A Flawed Framework

Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided

Charles L. Glaser

Policymakers and scholars in the United States worried about growing threats to the Western international order well before President Donald Trump began rhetorically attacking U.S. allies and challenging the international trading system.[1] These threats included the 2007–08 financial crisis and the negative economic impacts of globalization. Recently, the focus has shifted sharply to the return of major power competition. As the United States' 2018 National Defense Strategy notes: "We are facing increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order . . . Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."[2] Perceived threats have generated a search for policies capable of preserving the international order. As a bipartisan group of former govern-

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1. See, for example, Stewart Patrick, "World Order: What, Exactly, Are the Rules?" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 7–27, doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1170477. On various assessments of the threat, see G. John Ikenberry, "The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (May/June 2014), pp. 80–90, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2014-04-17/illusion-geopolitics; and G. Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal World: The Resilient Order," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (July/August 2018), pp. 16–24. Thomas J. Wright concludes that "the post–Cold War international order has come to an end." Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017), p. ix.
2. Secretary of Defense James Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2018), p. 1, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf. For an earlier official statement of the need to strengthen the international order, see Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter, "Remarks on 'Strategic and Operational Innovation at a Time of Transition and Turbulence' at Reagan Defense Forum" (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, November 7, 2015), https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/628147/remarks-on-strategic-and-operational-innovation-at-a-time-of-transition-and-tur/.

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ment officials concluded in 2016, "The great task of our time is therefore to preserve, adapt and extend that order as best we can."[3]

This article explores a more fundamental set of issues—the analytic value of framing U.S. security and foreign policy in terms of the international order. Scholars typically define an international order as the rules and institutions that guide states' behavior. A specific type of international order—the liberal international order (LIO)—plays a central role in current analyses of and debates over U.S. foreign policy. The LIO comprises a variety of disparate elements, including predominant U.S. power, U.S. alliances in Europe and Asia, the open international economic system, and the United Nations.

My analysis introduces a distinction between the LIO and what I term the "LIO concept"—the logics and mechanisms through which the LIO is said to produce outcomes. Scholars have claimed that the LIO concept explains the cohesion and effectiveness of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and that the LIO is responsible for the Cold War peace, U.S. victory in the Cold War, and the absence of balancing against U.S. hegemonic power after the Cold War. Yet, despite the centrality of the LIO to U.S. foreign policy discourse, scholars have devoted little effort to scrutinizing key strands of the LIO concept and claims about the outcomes the LIO has produced.[4] This article seeks to fill these gaps in the literature.

In this article, I show that the LIO concept suffers from theoretical weaknesses that render it unable to explain much about the interaction of the United States with its adversaries or its allies. Worse yet, framing U.S. policy in terms of the LIO is potentially dangerous; by exaggerating the threat posed by small changes to the political status quo and implicitly rejecting adaptation to the new balance of power in East Asia, the LIO lens could encourage the United States to adopt overly competitive policies.

The LIO concept suffers from two main problems. First, and most basic, the LIO concept is inward looking; it focuses on interactions between states that are members of the liberal international order, not on interactions between states that belong to the LIO and those that do not. This is a serious limitation,

3. Kurt Campbell et al., "Extending American Power: Strategies to Expand U.S. Engagement in a Competitive World Order" (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, May 2016), p. 19, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/extending-american-power-strategies-to-expand-u-s-engagement-in-a-competitive-world-order.

4. A key exception is Randall L. Schweller, "The Problem of International Order Revisited: A Review Essay," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 161–186, doi.org/10.1162/016228801753212886. For more recent critiques that challenge whether U.S. post–war policy was liberal, see Graham Allison, "The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (July/August 2018), pp. 124–133, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/myth-liberal-order; and Patrick Porter, "A World Imagined: Nostalgia and Liberal Order," Policy Analysis No. 843 (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, June 5, 2018).

because the LIO is a partial order; it does not (and did not) include key major powers. During the Cold War, for example, the LIO did not include the Soviet Union; today, neither China nor Russia is fully included. Consequently, the LIO concept can shed little light on the most important issues in international politics—specifically, the prospects for peace and cooperation between the United States and its allies, on the one hand, and its adversaries and competitors, on the other.

Second, key strands of the LIO concept suffer serious theoretical weaknesses. For example, one strand argues that a powerful state can bind itself to institutions, thereby reassuring weaker partners that it will meet its alliance commitments, neither abandoning its allies nor using force coercively against them; such reassurance was essential to NATO's success during the Cold War. A powerful state, however, cannot effectively constrain its ability to use its power/military force when the stakes are sufficiently high. Another strand of the LIO concept holds that hierarchy built on legitimate authority, granted by subordinate (i.e., weaker) states to the dominant (i.e., stronger) state, is essential to explaining cooperation under anarchy. According to this argument, hierarchy plays a central role in explaining cooperation among NATO's member states. I show, however, that this has not been the case and that established theories of alliance cooperation explain cooperation within NATO quite well. Given these theoretical weaknesses, the LIO concept cannot support claims that the LIO's institutions have been more effective or better able to weather shocks from the international system than they would have been otherwise.

I argue that other well-established theories—in particular, defensive realism/rationalist structural theories, which are based on a combination of power, interest, and information-based arguments—are able to explain the major historical events that scholars and commentators have credited to the LIO. Thus, the LIO concept's inward focus and theoretical weakness do not leave scholars with a significant explanatory gap. For example, balance of threat theory does an excellent job of explaining the basics of NATO's Cold War cohesion and effectiveness. Explaining more nuanced features of NATO requires other theories, including bargaining theory and neo-institutional theories. Similarly, a variety of structural arguments can explain the Cold War peace, including the defense advantage created by nuclear weapons, NATO's effective deterrent capabilities, and the relative simplicity of balancing in bipolarity.

Despite these problems with the LIO concept, the LIO might prove valuable if its components produce more jointly than they would individually—that is, if the whole of the LIO were greater than the sum of its parts. For example, a variety of theories have identified positive interactions between U.S. alliances and the open economic system. Available research indicates, however, that the size of these interactions is hard to estimate—experts disagree on their magni-

tude, with some finding that the benefits are insignificant. Thus, the possibility of interactive benefits fails to provide a strong case for envisioning the LIO as an integrated entity. More central to my critique, the mechanisms that drive these interactions are not included in the LIO concept and therefore lie largely outside the LIO lens.

In light of all of these shortcomings, I conclude that scholars, policy analysts, and practitioners should stop framing their analyses of U.S. international policy in terms of the LIO. In addition to lacking analytic value, framing discussions of U.S. international policy in terms of the LIO tends to build in a status quo bias: the vast majority of such discussions start from the premise that preserving the LIO deserves top priority. With China's rise generating a dramatic shift in the global balance of power, however, the United States needs to engage in a more fundamental evaluation of its interests and the best means for achieving them. I argue, therefore, that the United States should analyze the broad outlines of its international policy from the perspective of grand strategy. By adopting a grand-strategic framework, analysts can correct the LIO's status quo bias, make theoretical debates more explicit, and ensure that a wider array of foreign policy options receive due consideration.

