elsewhere, illustrate how the rules-based order became a law unto itself. The Russo-Ukraine war is the culmination of a long period of divergence, in which the behavioural patterns of international politics have increasingly deviated from the norms and practices represented by the Charter system.

Europe has devised a succession of international systems, each building on the successes of its predecessors while learning from their shortcomings. The details change, but the fundamental problem of regulating an anarchic state-based international politics remains the same. The Peace of Westphalia brought an end to the Thirty Years' War in 1648 by codifying the sovereignty of princes. This eventually laid the groundwork for the principles of national sovereignty. The Peace of Utrecht in 1715, at the end of the War of Spanish Succession, formalised the age of empire and practices of diplomacy. The Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), at the end of the era of revolutionary convulsions and Napoleonic conquests, introduced an ideological element into what became the Congress international system, including the 'concert of powers'. This brought France back in from diplomatic isolation. Meanwhile, the Holy Alliance brought together the conservative monarchies of Austria, Russia and Prussia to suppress republican challengers. Russia came to the aid of the threatened Hapsburg monarchy in 1848, but soon found itself the target of an 'anti-autocratic' alliance in the Crimean War (1853–1856)—prefiguring the contemporary division of the world into democracies and autocracies. The Congress system lasted for a century, but it had little to offer in the age of imperialism and intensifying inter-imperialist rivalries. The Hague Convention of 1899 and the Second Peace Conference in 1907 sought to

regulate the conduct of war but were unable to halt the slide to a more generalised conflict. The system of great power politics generated tensions that finally led to the catastrophic war of 1914–1918. The search after World War I for a more rational way to manage international politics gave rise to the League of Nations, whose failings we have already noted.

Following another bout of the endemic European civil war between 1939 and 1945, the Charter International System provided a formula to prevent a return to the great power conflicts of the past, while establishing the framework for a sustainable peace order in the future. The formula will only work, however, if it is applied. This is no longer a European international system but a genuinely global one. Following the most catastrophic war the world had yet seen, the Charter International System expressed the highest aspirations of humanity. The comprehensive set of normative principles and institutional practices sought to prevent a recurrence of another such conflict, which in the nuclear age threatens the very survival of sentient life on earth. The goal is to temper and constrain the conflictual dynamics inherent to the anarchic world of international politics. The United Nations and its foundational Charter were reinforced subsequently by numerous declarations, protocols and conventions. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted as well as the Genocide Convention, and in 1966, the UN adopted its Convention on Social and Economic Rights. Over the years, this international system delivered many public goods, above all through the system's two dozen specialised agencies. The Security Council, comprising five veto-wielding permanent members and ten alternate members elected for 2-year terms, was largely paralysed during Cold War I. Despite some achievements, after 1989 anticipation of a more positive peace order once again by 2014 had given way to renewed cold war paralysis (Bacevich 2020; Sakwa 2023a). The difference this time is that it has a putative rival in the form of the Political West, claiming a normative superiority that properly belongs to the Charter system.

The UN balances the interests of the great powers (through the Security Council) with the sovereignty of the community of nations. It provided the framework for the most radical period of decolonisation in world history. At the time of the UN's establishment, India was still a colony despite being a founding member. India's absence from the cohort of permanent members of the UNSC remains one of the most glaring deficiencies of the system. The UN Charter system repudiates the logic of war and provides a mechanism for the peaceful resolution of conflict. The UN is at the heart of a dense network of international organisations, including the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation as well as UNESCO, dealing with culture. The charter system has also spawned a vast body of international law, including the branch that deals with humanitarian affairs. A range of regional organisations, notably the Council of Europe, reinforce Charter norms at the continental level. The UN remains the centre of multilateral diplomacy and provides the normative framework for international politics. It is far from a world government, but its norms and statutes establish the framework for what is considered legitimate and legal, and what is not.

The Charter peace order moderates great power politics, seeking to transcend the traditional lexicon of the balance of power and spheres of interest. Its

operative principle is sovereign internationalism. Gerry Simpson couches this in terms of ‘charter liberalism’, advancing a pluralist concept of international politics. He describes charter liberalism as a ‘procedure for organizing relations among diverse communities’. Simpson contrasts this with ‘liberal anti-pluralism’, which he defines as ‘a liberalism that can be exclusive and illiberal in its effects’, above all in its ‘lack of tolerance for non-liberal regimes’. In Simpson’s analysis, liberalism is divided into two traditions: ‘an evangelical version that views liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine or a social good worth promoting and the other more secular tradition emphasizing proceduralism and diversity’ (Simpson 2001, 539, 560). In my lexicon, charter liberalism equates to sovereign internationalism. Sovereignty and pluralism are balanced by a commitment to Charter multilateralism, respecting distinctive interests even when divided by ideological and ethical differences. Liberal anti-pluralism, by contrast, is analogous to democratic internationalism, imposing standards on the conduct of international affairs that subverts traditional forms of diplomacy.