This article proceeds in eight sections. In the first section, I discuss different meanings of the term "liberal international order" and argue that the lack of an agreed upon meaning is a source of policy and analytic confusion. Next, I describe the logics and mechanisms of the LIO concept. I then show that the LIO concept's inward focus largely undermines its explanatory value. In the fourth section, I explore weaknesses in some of the LIO concept's theoretical arguments. The fifth section offers alternative explanations for international behavior that some theorists credit to the LIO. The sixth section reviews research that demonstrates that interactions between the LIO's security and economic components do not make it significantly more than the sum of its parts. In the seventh section, I argue for shifting entirely from an LIO lens to a grand-strategic lens. In the conclusion, I identify policy issues and options raised by employing a grand strategy framework. For example, should the United States retain its security commitments to its regional allies? Should it make concessions in East Asia that are essentially precluded by the LIO's status quo bias? Should the United States instead adopt competitive policies that are inconsistent with the LIO but that may be required to preserve U.S. regional dominance?

What Is the Liberal International Order?

This section reviews scholars' understandings of the elements that constitute an international order. It then explores whether an international order should be considered an end or a means.

INTERNATIONAL ORDER BASICS

An international order is widely understood by scholars as the "explicit principles, rules, and institutions that define the core relationship between the states that are party to the order."[5] Therefore, almost any international situation qualifies as an international order, so long as its members accept the sovereignty norm. All of the basic types of security arrangements—including hegemony, balance of power,[6] collective security, concerts, and security communities—qualify as international security orders or partial orders. Security orders vary in terms of the degree of competition and cooperation between states, as well as in the extent to which power and coercion play central roles. Economic relationships—specifically, economic interdependence—and regime type—specifically, democracy—may also be defining features of security orders, as well as of international orders more broadly.[7]

Most analyses of international orders concentrate on major powers, focusing on their achievement of peace and prosperity, and emphasize the benefits of states' acceptance of norms and institutions. U.S. discussions of the international order fit firmly in this category.[8] In contrast, other analyses highlight the contested nature of norms and institutions, which they attribute to the combined effects of the unequal distribution of global power and the tremendous influence of the most powerful states in shaping the order.[9] These analyses

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5. G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 23. For criticism of Ikenberry's definition as too narrow, see Schweller, "The Problem of International Order Revisited," pp. 169–173. For a discussion of more basic elements that influence orders, see Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 85–140. Finnemore emphasizes the significance of states' goals and their understandings of threats to these goals. See also Charles A. Kupchan, "Unpacking Hegemony: The Social Foundations of Hierarchical Order," in G. John Ikenberry, *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

6. A balance of power system might not appear to qualify as an order; however, many order theorists argue otherwise. See, for example, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 101–126; and G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 47–55.

7. Muthiah Alagappa, "The Study of International Order: An Analytic Framework," in Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 52–64.

8. Recent analyses, however, have started to criticize U.S. domestic policy for failing to share the benefits and offset the costs of open trade, which has in turn undermined the domestic legitimacy of the LIO. See, for example, Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, "The Liberal Order Is Rigged: Fix It Now or Watch It Wither," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (May/June 2017), pp. 36–44.

9. Andrew Hurrell labels the first type of order as "pluralist" and the second as "liberal solidarist"; in addition, he identifies a third category—"complex governance." Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States, and Global Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Another distinction is between global and regional orders, see David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, eds., *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

place greater weight on questions of justice, global inequality, and poverty, and emphasize their importance for the order's legitimacy.

U.S. scholars' and policymakers' discussions of the international order refer primarily, at least implicitly, to the LIO, sometimes termed the "liberal hegemonic order," which the United States took the lead in establishing following World War II.[10] Democratic states infuse the LIO with liberal values. The LIO's institutions include NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance; an open trading system, initially managed via the Bretton Woods institutions and now including the World Trade Organization (WTO); and the United Nations, which sets out the central role of state sovereignty and limits on the use of military force, which have their foundation in the principle of Westphalian sovereignty. While the United States used its overwhelming power (i.e., its hegemonic position) to shape these institutions, according to LIO theorists, it also agreed, via these institutions, to make "the exercise of American power more restrained and predictable."[11] Most analyses adopt a primarily U.S. perspective that tends to overlook that China and Russia have never fully embraced the LIO—most importantly, its commitment to democracy and individual human rights. In effect, this perspective implicitly assumes that what is good for the United States is good for others as well.

Since the end of the Cold War, many scholars and policy analysts have employed the term LIO much more broadly, including within it a norm to defend and promote democracy;[12] obligations for states to combat terrorism and to adopt plans to reduce climate change; a norm requiring the protection of human rights; a commitment to the economic growth of developing countries; the nuclear nonproliferation regime and other limits on weapons of mass destruction; the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea; regional trade agreements—for example, the North American Free Trade Agreement; and an array of regional forums and groups designed to pursue security or economic goals, or both.[13]

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10. On different types of orders, and how they are combined in the LIO, see Ikenberry, *After Victory*, pp. 21–49, in which he identifies balance of power, hegemonic, and constitutional orders; and Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 35–77. On hegemonic orders, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). See also Alagappa, "The Study of International Order." He identifies three broad categories of international order—instrumental, normative-contractual, and solidarist.

11. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 159–219, at p. 216. On the importance of American purpose in shaping the institutions formed by the hegemon, see John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 561–598, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027831.

12. On preserving the liberal order, but also the limits that should be placed on democracy promotion, see Michael W. Doyle, "A Liberal View: Preserving and Expanding the Liberal Pacific Order," in T.V. Paul and John A. Hall, eds., *International Order and the Future of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

13. For example, Patrick, "World Order"; Bruce Jones et al., "The State of the International Order,"

Given the many different uses of the term LIO, it is unsurprising that a recent analysis concludes that "much of the disagreement about the value of the international order for U.S. policy may come down to disagreements about what we actually mean by 'order.'"[14]

MEANS OR END?

A key conceptual question about any international order is whether it is a means for achieving a state's objectives or an end in itself. Scholars and policymakers frequently create confusion by using the term to refer to both. For example, the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy holds that "an international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security and opportunity" is one of the United States' enduring interests—that is, an end. The document also holds that the "test of this international order must be the cooperation it facilitates and results it generates"—that is, a means.[15] For both conceptual clarity and analytic utility, I argue that an international order should be understood as a means, not an end. A state or states create an order to achieve certain ends. Similarly, a state can choose to join an order—abide by its rules and norms and participate in its institutions—in pursuit of its interests (i.e., ends).[16]

A related, distinction is whether an international order is a means or an outcome (i.e., a result).[17] For example, Hedley Bull, an early theorist of interna-

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Policy Paper No. 33 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, February 2014); and Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016), p. 15.

14. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, pp. 7–17, at p. 17. On related points, see also Richard Fontaine and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "How China Sees World Order: Can Beijing Be a 'Responsible Stakeholder'?" *National Interest*, May–June 2016, p. 3, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-sees-world-order-15846; and Michael J. Mazarr, "The Once and Future Order: What Comes after Hegemony?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (January/February 2017), pp. 25–32, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-12/once-and-future-order. Mazarr argues that the liberal international order "has always incorporated two distinct and not necessarily reconcilable visions" (p. 26). See also Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (January/February 2017), pp. 10–16, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive. Nye observes that "the mythology that has grown up around the order can be exaggerated" (p. 11).

15. White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (Washington, D.C.: White House, May 2010), p. 12, https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=24251. The document argues later that the order is both a means and an end, but the logic is not convincing, see ibid., p. 40.

16. Choosing to join an order does not necessarily indicate that the state prefers that order to other possible orders, including less highly institutionalized orders. See Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Organizations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

17. Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 8. Similarly, Stewart Patrick, holds that "'World Order' denotes a baseline level of predictability, or patterned regularity, that makes interstate relations something more than a war of all-against-all, despite the inherent structural anarchy of a system composed of independent, sovereign states." Patrick, "World Order," p. 8. G. John Ikenberry notes that in a balance of power order, "out of the resulting stalemate of power, order arises. . . . In effect, order is the

tional order, defines international order as "a pattern of behavior that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society." This definition conceives international order as an outcome—in this particular case, a pattern. It thus conflates an international order—the norms, rules, and institutions—with the outcomes it produces.

In addition to being a means to an end, an order can be a constraint on a state's behavior. Once an order is established, a member state may be unable to quickly change it. Deeply institutionalized trade organizations and security alliances are costly to create—in terms of time, wealth, or political capital, or some combination thereof—and thus costly to re-create. Thus, with few exceptions, a state can in the short term choose to act within the order—abiding by its rules and norms—or to violate it, but not to create a revised order.[18] Whether an order is a means or a constraint thus depends partly on the phase of its evolution. During its creation, an order is essentially a means to an end; once established, it can be at least partly a constraint. In the longer term, a sufficiently powerful state may be able to revise the order; therefore, in this time frame, the order is primarily a means.

The remainder of this article explores the LIO, because it is the focus of current U.S. discussions of the international order. I further restrict my discussion to the narrow version of the LIO for a variety of reasons: virtually all discussions of the LIO include its core of elements; the narrow version is the most extensively theorized; and the elements included in the narrow version have the greatest potential to maintain and increase U.S. national security.

The LIO Concept

In this section, I briefly describe five mechanisms—causal logics—that LIO theorists argue produce the order's outcomes:[19] democracy, hierarchy built on legitimate authority, institutional binding, economic interdependence, and political convergence.[20]

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result of an equipoise or equilibrium of power between the competing states." Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, p. 48.

18. This observation is consistent with the more general institutional argument that international regimes are easier to maintain than to create. See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 100–103.

19. As with the LIO, there is no agreed set of mechanisms that form the LIO concept. I have identified the five that are most important.

20. As China has risen, some analysts have begun envisioning a narrower order—a rules-based order—that does not include the democracy and convergence strands of the LIO concept or the central role of individual human rights that are emphasized by liberalism. This rules-based order could fully integrate China and therefore might hold greater promise going forward. Given space constraints, I do not explore the implications or potential of this type of order. On the range

Understanding these mechanisms is essential for evaluating proponents' claims that the LIO positively influences international outcomes. Scholars have extensively theorized and studied the individual core elements of the LIO, including alliances, the open economic system, and the sovereignty norm, without viewing them as part of an integrated entity, the order. This research has yielded well established, or at least widely debated, insights about the international impacts generated by each element. To take an obvious example, NATO certainly influenced U.S.-Soviet interactions during the Cold War. NATO's influence is well understood, however, in terms of established theories—including theories that explain why alliances form, how they support deterrence, and when they threaten adversaries. Proponents of the LIO, employing the LIO concept, claim that the LIO produces positive outcomes not explained by the theories that address the order's individual elements. Following sections explain why they are wrong.

DEMOCRACY

Theorists of the LIO claim that many facets of democratic states help make feasible a liberal order that produces cooperation, unilateral restraint, and peace: democratic states have common interests; they expect that interactions will be based on consensus and reciprocity, not simply on the exercise of power; they can overcome the security dilemma; and they can make credible commitments that provide confidence that powerful states will restrain their use of force.[21] As a result, democracies are better able to maintain alliances, pursue open trade, and establish and abide by rules that guide international behavior.

Scholars have extensively debated the impact of democracy on international politics.[22] Democratic peace theory, which explains cooperation and peace between democracies, and related features of democratic exceptionalism have received much support, although scholars continue to disagree over which specific mechanisms produce these outcomes. Analysts who conclude that democracy has these far-reaching positive international impacts find that the LIO has greater potential to benefit its member states than democratic-peace skeptics believe.

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of illiberal challenges facing the United States and LIO, see Michael J. Boyle, "The Coming Illiberal Order," *Survival*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (April–May 2016), pp. 35–66, doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1161899.

21. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 61–66. Democracy is a central element of the liberal worldview. See Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 205–311.

22. See, for example, Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post–Cold War World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

HIERARCHY BUILT ON LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY

According to LIO theorists, the order is characterized by hierarchy, not anarchy—that is, the lack of an international institution or state that can prevent the use of military force and enforce international agreements. In the international relations theory literature, hierarchy has a variety of meanings and logics. The LIO is grounded in a narrow conception of the term: hierarchy is manifest in legitimate political authority between superordinate and subordinate states.[23] John Ikenberry explains that in hierarchical systems, "order is established or imposed by a leading state wielding concentrated power and authority . . . hierarchical orders can vary widely in terms of the degree to which superordinate and subordinate roles are established and maintained by such factors as coercive power, legitimate authority, institutionalized relations, and a division of labor."[24] In a liberal hegemonic order, legitimate authority plays a large role, whereas coercion plays a limited role.

The legitimacy of the most powerful state reflects its willingness to rely on bargaining to achieve consensus.[25] The LIO is built on negotiated rules that all states, including the most powerful state, accept. Consequently, the weaker states consider the most powerful state's overwhelming influence in establishing the terms of the consensus to be legitimate.[26] Accordingly, the weaker

23. On narrow and broad definitions, see Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, "Hierarchies in World Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Summer 2016), pp. 623–654, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000126. Jack Donnelly argues that authority is often associated incorrectly with hierarchy. Donnelly, "Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy: American Power and International Society," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 2006), pp. 139–170, at p. 142, doi.org/10.1177/1354066106064505. See also Meghan McConaughey, Paul Musgrave, and Daniel H. Nexon, "Beyond Anarchy: Logics of Political Organization, Hierarchy, and International Structure," *International Theory*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (July 2018), pp. 181–218, doi.org/10.1017/S1752971918000040.

24. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, p. 56. David A. Lake states that "hierarchy exists when one actor, the dominant state, possesses authority over another actor, the subordinate state." Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Summer 2007), p. 56, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.32.1.47.

25. On this basic conception, see Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, especially pp. 70–74. On related understandings of legitimacy, see Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 379–408, doi.org/10.1162/002081899550913. Hurd focuses on why states follow international norms. See also Hurrell, *On Global Order*, pp. 77–91. A state can engage, however, in coercion even if it works through an international institution; see Alexander Thompson, "Coercion through IOs: The Security Council and the Logic of Information Transmission," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 1–34, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818306060012.

26. For a broader discussion of legitimacy and its constraining influence on unipolar powers, see Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn't All It's Cracked Up to Be," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 58–85, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000082. For a different perspective on the trade-offs facing a unipolar power, see also Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). On a hierarchical order built on the provision of justice, see Ahsan I. Butt, "Anarchy and Hierarchy in International Relations: Explaining South America's War-Prone Decade, 1932–41," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 575–607.

states are less likely to try to overturn the agreement or regime, which increases the most powerful state's prospects for maintaining its position over the long run. Nevertheless, the structural relationship between the states is hierarchical, because the most powerful state disproportionately influences the terms of the agreement.