This division is crucial to understanding international relations in the post-Cold War era. Contradictions between the principles of Charter multilateralism and the practices of international politics in Cold War II are sharper than ever. The discrepancy between sovereign internationalism, in which respect for sovereignty and pluralism is tempered by commitment to Charter values, and democratic internationalism, the expansive and illiberal view of international politics, shapes international affairs. This is the metapolitics of our era, prevalent across all domains. The clash between world orders, in particular the US-led rules-based order (i.e., the Political West), and the nascent Political East alignment of Russia, China and several other states, is augmented by ontological contestation at the structural level. A multi-order world at the level of international politics may be emerging (Flockhart 2016), otherwise described as multipolarity (although the two are not synonymous), but this is accompanied by threats to the international system itself. This was not the case in Cold War I, which is why Cold War II is now proving to be much deeper and more intractable. The palpable ideological differences of Cold War I, with capitalist democracies pitted against the legacy powers of revolutionary socialism, in this light appear relatively superficial. Cold War I was conducted *within* the framework of the Charter International System (however, much observed in the breach), whereas Cold War II is *about* the system itself. This double conflict, operating simultaneously at the level of system and orders, imbues the conflict with unprecedented depth, while at the same time, remaining amorphous and protean. Cold War II is more challenging, pervasive and dangerous than the first.

3 Cold war contradictions

The Charter formula for postwar peace has lost none of its relevance, but the post-catastrophe spirit of the era in which it was formulated has dissipated. Instead of the spirit of unity symbolized by the meeting of Soviet and American forces on the Elbe in April 1945, the spirit of the 1910s and the 1930s has returned. Pre-war tensions and illusions run rampant, with only a few voices advocating for restraint. The

distinction between system and order explains the reversion to a new type of cold war. The collapse of the Soviet world order presented the Charter system with a new challenge: the pursuit of global hegemony by the remaining bloc, the Political West led by the US. This bloc claimed certain tutelary privileges, formulated initially in terms of a 'liberal international order' and later in the form of the 'rules-based order' (Dugard 2023). The part effectively tried to substitute for the whole, the particular for the universal. This generates conflicts and even wars.

The contradiction between the practices of international politics and Charter aspirations is not new, but its intensity was magnified by the absence of a countervailing force. Tensions between competing blocs in Cold War I were exacerbated by fundamental differences at the level of international political economy. Capitalist market democracies were countered by the state-planning of the socialist systems. Conflict was tempered by some universalistic international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, the World Council of Churches as well as transnational peace movements. With the end of Cold War I, the practices of international politics and the norms of the Charter system looked set to converge. Bloc politics and ideological contestation were no longer relevant, and the world appeared to be coming together on a set of common standards and norms. In the negative peace of a cold war, conflict is managed rather than transcended, but in the post-1989 era of 'globalisation'—open markets on a global scale, financialisation and flexible labour policies accompanied by a revolution in communications and mobility—it was assumed that a positive peace could be inaugurated. Cooperative endeavours would foster development and enhance well-being. This certainly was the vision held by Mikhail Gorbachev, when, as the head of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, he put an end to Cold War I by appealing to Charter principles. His New Political Thinking recognised the achievements of the Political West, but it certainly never represented a capitulation to the predominance of the US and its allies (Sakwa 2023a). The information and communications revolution reinforced the economic imperatives of global trade and labour and capital mobility, which were assumed to generate a pacific set of behaviours. Competition would shift from military confrontation to economic rivalry (e.g., Pinker 2011).

In the event, the course of history took a very different turn. Instead of dissolving at the end of Cold War I, as neo-realists assumed alliances should do once they had achieved their goal (Waltz 1993), the Political West not only continued but enlarged to encompass most of Europe, with the notable exception of Russia. The logic of cold war was thereby perpetuated, with disastrous consequences. Expansion was accompanied by deepening. Without the constraining influence of bipolarity, one of the blocs created in Cold War I now claimed tutelary rights over the system as a whole. The US had always been wary of subordinating its foreign policy autonomy to an external agency. This is why the Senate failed to ratify US membership of the League of Nations in 1920. By contrast, after 1945 the US was a founder member of the Charter system and invested in its development, in the belief that the legitimacy of US actions would be enhanced when sanctioned by an international authority (Wertheim 2020). However, the US always reserved the right to act independently, and it did so in the majority of Cold War I conflicts. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its alliance system, the unipolar era was marked by a great substitution.