David Lake offers a different understanding of hierarchy, based on a concept of "relational authority." He states that "in a relational approach, authority is understood to rest on an exchange relationship between dominant and subordinate states, in which the former provides a social order in return for compliance and legitimacy from the latter."[27] Legitimacy conferred by the subordinate (weaker) power to the superordinate (stronger) power distinguishes the product of relational authority from standard bargained agreements. Central to Lake's understanding of legitimacy is duty: "It is the duty to comply with the ruler's commands—or alternatively the legitimacy of those commands—that renders authority and coercion conceptually distinct."[28]

INSTITUTIONAL BINDING

Scholars who study institutions have identified a variety of ways in which international institutions can help states achieve common objectives, including by providing information, reducing transaction costs, and increasing efficiency in the implementation of shared functions.[29] The LIO concept goes further, holding that states can bind themselves to institutions. Ikenberry argues that "liberal theories grasp the way in which institutions can channel and constrain state actions, but they have not explored a more far-reaching view, in which leading states use intergovernmental institutions to restrain themselves and thereby dampen fears of domination and abandonment in secondary states."[30] For Ikenberry, the ability of powerful states to bind themselves to rules, agreements, and institutions makes exit from the institutions sufficiently difficult and costly that a dominant state can reassure weaker members that it will meet its obligations and not use its superior force against their interests. "The logic of institutional binding and supranationalism," writes Ikenberry, "is to restrain

27. Lake, "Escape from the State of Nature," p. 71. On the essential role of hierarchy and authority in international order, see David A. Lake, "International Legitimacy Lost? Rule and Resistance When America Is First," *Perspective on Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 2018), pp. 6–11, doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717003085.
28. David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 22; see also, pp. 30, 51–52.
29. The foundational work is Keohane, *After Hegemony*. I do not see a deep theoretical divide between neo-institutional arguments and rational structural theories. See Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 161–166.
30. Ikenberry, *After Victory*, p. 15.

power through the establishment of an institutionalized political process supervised by formal-legal authority." He goes on, "States might ordinarily prefer to preserve their options . . . Through institutional binding, states do exactly the opposite: they build long-term security, political and economic commitments that are difficult to retract." This checking of the dominant state's power increases weak states' willingness to reach agreements that expand their dependence on the dominant state and their potential vulnerability to its power.[31]

economic interdependence

A core theme of liberalism is that economic interdependence reduces the probability of war. States give priority to increasing their prosperity, and trade can play a central role in achieving this end. The higher the level of economic interdependence, the greater the losses from the interruption of trade; recognition of these potential losses increases the incentives for states to avoid war. U.S. leaders' beliefs about the benefits of economic interdependence and about the dangers of unbridled economic competition, which fueled the Great Depression and in turn World War II, played an influential role in shaping the U.S. design of the LIO.[32]

As with the role of democracy in promoting peace, there is substantial theoretical and empirical debate over the impact of economic interdependence on war.[33] For example, realists have argued that economic interdependence creates vulnerabilities, which in turn generate the potential for coercion via trade embargos and trade wars, and that vulnerability to the disruption of vital imports can fuel military competition and support decisions for war.[34] A state's decisions about how much economic vulnerability to accept depend on its expectations about the size of the economic benefits and the probability of future political and military conflict.[35]

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31. Ibid., pp. 7–17, 40–44, 199–210, at pp. 43, 41; and Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 61–62.
32. Ikenberry, *After Victory*, pp. 163–214.
33. Christopher Gelpi and Joseph M. Grieco, "Economic Interdependence, the Democratic State, and the Liberal Peace," in Edward D. Mansfield and Brian M. Pollins, eds., *Economic Interdependence and International Conflict: New Perspectives on an Enduring Debate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), pp. 44–59; and Edward D. Mansfield and Jon C. Pevehouse, "Trade Blocs, Trade Flows, and International Conflict," *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn 2000), pp. 775–808, doi.org/10.1162/002081800551361.
34. For a succinct review of these arguments, and numerous qualifications and debates, see Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 16–50. See also Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 129–160.
35. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War*. However, states may have little option than to trade for goods that they do not produce and resources they do not possess—maybe, most importantly, oil—thereby leaving themselves vulnerable. On oil, see Rosemary A. Kelanic, "The Petro-

POLITICAL CONVERGENCE

The fifth mechanism in the LIO concept—political convergence—played a central role during the post–Cold War period. Convergence embodies the belief that "as countries embraced globalization, they would become more 'responsible' members of the liberal international order and would, over time, liberalize domestically."[36] More specifically, states' growing involvement in the open international economy and, related, their increasing prosperity would eventually convert authoritarian states into democracies. Democracy would then lead to cooperation and peace between the great powers via the logic of the democratic peace. In contrast to the four other LIO mechanisms, the core of convergence is essentially transformational: the international order achieves these positive outcomes by changing states, aligning their interests and advancing their understandings of acceptable means for achieving their foreign policy objectives.[37]

The convergence-driven transition to democracy could occur incrementally through a variety of reinforcing mechanisms. The increasingly open economic system and the acceleration of globalization would increase countries' wealth and per capita gross domestic product (GDP). The resultant rising standard of living would promote democracy via the creation of a middle class striving to achieve political influence. In addition, features of an effective market—including the rule of law and property rights—would favor the development of civil society and, in turn, support liberal democracy.[38]

In the post–Cold War era, the most important candidates for convergence were Russia and especially China, given its potential to become an economically advanced peer competitor of the United States. Michael Mandelbaum summarizes the thinking: "The guiding principle of the post–Cold War Western policy toward Russia and China, as well as toward the countries of the periphery, was one of the precepts central to the liberal view of history: Free markets make free men."[39]

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leum Paradox: Oil, Coercive Vulnerability, and Great Power Behavior," *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2016), pp. 181–213, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1171966; Charles L. Glaser, "How Oil Influences U.S. National Security," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2013), pp. 112–146, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00137; and Jeff D. Colgan, "Fueling the Fire: Pathways from Oil to War," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2013), pp. 147–180, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00135.

36. Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, p. 1.

37. Thomas Wright traces the ideas through three U.S. presidencies, and identifies key supporting works. Ibid. Included among these works are Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003); and Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

38. Mandelbaum, *The Ideas that Conquered the World*, pp. 265–276.

39. Ibid., p. 265.

Inward Focus of the LIO Concept

Proponents of the LIO have made ambitious claims about its positive impact on U.S. security, maintaining that it was responsible for the Cold War peace, U.S. success in winning the Cold War, the specialization of capabilities within U.S. alliances,[40] and the lack of balancing against predominant U.S. power following the Cold War. In addition, they ascribe the peace and cooperation that characterized the first two decades of the post–Cold War era largely to the LIO.

The LIO can take little or no credit for these outcomes, however, because it is a partial order and because the LIO concept is primarily inward looking. By partial, I mean that the order does not include all of the major powers;[41] by inward looking, I mean that the LIO concept primarily addresses interactions between states that are members of the order, not interactions between its members and states that lay outside the LIO. In other words, links between the LIO concept and the behavior of potential U.S. adversaries are largely missing.

My argument does not dispute that individual elements of the LIO significantly influence interactions between the United States (and its allies) and nonmember states. There are well-established theories that explain these interactions. Given its inward focus, however, the LIO concept fails to identify additional interactions, outcomes, or benefits.