Liberal hegemony acted as the substitute for Charter norms and the pluralism that they represent. Democratic internationalism was advanced as morally superior to the relative ethical neutrality represented by sovereign internationalism. Not accidentally, it also reinforced the geopolitical authority and political power of the Political West.

Democratic internationalism emphasizes human rights, free markets and liberal constitutionalism. This represents a radical cosmopolitan vision of liberal internationalism that would ‘transform the old global system—based on the balance of power, spheres of influence, military rivalry, and alliances—into a unified liberal international order based on nation-states and the rule of law’ (Ikenberry 2020, 140). The concept of a ‘liberal international order’ amalgamates distinct categories into a single all-encompassing ‘order’, combining the systemic and the political, as well as the political economy and even societal domains. The implicit assumption is that this is the only viable order, incorporating the Charter system. This means that there can be no legitimate ‘outside’ to such an order. The autonomy of the Charter system is reduced to nought, and international law subsumed into a specific order. Outsiders are no more than applicants in the waiting room of history, becoming supplicants as they wait for entry into desired order. Old socialist ideas of progress on the temporal plane was displaced by a geospatial representation of modernisation and development. Even classical conservative ideas that each society must develop a political order suitable for its level of development and characteristics was supplanted by this new revolutionary ideology.

This is a ‘monist’ view, reflecting Simpson’s ‘liberal anti-pluralism’, assuming that the liberal international order is the only viable one on offer. Monism simply means the rejection of the pluralist sovereign internationalist view that the world is made up of different types of legitimate social systems (regime types), reflecting societies at different levels of development and with different historical trajectories and needs. The concept of a liberal international order is just another way of describing democratic internationalism’s idea of teleological development. This is redolent of the discredited unilinear modernisation paradigm of the 1950s and 1960s, in which the more advanced societies were presumed to demonstrate the future to less developed ones. Modernisation at the time was often equated with Westernization, specifically following the US model—a view that has long lost its credibility. Nevertheless, the ideology of democratism remains influential. Democratism is the instrumental application of democratic norms in the service not of the democratic preferences of an actually existing demos but of an idealised representation of these preferences (Finley 2022; Sakwa 2023b). Democratism is to democracy what dogmatic Marxism-Leninism is to socialism.

The universalist ambitions of the US-led Political West means that the practices of international politics increasingly diverge from Charter norms (Devji 2024). The notion of a ‘liberal international order’ makes sense in terms of power politics and the development of a globalised economic order, but by definition it presumes a distance from the international system in which it is rooted. During Cold War I, the parallel systems more or less coexisted, since excess ambitions were constrained by the existence of a powerful military and ideological alternative. This rival order, indeed, prompted the Political West to implement reforms drawn from the adversary

to maintain its own viability. The creation of welfare states in Western Europe had deep internal roots, but rivalry meant that domestic constituencies had to be placated to avoid alienation and sympathy for the enemy, which offered an alternative model of social development. Even the US was affected by this dynamic, although tempered by the prosperity generated by the permanent war economy and an all-encompassing informational ecosystem.

With the constraints removed, the Political West went into over-drive. The language of unipolarity, of ‘the indispensable nation’ and ‘exceptionalism’ rendered sovereign internationalism redundant. In the economic sphere, the imperatives of globalisation allegedly compressed time and space into a new dimension. The universalistic aspirations of liberal hegemony transcended particular histories and traditions. The rules-based order not only assumed an identity separate and distinct from the Charter system, but also even presumed a higher status than the Charter system due to its ambition to advance the democratic internationalist agenda. The UN was marginalised in the bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and was unable to resolve the deepening crisis of European security. NATO enlargement in technical terms may have been rational, but in substantive terms, it represented the repudiation of the idea of indivisible security embedded in the fundamental agreements regulating the European security order in the post-Cold War era, and even earlier. The tension in the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe of November 1990, the Istanbul declaration of November 1999 and the Astana Declaration of December 2010 between ‘indivisible security’ and ‘freedom of choice’ reflected the larger contradiction between sovereign and democratic internationalism. The UN became an arena for the airing of divisions rather than a forum for their resolution. The divergence between Charter norms and the practices of international politics provoked a resurgence of interstate conflict to Europe.

4 The Political West

Two models of world order are derived from contrasting ideas of how international affairs should be conducted, the sovereign internationalist vision versus the democratic internationalist ideal. These diverging representations are gaining an increasingly sharp spatial (geopolitical) profile. On one side, there is the world order represented by the restless and expansive Political West, making claims that subvert the prerogatives of the Charter international system. The ideology of democratic internationalism brooks no compromises (at least, when it comes to adversaries), and undermines the accustomed practices of diplomacy. Liberal hegemony lacks a territorial ethnonym but it is not spaceless or timeless. My argument is that after 1945 a specific type of power system took shape. The Political West created during Cold War I was shaped by cold war practices and its survival after 1989 served to further entrench those cold war traits. It declared victory in the Cold War, but that very framing was not only problematic but also undermined the very victory that it asserted. The cold war was perpetuated rather than transcended, which was no victory at all.

The Political West's normative framework is congruent with the Charter International System, but they are not identical, contrary to the claims of the 'liberal international order' school of thought. Congruence leads to the conflation of the two; understandably, since the US contributed so much to the establishment of both, but nevertheless mistakenly. This brings us to a fundamental point. The Political West combines two powerful impulses. The first represents the spirit of 'commonwealth', the developmental and democratic agenda at the heart of the liberal international order as well as the Charter system. However, in cold war conditions, this was accompanied by the creation of an overweening 'imperial' dimension. America's overwhelming military and economic power at the end of World War II was translated into a permanent war economy, the creation of NATO and a network of military bases globally. The Political West is based on an Atlanticism that excludes other spatial configurations, such as European pan-continentalism. The Atlantic power system ensures the permanent subordination of European powers to American strategic concerns.

In the face of the common Soviet adversary, this was not a problem during Cold War I. There was scope for substantive political divergence, including Charles de Gaulle's expulsion of NATO installations from France in 1966, German's *Ostpolitik* from the 1960s and Europe's economic and energy engagement, often against US wishes, from the 1970s with the Soviet Union. This grand strategy of unity between the two wings of the Atlantic alliance continued into the post-Cold War period, accompanied by the perpetuation of the Europe's subaltern status. Autonomy in economic management, regulatory regimes, technological innovation and industrial strategy remain, but the development of a common European foreign, security and defence identity remain circumscribed. Since Washington was willing to bear the main burden of defence, the European powers were free to enjoy the peace dividend. In Cold War II, the scope for European independent political initiatives narrowed, despite much talk of 'strategic autonomy'. After 2022, bloc discipline further reduced autonomy to almost negligible levels. The prospect of a second Donald J. Trump presidency revived such aspirations, driven as much by necessity as by desire. Trump threatened to upend the grand strategy that underpinned the Political West since the 1940s, including forcing Western Europe to pay more for its defence as the US pivoted to focus on Asia. As an anonymous commentator in *The American Conservative* (2024) put it, the days of European 'free-riding' were coming to an end.

The Political West's dual character—empire and commonwealth—is reflected in a duality at the heart of the American polity. As early as 1955, Hans Morgenthau identified a 'regular state hierarchy' operating within the bounds of the constitutional state, the law and democratic institutions, and a 'security state', sometime called a 'deep state'. According to Morgenthau, the security state enjoyed an effective veto over the decisions of the regular state and is based on an effective choicelessness. Its definition of security trumps all other options, whereas the regular state operates in the realm of political alternatives—although they are foreclosed by the securitisation exercised by the security state (Morgenthau 1962, 400; see also Tunander 2009). Michael Glennon (2015) took up the theme. He describes how a 'Trumanite' state was forged during the Cold

War, establishing enduring connections between the various branches of the military and intelligence agencies, the political class, the media, think tanks and some universities. This represented a structural transformation of the American state, in which military contractors, the armed services and their civilian acolytes play an outsize role, to the detriment of diplomacy and traditional statecraft. Constitutional control withered because of the inherent complexity of national security issues as well as the enduring bipartisan ideological consensus on America's primacy in world affairs. Barack Obama's White House staffer Ben Rhodes attributed this policy continuity to the enduring influence of the foreign policy establishment, which he labels 'the blob' (Walt 2019, 91–136). Hence, the 'Madisonian' constitutional state, the formal institutions of governance encompassing democratic organs such as the presidency, Congress, the judiciary and regular elections, are overshadowed by Trumanite imperatives. Dwight D. Eisenhower (1961) referred to this in his farewell address on 17 January 1961 when he warned against the corrupting influence of the 'military-industrial complex', the combination of 'an immense military establishment and a large arms industry', which he noted was 'something new to the American experience'. He warned that 'the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist'. Eisenhower argued that the creation of a permanent war economy would skew the priorities of American foreign policy and divert resources from domestic needs. There is a large volume of literature which argues that this indeed took place (e.g., McCartney 2015). Glennon argues that the bipartisan consensus of a militarised US grand strategy endures despite regular turnover in political leadership. US foreign and security grand strategy remain remarkably consistent, despite some sharp policy turns.