Consider, first, the Cold War. The Soviet Union and its allies were not members of the LIO. They were not democracies, so democratic peace arguments do not apply. Nor were they members of the most important and most consequential LIO institutions, including NATO. Thus, the institutional binding argument says little about how institutional arrangements influenced political relations between the United States and Soviet Union. Nor does the hierarchy argument apply globally, because the Cold War was bipolar. To the extent that the United States enjoyed power advantages within this bipolarity, it could not use them to gain legitimate authority through a consensual bargain with the Soviet Union. Finally, the Soviet Union was largely excluded from the West's open markets and its financial system; thus, economic interdependence arguments do not apply. In short, the LIO concept does not address interactions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

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40. Given space constraints, I do not explore the specialization argument. Briefly, part of the problem is Waltz's overstatement of this argument; once modified, basic information arguments can explain this specialization. With sufficient confidence that the more powerful state will not defect, weaker states are willing to run the risks of specializing. This type of argument goes a long way toward explaining the examples of Germany and Japan forgoing nuclear weapons.

41. Ikenberry, of course, understands this, acknowledging that the liberal order existed within a bipolar system. See, for example, Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 167–169, 222–223. He does not draw implications for the overall importance of the LIO, however.

The post–Cold War era is less clear cut. Nevertheless, the LIO concept continues to suffer many of the problems associated with its inward focus. China is not a democracy, and it is not a member of the United States' security alliances in Asia; indeed, China is now the target of these alliances. The binding and hierarchy arguments, therefore, do not apply to China. China was, however, increasingly integrated into the international economy, including the WTO, during this period; economic interdependence between the United States and China grew dramatically, as did China's wealth. Thus, the economic interdependence and convergence arguments do apply. The LIO concept says little about the expected results when only some of its mechanisms apply. In any event, the results predicted by the LIO's interdependence and convergence mechanisms have been disappointing: growing international trade has been accompanied by escalating tensions between the United States and China, not by reduced tensions; and China's dramatic economic success has been accompanied recently by increasingly centralized authoritarian rule, not democracy and liberalization more generally. China's failure to move toward democracy has been possibly the greatest disappointment for proponents of the LIO.

The LIO's Weak Theoretical Foundations

In this section, I continue to explore the LIO concept by probing the logic of certain of its key mechanisms. Although the concept's inward focus leaves the LIO with little ability to directly affect U.S. relations with adversaries, the LIO might enhance its members' ability to cooperate and coordinate with each other. If so, the LIO could then increase U.S. security indirectly by increasing member states' wealth and the effectiveness of the LIO's institutions. For example, if the LIO concept shows that U.S. alliances have been more effective—more cohesive, less contentious, longer lasting, and so on—than established alliance theories predict, then this additional effectiveness should be recognized as a distinct contribution of the LIO to U.S. success during the Cold War.

I argue that because of weaknesses in three of the mechanisms that constitute the LIO concept—binding, hierarchy, and political convergence—the LIO does not provide the United States with significant indirect security benefits. My critique does not challenge the core institutionalist arguments about the potential of international institutions to influence states' behavior.[42] Nor does

42. On the broader debate over the institutions in the security realm, see John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 5–49, doi.org/10.2307/2539078, which makes many important points, but overstates the pessimistic case; Keohane, *After Hegemony*; Helga Haftendorn, Robert O. Keohane, and Celeste A. Wallander, eds., *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (Oxford: Oxford Uni-

it take a position in the debate over the international impacts of democracy. In other words, my critique does not rely on taking a specific position in the continuing debate over the arguments that lie at the core of liberalism.[43]

Institutional binding's flawed logic

The institutional binding argument suffers serious weaknesses. As Randall Schweller has convincingly explained, a powerful state cannot effectively constrain its ability to use its power/force when the stakes are high[44]—for example, in situations in which a state is willing to launch a major war, employ its military coercive power, or initiate a crippling trade war. Breaking an agreement or violating a norm can be costly for a powerful state. Damage to its reputation for respecting agreements could reduce other states' willingness to cooperate with it in the future. Weakening a norm could create leeway for other states to pursue actions that run contrary to the powerful state's interests. Nevertheless, in high-stakes situations, these costs may be dwarfed by the benefits the powerful state would receive by acting. Moreover, the powerful state's willingness to break a commitment would be reinforced by its "discounting" of future costs—states typically place less weight on the future than on the present, which supports breaking an agreement to acquire the benefits now, while suffering the costs later.

The critical point for the binding argument is that high-stakes cases are precisely those in which weak states need the most confidence in the effectiveness of institutional binding. Alliances provide a prime example: if a powerful state decides that a major war would be too costly, it can abandon its ally; and the powerful state can attack or coerce its ally, which may have been weakened by joining the alliance.[45] In deciding whether to join an alliance that promises large security benefits, a weak state will have to take these risks into account. Unfortunately, the powerful state will be unable to significantly reduce these risks via institutional binding. In short, although institutions can influence international outcomes, when the benefits of defection are large, self-enforcing

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versity Press, 1999); and Celeste A. Wallander, *Mortal Friends, Best Enemies: German-Russian Cooperation after the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

43. For a recent critique of many features of liberalism, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018).

44. For an extensive treatment, see Schweller, "The Problem of International Order Revisited," pp. 176–184.

45. Similar problems plague commitments to use force when a state's vital interests are not at stake. On this flaw in collective security systems, see Charles L. Glaser, "Why NATO Is Still Best: Future Security Arrangements for Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Summer 1993), pp. 27–28, doi.org/10.2307/2539031; and Richard K. Betts, "Systems for Peace or Causes of War? Collective Security, Arms Control, and the New Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 5–43, doi.org/10.2307/2539157. On buck-passing of alliance commitments, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), pp. 157–162.

agreements can be difficult or virtually impossible to design, and binding cannot solve this problem.

Schweller identifies a number of examples of the United States violating "the spirit of multilateral cooperation within its own alliance system," including the decision by Dwight Eisenhower's administration not to support Britain and France during the Suez crisis, the adoption by John Kennedy's administration of flexible response in the face of allied opposition, and the decision by Richard Nixon's administration to normalize relations with China without consulting Japan, even though Japan was the United States' key regional ally.[46] These are important examples of the United States acting unilaterally, largely unconstrained by its allies' preferences. One could argue, however, that they do not go to the core of the binding argument—the desire of weaker states to protect themselves directly from the dominant power.

A still more convincing example of the limits of institutional binding might be cases in which binding would have solved a problem but was judged insufficiently effective. Why, for instance, did the West European countries not employ it to constrain West Germany following World War II? NATO was created to meet two challenges: the need to balance against the Soviet Union and the need to constrain West Germany. Distinguishing the influence of these motives for NATO's creation is difficult. But even before the Cold War began and fear of the Soviet Union had crystalized, Britain and France had opposed the creation of a purely European institution, that is, one that did not include the United States. They worried that once West Germany recovered economically and rearmed, it would pose too large a threat, even if embedded with a European institution. Some U.S. officials, including George Kennan, favored this approach. In contrast, believing that a European institution could not adequately bind West Germany, British and French leaders wanted the United States to provide for Western European security.[47] In other words, institutional binding would not work, but U.S. power could solve the German problem. Interestingly, Europeans' concern about Germany reemerged, possibly only briefly, with the end of the Cold War. And again, the solution was NATO, which provides U.S. power to an already deeply institutionalized Europe.[48]

So, why would weaker states ever enter into an alliance that provides little protection against its most powerful member and, in some cases, may in-

46. Schweller, "The Problem of International Order Revisited," p. 179.
47. For a summary of the history, but not this argument, see Ikenberry, *After Victory*, pp. 163–214. See also David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony: The Future of the Western Alliance* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). For related arguments, see Brian C. Rathbun, *Trust in International Cooperation: International Security Institutions, Domestic Politics, and American Multilateralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 161–208.
48. Robert J. Art, "Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 1–39, doi.org/10.2307/2151926.

crease their vulnerability to attack and coercion? To begin, even if the weaker state becomes more vulnerable within the alliance, the security benefits vis-à-vis its current adversaries could more than offset these risks, resulting in net benefits for the weaker state. Moreover, even if the weaker state believes that the agreement contains significant risks, its other options—including no alliance—may be worse. In addition, a weaker state that believes the more powerful state has little interest in taking advantage of its vulnerabilities, especially those created by the alliance, will judge the risks of its increased vulnerability to be smaller. This explains why the Western Europeans were not very worried about allying with the United States, even though it was much more powerful than West Germany and even though the stationing of U.S. troops on their soil as part of NATO increased their vulnerability. European beliefs/information about the United States' benign intentions reflected not only its democratic regime type, but also its historical reluctance to engage in European security affairs.

The Key to Asymmetric Bargains: Power, Not Hierarchy

The hierarchy arguments that constitute part of the LIO concept suffer two key weaknesses. First, as touched on when discussing the concept's inward focus, even if certain elements of the LIO are characterized by some degree of hierarchy, this will not affect cooperation between members of the LIO and their adversaries. As Jack Donnelly explains, anarchy and hierarchy are not opposites, and hierarchy can exist within anarchy.[49] Therefore, hierarchy within the LIO would not reveal much about the comparable relationship between the states that are included within the order and those outside it—including, most importantly, the Soviet Union during the Cold War and China today. The relationship between the United States and these countries remains anarchic, with all of the security pressures and incentives that the international system can fuel under certain conditions.

Second, there is little evidence of hierarchy—understood in terms of a dominant power with legitimate authority—in U.S. alliances. Evidence of hierarchy is difficult to identify, because bargaining between a more powerful state and a weaker one can produce outcomes that appear similar to those supposedly explained by legitimate authority. Recall that according to theorists of the LIO, legitimate authority is granted to the more powerful state when it does not rely on coercion to reach a consensus agreement with weaker states.

A dominant state, however, can use its significant power advantage to achieve a highly asymmetric bargain without threatening to use force. During bargaining over the creation of an alliance, or adjustments to an existing alli-

49. Donnelly, "Sovereign Inequalities and Hierarchy in Anarchy."

ance, the dominant power can threaten, at least implicitly, not to reach an agreement. A weaker state that requires the alliance for its security may have little choice but to accept highly asymmetric terms. Similarly, agreements are typically enforced by the shared understanding that violating the agreement will result in the loss of the benefits it provides and the possibility that the weaker state will be punished by the dominant state. A state that leaves an alliance understands that the remaining members will not (or at least are less likely to) protect it. As a result, the state willingly remains in the alliance. Weaker states may believe that the agreement is legitimate because the dominant state did not to use military force; or they may simply recognize that the deal is the best they can get and accept it because the benefits exceed the risks. Either way, the terms of the agreement reflect the differences in the states' power. Framing this outcome in terms of hierarchy and legitimate authority reveals little, because power plays a decisive role in shaping the negotiated agreement.

The existence of duty—weaker states complying with the dominant state's demands/policy preferences because they believe they should—within U.S. alliances is still harder to find. U.S. alliances with Western Europe and Japan are cited as key examples of hierarchical security arrangements that reflect duty,[50] but the evidence suggests otherwise. At times during the Cold War, the United States had to bargain hard with its allies and use its power advantage—including threatening to abandon the alliance or to significantly reduce its military forces—to prevent them from acquiring nuclear weapons and to prevail on other issues.[51] Moreover, despite its large power advantage, the United States has frequently not received the cooperation and investment of financial and manpower resources it expected from its allies. President Trump has adopted an especially assertive and public approach for dealing with inadequate burden sharing, but the problem is not new. U.S. dissatisfaction with its NATO partners' unwillingness to meet their spending commitments spans many decades. According to a 1989 study, "The allocation of burdens and responsibilities has been a contentious issue since the formation

50. For example, Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, pp. 55, 86–89. This is not to imply that this type of authority and duty does not exist in other types of relationships. See David A. Lake, "Rightful Rules: Authority, Order, and the Foundations of Global Governance," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (September 2010), pp. 587–613, doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-2478.2010.00601.x. Lake discusses, among other things, authority within families and religious groups.

51. Gene Gerzhoy, "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 91–129, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00198; Nicholas L. Miller, "The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions," *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Fall 2014), pp. 933–937, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000216; and John M. Schuessler and Joshua Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "The Shadow of Exit: Insularity and American Preponderance," Texas A&M University and Boston University, January 16, 2018.

of the alliance. . . . Several enduring themes have bedeviled burden-sharing issues almost from the inception of NATO."[52] In a more recent study, Jens Ringsmose observes that "given that the United States could in fact withhold its indispensable contribution to the alliance, the senior ally was able to 'induce its smaller partners to do more than they planned and intended.'"[53] If U.S. partners felt a duty to comply with U.S. expectations, such serious and persistent burden-sharing problems should not be evident.

Absence of political convergence

The political convergence argument posits that authoritarian regimes that engage with the globalized international economy will eventually become liberal democracies. Yet, neither Russia nor China has become a liberal democracy, or is on a trajectory to become one anytime soon. This reality is highlighted in the United States' 2017 National Security Strategy, which argues that the United States must "rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors."[54]

Although there is substantial empirical support for the correlation between states that are more economically developed (and have higher per capita GDPs) and states that are democracies, a review of the comparative politics literature, which has extensively studied transitions to democracy, shows that the LIO political convergence argument is greatly oversimplified. The argument is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. Social scientists have not reached a consensus on the mechanisms that underpin the transition from autocracy to democracy.[55] Research has produced support for many mechanisms,

52. Charles A. Cooper and Benjamin Zycher, *Perceptions of NATO Burden-Sharing* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, June 1989), p. v. See also U.S. General Accounting Office, *U.S.-NATO Burden Sharing: Allies' Contributions to the Common Defense during the 1980s* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, October 1990).

53. Jens Ringsmose, "NATO Burden-Sharing Redux: Continuity and Change after the Cold War," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (August 2010), p. 321, doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2010.491391. The quotation appears in Wallace J. Thies, *Friendly Rivals: Bargaining and Burden-Sharing in NATO* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 13.

54. White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America" (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017), p. 3, https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=806478.