The Political West has shown intolerance towards external challenges. Despite rhetorical support for pluralism and tolerance, it intrinsically generates Simpson's 'liberal anti-pluralism'. Democratic internationalism generates neo-containment practices against potential rivals, couching great power concerns in the supposed structural antagonism between democracies and autocracies (cf. Mearsheimer 2014). This makes the Political West inherently hermetic—deaf to the appeals of outsiders. By definition, diplomacy is about dialogue and compromise, but in the Manichean world of cold war politics, complex issues are simplified and dialogue is considered a reward to be doled out sparingly only to those considered deserving of the privilege. Compromise is considered to be a betrayal of virtue, and diplomacy is regarded as tantamount to surrender. For the neoconservative partisans of democratic internationalism, it is always 1938. The spectre of appeasement narrows the scope for peacemaking.

The return of the category of evil in international politics precludes normal interstate politics. Rational decision-making, diplomatic statecraft and security dialogue are undermined (Diesen 2017). Moreover, questioning the purpose and perspectives of the Political West is suppressed through ramified systems of information management. External critique is considered a challenge to the unity of the allies, intended to drive a 'wedge' between the two wings of the Atlantic power system. Bloc unity becomes an end in itself, even if the consequences are increasingly dysfunctional. The 'exceptionalism' that has long characterised US national identity

is now projected through the collective agency of the Political West. Predictably, benign intent generates malign outcomes (Lieven and Hulsman 2006a, b). Empire triumphs over commonwealth.

5 The Political East

On the other side, there is the loose alignment that we call the Political East, bringing together states defending sovereign internationalism. The notion of a Political East can be dismissed as little more than yet another invention of Western thinking, in line with ‘the West versus the rest’ tropes. If the Political East is envisioned as a mere anti-Western construct, with a vision of world order sharply at odds with that of the West, then the critique may be justified. In practice, the situation is rather different. Providing that the Political West conforms to the ideas of the Charter system and its foundational principle of sovereign internationalism, the two alignments can find common cause and cooperate. However, when the Political West advances democratic internationalism, positions itself as somehow superior to the Charter system, and asserts its hegemony in cold war terms, then we can conceptualise the Political East not as an anti-West but as its counter. In this role, it repudiates the logic of cold war and hegemonism, accompanied by the defence of the Charter system, to advance an agenda rooted in positive peace. At its sharpest, this includes the revival of Third International-style anti-colonialism and anti-fascism. Many swing states in the Global South are sympathetic to this agenda. None, however, are ready to enter bloc politics of the sort represented by the Political West, and thus repudiate the idea of creating some sort of Fifth International of anti-Western (and by implication illiberal) powers. By its very essence the Political East is an amorphous and contingent set of alignments, although grounded in ideological contiguity.

The core of the nascent Political East is the Sino-Russian alignment, an unprecedented phenomenon. Two great powers, perhaps better described as civilisation-states, with divergent although entangled histories, have come together in a novel manner. Sometimes described as a quasi-alliance relationship, its foundation lies in a common approach to international politics. This was reflected in the wording of the Joint Statement of 4 February 2022, issued by President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin when they met at the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The statement condemned the attempt by ‘certain states’ to impose their ‘democratic standards’, asserting that China and Russia both have ‘long-standing traditions of democracy’. Hence, ‘it is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their state is a democratic one’. The statement condemned ‘further NATO enlargement’ and called on the alliance to ‘abandon its ideologised Cold War approaches’. Above all, the statement affirmed the centrality of the UN Charter and the UDHR as ‘fundamental principles, which all states must comply with and observe in deeds’. This was summed up as follows:

The sides underline that Russia and China, as world powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, intend to firmly adhere to moral principles and accept their responsibility, strongly advocate the inter-

national system with the central coordinating role of the United Nations in international affairs, defend the world order based on international law, including the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, advance multipolarity and promote the democratization of international relations, together create an even more prospering, stable, and just world, jointly build international relations of a new type.

The core idea was that ‘No state can or should ensure its own security separately from the security of the rest of the world and at the expense of the security of other states’—a position that Russia had advanced since the end of Cold War I. Interstate relations between Russia and China were defined as:

superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two states has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries (Kremlin.ru. 2022).

Russia’s longstanding critique of US exceptionalism and hegemonic ambitions was now joined by a China, intent on asserting its status as a global power. The statement rejected the notion that the two countries were ‘global autocracies’ out to subvert Western liberal democracies and instead appealed for pluralism in an international system based on Charter principles, the ‘charter liberalism’ identified by Simpson. Order in international affairs could only be established on this basis. The alternative was disorder and permanent conflict.