55. For reviews of the literature, see Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2 (June 1999), pp. 115–144, doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115; and Jan Teorell, *Determinants of Democratization: Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). On the correlation between democracy and per capita GDP, see Robert J. Barro, "Determinants of Democracy," *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 107, No. 6 (December 1999), pp. 158–183, doi.org/10.1086/250107. On wealth as a barrier to reversion, see Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Fact," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (January 1997), pp. 155–183, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25053996.

but scholars continue to disagree about their relative importance. For example, increases in per capita income may result in democracy only when certain domestic political conditions are present; a split within the autocratic leadership may be an especially important condition. In fact, the per capita income/democracy correlation may not reflect a greater probability of transition, but instead a greater probability that once a transition to democracy occurs, wealthy states are less likely to revert to authoritarian rule. At a minimum, therefore, although greater per capita income correlates with states being democratic, whether a liberal democracy will emerge in a specific case is conditional, and when this would occur is still more uncertain.

This research raises the question of whether the international economic openness and high economic growth that China has experienced over the past few decades had reasonable prospects for generating a transition to democracy, and what its prospects are going forward. Scholars studying this question have offered a level of nuance and conditionality that is missing in the LIO concept's basic political convergence argument. Some experts conclude that the Chinese system is fragile, but others observe "authoritarian resilience."[56] At a minimum, policy analysts need to appreciate that the Chinese leadership has pursued a diversified strategy for preserving its hold on power, including not only promoting economic growth and engaging in repression of critics of the regime, but also improving the provision of public goods, increasing input from stakeholders outside the Communist Party, and pursuing cooptation by bringing economic and social elites into the regime.[57] Moreover, China experts have identified important differences between China's emerging middle class and the middle classes of other countries that have transitioned to democracy, including its relative newness, its continuing support for China's authoritarian system, and its recognition that it lacks the ability to effectively challenge this system.[58] These differences, in combination with the government's policies for retaining power, suggest that the probability of a democratic transition in China was unlikely over the past couple of decades. Consistent with this evidence, many China experts believed that integrating China into the world economy would not lead to a democratic China, at least not within a relevant time frame.[59]

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56. For a summary of this debate, see Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 17–24.
57. Ibid.
58. Andrew J. Nathan, "The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April 2016), pp. 5–19, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/puzzle-chinese-middle-class.
59. For perspective on the extent of disagreement within the expert community, see the sections by J. Stapleton Roy, Aaron Friedberg, Thomas Christensen and Patricia Kim, and Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, in Wang Jisi et al., "Did America Get China Wrong? The Engagement Debate," *For-*

Explanations for International Cooperation

Given the LIO concept's limited explanatory value, are there other theories that can account for the historical outcomes that theorists and policy analysts have credited to this concept? In this section, I demonstrate that a variety of international relations theories—most importantly, defensive realism—provide satisfactory explanations for key historical outcomes, including cooperation under anarchy, NATO's successful balancing, the Cold War peace, and the lack of balancing against the United States following the end of the Cold War.

cooperation under anarchy

At the broadest level, proponents of the LIO concept hold that the LIO produces results—including cooperation and restraint—that cannot be explained by other theories, most importantly, realism. Ikenberry argues that the U.S.-led liberal hegemonic order "plays havoc with prevailing understandings of international relations," specifically with neorealism and its focus on anarchy, insecurity, and balancing. Among its shortcomings, he holds that neorealism cannot explain the lack of security competition within the LIO, the lack of balancing against U.S. unipolar power following the end of the Cold War, and the hierarchical nature of the order.[60] In a similar vein, Lake maintains that "in a wholly anarchic world, self-restraint is an oxymoron," and that "for realists, states pursuing power or even security under uncertainty necessarily implies zero-sum conflicts."[61]

The fatal flaw in these arguments is that a key strand of neorealism—defensive realism—explains that under a range of conditions a state can best achieve security by cooperating with its adversary and by exercising self-restraint, rather than by competing. Neorealism is no longer a single theory, but a family of theories, including Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, offensive realism, and defensive realism/rationalist structural theories.[62] Drawing on Waltz is no longer sufficient for understanding the structural-realist possibilities for cooperation under anarchy.[63]

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eign Affairs, Vol. 97, No. 4 (July/August 2018), pp. 183–195, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-06-14/did-america-get-china-wrong.

60. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 36–37, 54–55.

61. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, pp. 14, 2.

62. William C. Wohlforth, "Realism," in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 132–149; Charles L. Glaser, "Realism," in Alan Collins, ed., *Contemporary Security Studies*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 13–29; and John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, eds., *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 77–93.

63. Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90, doi.org/10.2307/2539079.

The logic of the security dilemma, which lies at the core of defensive realism, explains why under a range of material and information conditions, under anarchy and absent hierarchy, a state should adopt cooperative policies. For example, unilateral restraint can signal a state's benign motives; and an arms control agreement can reduce the probability that an adversary will gain an offensive military advantage. Cooperation, however, can also create risks—including generating relative economic losses, suffering a military disadvantage if the adversary cheats on an arms agreement, and (mis)signaling a lack of resolve by pursuing cooperation to signal that one's motives are benign. Yet, competition brings its own risks, including the possibility of suffering absolute economic losses, losing an arms race, and (mis)signaling that one's own state has malign motives. The security dilemma confronts states with the sometimes difficult choice about how best to balance these risks; defensive realism and related rationalist theories explain that cooperation is sometimes a state's best option.[64]

To appreciate the full strength of my critique, it is necessary to remember that the LIO concept does not provide a framework for explaining cooperation between adversaries. Instead, it is concerned essentially with cooperation within the LIO and especially between allies. This focus is striking because explaining cooperation among allies is relatively easy; explaining the possibilities for cooperation between adversaries is both more difficult and more important. The debate within realism, which is beyond the scope of this article, does provide counters to the defensive realist/rationalist position, but these arguments do not shift support to the LIO theorists' position on cooperation under anarchy.

effective nato balancing

NATO is one of the LIO's pillars; LIO theorists highlight the alliance's success and rely heavily on the LIO concept to explain it. Realism, however, does an excellent job of explaining NATO's formation and success. Alliances are foremost a form of competition vis-à-vis an adversary; cooperation with potential allies enables this competition. Among the most basic expectations of all strands of structural realism is that states engage in external balancing (i.e., form alliances) to achieve their goals—most prominently, security. The defensive strand of realism—balance of threat theory—explains alliances as states' reactions to threats, which are determined not only by an adversary's power

64. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214, doi.org/10.2307/2009958; Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (October 1997), pp. 171–201, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100014763; Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*; and Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

but also by the extent of its offensive capability and its intentions. Balance of threat theory explains the basics of NATO well; although U.S. power surpassed Soviet power during the Cold War, NATO's Western European members were much closer geographically to the Soviet Union (which enhanced its offensive potential against them) and believed that Soviet intentions were much more malign than U.S. intentions.[65]

Balance of threat theory also posits that the larger an external threat, the larger the risk that allies will accept from within the alliance. These risks depend on the military vulnerabilities created by participating in the alliance and on the state's beliefs about its allies' motives and intentions. For example, allowing foreign troops to be deployed on one's territory and forgoing nuclear weapons can increase a state's vulnerability vis-à-vis its more capable ally. The United States' NATO allies ran these risks during the Cold War and continue to do so today. The perceived dangers of accepting military vulnerability are smaller, however, if the weaker state believes that its ally is unlikely to have malign motives and, therefore, is less likely to take advantage of these vulnerabilities. One strand of the LIO concept—regime type—likely contributes here to understanding NATO's cohesion. Regime type can provide a state with information about other states' intentions. Because the United States is a liberal democracy, during the Cold War its NATO partners were far less worried that the United States would exploit vulnerabilities that were generated by the alliance.[66] This information argument is far more compelling than the institutional binding argument. Institutions cannot prevent a state from using its military capabilities in high-stakes situations, so if allies had serious doubts about U.S. intentions, they would have been unwilling to run large military risks.[67] In contrast, information about a powerful ally's benign intentions can make binding unnecessary.