Not all commentators in the Political East hold this view. An influential group argues that the rupture with the Political West at the level of international politics should extend to a break with the international system in its entirety. For example, the Russian academic Sergei Karaganov argues that ‘The United Nations is going to extinct [*sic*], saddled with Western bureaucrats and, therefore, unreformable. There is no need to tear it down, but it is necessary to build parallel bodies based on BRICS+, and an expanded SCO [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation], and their integration with the Organization of African Unity [the African Union], the Arab League, ASEAN, and Mercosur. In the interim, it may be possible to create a permanent conference of these institutions within the UN’ (Karaganov 2024). In other words, the alternative was to be nurtured within the UN system, but it was not clear whether the goal was to supersede the Charter system or to wrest control back from the Political West. Either way, the argument risks undermining the achievements of the existing international system. In fact, the alternative is based on Charter principles, suggesting that a more viable strategy would be to reform the existing system rather than attempting to create a new one from scratch.

The mainstream view in the Political East remains committed to making the Charter system work as originally intended. This view is no longer restricted to Russia and China. It is echoed in all the fundamental statements of the BRICS+ organisation, consisting of the five original members (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and four new members as of 2024: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (Argentina refused the invitation and Saudi Arabia deferred

its application). It is also reflected in the statements of the SCO, which currently unites eight countries: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and six ‘dialogue partners’: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey. The mere enumeration of these countries demonstrates the utility of the concept of a ‘Political East’. It encompasses the distinctive dynamics of Northern Eurasia (formerly described as the post-Soviet space), Central Asia, Southwest Asia (once known as the Middle East), East and South Asia, as well as the Global South (once described as the Third World). This is reflected in the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) aligning integration processes within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Within the Global South, the Non-Aligned Movement has been revived. First outlined at the Bandung conference in 1955 then formally established in Belgrade in 1961, NAM reflects the desire of the Global South to remain aloof from renewed cold war blocs. Meanwhile, some nations are considered ‘swing states’, aligning with one side or the other depending on the specific issue. Overall, the Political East reflects the maturation of the international system, within whose framework decolonisation was conducted in the postwar years. Although still burdened by neo-colonial legacies, the 200 countries that now make up the inter-state system firmly defend and assert their sovereignty. At the same time, sovereignty is tempered by commitment to Charter internationalism, and thus is far removed from the statist fundamentalism considered a hallmark of the Westphalian international system.

6 The Charter system under threat

As the postwar titan, the US resented the constraints imposed by multilateralism. Nevertheless, the US understood that exercising power comes with certain costs. Learning from its failure to join the League of Nations, influential Washington policy makers from 1940 argued that embedding US power in a multilateral format would enhance the legitimacy of its power and enhance the prospects for a more durable peace (Wertheim 2020). The US repeatedly exercised unilateral power in Cold War I, including numerous regime change operations and military interventions without UN sanction, but its formal commitment to the Charter system endured.

After 1989, the Political West radicalised. In the absence of a peer competitor in conditions of unipolarity, the ambitions of the Political West expanded and became intolerant of challengers. US leadership in international politics was expected and routine, but the post-Cold War urge towards primacy was something else. Undersecretary of defence for policy, Paul Wolfowitz, in early 1992 produced a notorious paper that came to be known as the doctrine bearing his name, later formulated as the Bush Doctrine. The Wolfowitz document adopted an imperial tone and proclaimed a policy of unilateralism and pre-emptive military interventions to counter threats to American dominance. The core postulate was ‘to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power’ (Wolfowitz 2000, 309). This is a classic principle of offensive realism, as outlined by John Mearsheimer (2014), and wholly rejects the normative dimension represented by Charter multilateralism.

A great substitution was in train. Instead of the US-led Political West remaining a sub-set of the Charter system, it now claimed directive prerogatives that properly belonged to the system as a whole. These claims were couched in terms of a ‘rules-based order’, implying that the Charter system failed to sufficiently establish globally applicable rules and norms. The inordinate prerogatives claimed by the subsystem were roundly condemned by Russia, China, the Political East more broadly and many states in the Global South. They were branded as a revived manifestation of neo-imperial ambitions and the traditional hegemonism of the West. The substitution of a part for the whole generated resistance. For the Political West, maintaining hegemony was deemed a necessary cost to protect democracies against resurgent autocracies. This framing generates bloc discipline on the one side while stigmatising opponents on the other. By inserting itself as the adjudicator and rule-enforcer, the ‘rules-based order’ threatens the viability of the Charter system in its entirety. The great substitution has a number of deleterious effects.

First, it undermines the very idea of sovereign internationalism, the foundation of the Charter system, and thus erodes these foundations. The rights and interests of a state are judged legitimate only to the degree that they conform to the rules and norms advanced by the rules-based powers. This self-referential aspect of democratic internationalism assumes a higher source of legitimate international authority. The appeal to ineffable and incontestable natural rights is adjudicated not by the UN or international law but by the rules-based powers—in other words, by the Political West itself. The great substitution marginalises the UN and its agencies. For example, over the decades the General Assembly adopted 180 resolutions on the Palestine issue and the Security Council 227. However, Israel consistently violates the stipulations. The Security Council’s paralysis over wars in Palestine, Syria and Ukraine undermines the credibility of the UN as a whole. Multilateral institutions are ill-equipped to deal with such crises in international politics. As one commentary puts it as the war in Gaza after the 7 October 2023 atrocity dragged on, killing over 30,000 in the first five months, half of whom were women and children: ‘Israel, with the backing of the US and the various pilot fish that follow it, has begun—or resumed, better put—a concerted attack on the UN, global justice, and altogether on international public space’ (Lawrence 2024). In the heartland of Europe, the public sphere has ‘been cranking up the old mechanism of sanitising Germany by demonising Muslims’ (Mishra 2024, 11). The wars in Palestine and Ukraine intensified continuing discussion about the redundancy of the UN as the supreme voice of the international community (e.g., Klimkin and Umland 2020). This was accompanied by calls for Russia to be stripped off its permanent Security Council seat (Carpenter 2023). This is something new, and highlights how Cold War II is far more pervasive and dangerous than the first.

A second outcome stems from this, namely the stifling of diplomacy. If human rights are an absolute value, then an absolutist political practice is appropriate—how can there be accommodation with evil? The Manichean black-and-white divisions of Cold War I have been taken to a wholly new level. The struggle between communism and capitalism was comprehensible and easily mobilised against the adversary, but today the lack of precision (how to define a democracy or an ‘autocracy’, and how to distinguish between friends and foes) generated an

intense arbitrariness feeding into systemic practices of double standards. In Cold War II, double standards are not an epiphenomenon of hegemony but a systemic feature of an imperial mode of governance. Russia's war in Ukraine was condemned, but Israel's mass slaughter of innocent civilians in Gaza and the West Bank were, at most, mildly censured.

Third, the encroaching global anarchy generates mimetic violence, which becomes a self-perpetuating cycle of status and militarised conflicts. Fear that the other side is insidiously subverting the domestic order generates mimetic contagion, scapegoating and repression. René Girard (2003) identified the victim mechanism as sustaining social order by redirecting violence to the scapegoat and appropriative mimesis. He considered the imitation of the desire to possess an object (which includes status and identity) to be a characteristic of humans throughout the ages (see Palaver 2013). The ritualised mimetic violence of scapegoating relieves a society of accumulated tensions. The symbolic allocation of responsibility for social ills to a particular subject deprives them of the most basic right, the right to life. The scapegoating principle is a universal phenomenon, although it takes many different forms (Girard 2005; Girard and Freccero 1989). As far as Moscow is concerned, the prevalent Russophobia in the Political West (significantly, the Global South is largely immune) is a token of the scapegoating mechanism at work, with Russia held responsible for subverting Western democracies and a host of other ills. The Kremlin naturally is no stranger to the mechanism, holding the West responsible for stirring up domestic dissent and thus discrediting legitimate opposition.

Fourth, the struggle for mastery over Charter institutions has intensified. The Political West increasingly votes as a disciplined bloc in the Security Council while deploying all manner of techniques, including bribery and intimidation, against recalcitrant powers to ensure that they vote the right way. This reduces the UN and its institutions to an instrument of cold war and great power rivalry, and thereby undermines its autonomy and efficacy. As China assumed more leadership responsibilities in multilateral agencies and organisations, including the World Bank and IMF, the Political West fought back. By 2021 China led four of the UN's 15 specialised agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Telecommunications Union, the UN Industrial Development Organisation, and the International Civil Aviation Organisation. This prompted a coordinated response by the Political West, fearing that the so-called 'revisionist' powers were subverting liberal order from within: 'They [the revisionist powers] begin by calling for reform of existing institutions, but over time the "salami slicing" of "existing rules and norms can create significant weaknesses in international institutions that undermine the broader institutional order' (Goddard 2022, 35). As the Political East shifted from rule-taker to rule-enforcer, the hegemony of the Political West eroded. Sergei Lavrov (2022), the Russian foreign minister, observed that 'the Americans have shown a tendency to privatise the secretariats of international organisations. They place their people in leading positions. To our great regret, they have influence over countries voting on personnel decisions. Americans are rushing round the world. What sovereign equality of states?'. A case in point is the alleged 'privatisation' of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) by agents of the Political

West, preventing impartial investigations into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria and elsewhere (Maté 2019).

Fifth, the intensifying crisis of Charter multilateralism encourages the creation of alternatives and the bifurcation of international politics. The Political West did this within the framework of the rules-based order, seeking to entrench its power within an alternative constellation. This included the idea of establishing a ‘League of Democracies’, the first steps towards which were annual ‘summits of democracies’. The Political East focused initially on creating alternative financial institutions and institutions in which the views of the non-Western powers were constitutionally entrenched. The world is dividing into two camps: on the one side there are defenders of ‘empire’, the tutelary role of the US and its allies over the multilateral institutions of the Charter International System; and on the other side are advocates of ‘commonwealth’, who believe that a better order of international politics is not only possible but essential for humanity’s survival amidst the various calamities it faces—ranging from irreversible and runaway climate change to the nuclear Apocalypse. This division in broad and far from consistent terms corresponds to ‘historical divisions between colonizing states and colonized states and ethnic/cultural divisions between “white” states and “non-white” states’ (Lawrence 2024). Russia now positions itself at the head of a renewed anti-colonial drive, while the US and its allies are presented as avatars of a revived liberal imperialism.

Sixth, the perennial debates over reform of the UN system. There are increasing demands for UN reform, above all by expanding the permanent members of the Security Council to include, at the minimum, India, Brazil and at least one representative from Africa. The absence of some major powers and regions from the Security Council undermines its credibility. Another important idea is changing the balance of responsibility between the Security Council and the General Assembly. There are many more ideas, but the enduring issue of UN reform is no closer to resolution today than it was in the past (Gordanić 2022).

7 Conclusion

The Charter International System faces unprecedented threats. Globalisation is fragmenting into at least two potential streams, accompanied by the general degradation of diplomacy and an intensified polarised culture of international politics. Sanctions have become a means of conducting hostilities as opposed to an alternative to war. Given the deadlock in the UN Security Council, the only universally legitimate source of sanctions and other global managerial and deterrence policies, nations have turned to the creation of alternative blocs and alignments to achieve their goals. The war in Ukraine from 2022 and the Israel-Hamas war from 2023 signal the breakdown of the aspirations for an enduring post-Cold War peace. Earlier, when the authority of the UN was flouted and its norms breached, there was a general awareness that some offence had taken place. Today this consensus is unravelling. The postwar period is coming to an end.

The relative stability ensured by the common understanding that the UN and its norms were the gold standard for international behaviour, long eroded, may

finally be crumbling (Barabanov et al 2018; see also 2022). Historically, major wars signalled the collapse of one international system and the preparations for the creation of its successor. Today, numerous signs suggest that we are at such a crossroads, an inflection point indicating the end of one system and the search for a new one. However, unlike in earlier epochs, there are no substantive ideas of what a fundamentally new system would look like. There are no alternative ideas waiting in the wings. The Charter International System still has mileage and potential. Some reforms are necessary, particularly regarding the permanent composition of the Security Council, and potentially in the relationship between the General Assembly and the Security Council. However, the principles and norms underlying the system remain the only realistic foundations for a viable international system.

The post-1945 international system is in crisis, but it is not necessarily a terminal one. New international systems are usually created after a major war and when novel ideas and potential institutional innovations have matured to the point that old ideas become anachronistic and old institutions outdated. This is not the case today. Today's International politics continues to be conducted in the long shadow of the great wars of the twentieth century. The cold war logic that dominated the second half of the century shapes international politics in the twenty-first. Nevertheless, the spirit of 1945 still burns, albeit with diminished brightness. It was revived in the New Political Thinking of the late 1980s, and deeply imbues the various global strategies advanced by independent members of the Global South and the nascent Political East. They stand in defence of the Charter system. To the degree that multipolarity develops, the Charter norms and principles will be reinforced. The vision of a positive peace order remains part of the language of international politics. There is an alternative to endless cold war. Reform of the UN is necessary, but not a sufficient condition to resolve the crisis. The Charter International System will remain the cornerstone of the international community for the foreseeable future. Resolving the crisis necessitates not a new international system, but a new pattern in international politics. For that to occur leadership at the national level is required, accompanied by pressure from political associations and popular movements.

The fossilised structures of the Cold War have reproduced in new forms, prompting conflict and global polarisation. The wars of our times distract attention from the pressing challenges of climate change and global development. There is no common vision of the future or even a perspective that the future can be an improvement on the past. The Political West is challenged by a slowly constituting Political East, a process that may restore some sort of equilibrium in international politics. The balance of power and influence is changing in international affairs. This is accompanied by new approaches to globalisation, with a greater awareness of the distributional effects within and between states. Equality and limits to unbounded financialisation and the power of capital are rising up the political agenda. The spirit of 1945 lives on in aspirations for peace and development. The opportunity to establish some sort of positive peace order after the end of the Cold War in 1989 was squandered. However, as long as the Charter International System is still in place, the framework remains for progressive initiatives and some sort of global peace order. The alternative is a global anarchy that threatens the very existence of humanity.

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