Theories of intra-alliance bargaining seek to explain more specific features of NATO, including the distribution of members' contributions to the alliance and the nature of alliance commitments. This approach shares much in com-

65. Stephen M. Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 273–281. Balance of threat theory is best considered a strand of defensive realism/rationalist theory: offensive capability reflects power and the offense-defense balance, which includes geography; the perceived intentions of opposing states are an information variable that captures the opposing states' types. Walt's formulation diverges somewhat from Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, which focuses on motives, not intentions.

66. On possible mechanisms, see Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, "A Framework for the Study of Security Communities," in Adler and Barnett, eds., *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 40–41; and Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Collective Identity in a Democratic Community," in Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 367–368.

67. An important exception is that a weak state may choose to accept even large alliance risks, if the risks of alternate alliance options or no alliance at all are still larger.

mon with defensive realism/rationalist approaches, but focuses primarily on the inner workings of the alliance, while paying relatively less attention to the international environment. Alliance bargaining theories identify a central role for power and interests: large differences in power are predicted to generate asymmetry in the bargained outcome, reflecting differences in the value the states place on the alliance—all else equal, more powerful states have less need for allies.[68] In the case of NATO, the United States' geographic distance from Europe further reduced the value of its allies and thereby increased its bargaining advantage. As discussed above, outcomes that are the product of bargaining can be similar to those predicted by the LIO concept's mechanism of hierarchy built on legitimate authority. Unlike the LIO concept, however, bargaining theory does not require legitimacy or duty, neither of which is evident in NATO.

Explaining other features of NATO requires institutional and regime theories, not the LIO concept. For example, a close examination of NATO policy finds that there is far more continuity in the size of countries' contributions to NATO forces than would be predicted by U.S. power advantages and allies' power more generally. Regime theorists explain this continuity by focusing on norms of consultation and the establishment of the status quo as a focal point,[69] not the weaker alliance members' belief that they have a duty to comply with U.S. demands. A second example is NATO's ability to maintain its cohesion as German power increased in the 1950s and 1960s. Many alliances are torn apart by shifting power, but NATO adapted via a variety of institutional mechanisms—including its integrated planning system and mechanisms for monitoring states' military capabilities—that enabled it to increase West Germany's influence while hedging against its increased power.[70]

Lack of Balancing against the United States

One of the supposed puzzles of the post–Cold War period was the lack of bal-

68. On bargaining in alliance formation and management, see Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), especially pp. 75–78, 147–155, 165–180.

69. John S. Duffield, "International Regimes and Alliance Behavior: Explaining NATO Conventional Force Levels," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 819–855, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033269.

70. Christian Tuschhoff, "Alliance Cohesion and Peaceful Change in NATO," in Haftendorn, Keohane, and Wallander, *Imperfect Unions*, pp. 140–161. Another example that may require institutional theories is NATO's continuation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. See Robert B. McCalla, "NATO's Persistence after the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Summer 1996), pp. 445–475, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300033440; and Celeste A. Wallander, "Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War," *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn 2000), pp. 705–735, doi.org/10.1162/002081800551343. There are also realist explanations, however, that contribute to explaining this persistence; for example, Glaser, "Why NATO Is Still Best."

ancing against the United States' enormous power advantage. Thomas Wright recounts how leading analysts held that the combination of U.S. power, the advantages of globalization, and the United States' willingness to open the LIO to other major powers explain the lack of balancing against the United States in the post–Cold War era. He concludes, "The power gap may have been necessary, but was not sufficient" to explain the dearth of balancing. The other key ingredient was the U.S. offer of "participation in much of the Western liberal order to the rest of the world so that potential rivals could benefit from engaging with the United States."[71]

There are two problems with this argument. First, China and Russia have begun balancing, even though the LIO was open to them. For more than a decade, it has become increasingly clear that China is building conventional and nuclear forces designed to reduce U.S. military capabilities. These actions suggest that China's decision not to balance sooner reflected, at least in part, its recognition of its limited power, not a strategy for rising peacefully.[72] They provide support for the argument that power alone may be sufficient to explain China's initial lack of balancing.[73] In addition, the difficulty of attacking across long distances and water, and the deterrent value of nuclear weapons—factors that favor defense over offense, and thereby reduce the threat posed by U.S. power—likely contributed to China's muted balancing.[74]

Second, although a focus solely on power may explain China's behavior, it does not explain why the member states of the European Union (EU) did not create a unified military capability to balance against the United States. Theories that include beliefs/information about other states' motives and intentions fill this gap. As mentioned, balance of threat theory underscores that power is not the only factor that should influence states' decisions about balancing.[75] The belief among EU states that U.S. motives are essentially benign, at least as they pertain to the use of military force to compel or defeat members of the EU, largely explains this lack of external balancing.[76]

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71. Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, pp. 2–5, at p. 5. See also Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 36–37.
72. On peaceful rise, see Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).
73. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), especially pp. 22–59.
74. Consistent with this argument is Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 7–43, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00001, which provides a succinct summary of the debate on why balancing had not occurred.
75. Walt, *Origins of Alliances*; and Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 86–120, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000045.
76. See, among others, Charles L. Glaser, "Why Unipolarity Doesn't Matter (Much)," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 136–138, doi.org/10.1080/09557571

GREAT POWER PEACE DURING AND AFTER THE COLD WAR

Proponents of the liberal hegemonic order claim that it played an important role in maintaining great power peace during and after the Cold War. Bruce Jones and his coauthors state, "Historically, one of the fundamental objectives of multilateral order is straightforward: To avoid great power war."[77] Ikenberry holds that the liberal hegemonic order "won the Cold War."[78] Wright argues that, following the Cold War, convergence's "initial success utterly transformed world politics and produced an unprecedented period of peace and cooperation among the major powers."[79]

However, while the causes of Cold War peace and the end of the Cold War have fueled much debate and generated many competing explanations, the LIO is rarely among them.[80] Effective balancing by U.S. alliances, deterrence supported by nuclear weapons, and bipolarity are much more prominent explanations for the Cold War peace. The economic effectiveness of capitalism relative to Soviet communism, the overwhelming and increasing power advantage that the West enjoyed by the 1980s, and the spread of ideas about security requirements and cooperation are commonly identified as contributing to the end of the Cold War.[81] If these factors are key, then there is little left for the LIO concept to explain.

To repeat the obvious about the partial nature of the LIO, the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies were not included in the order, but rather were directly opposed by it. Thus, discussion of lack of competition under anarchy and legitimate authority do not apply to the U.S.-Soviet competition. Consequently, if the LIO played a key role, it would have to be in enabling successful Western balancing against the Soviet Union. At first look, this seems unlikely. Standard balance of power/balance of threat arguments provide an adequate,

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.2011.570740; Keir A. Lieber and Gerald Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 109–139, doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894580; and Walt, "Alliances in a Unipolar World," pp. 102–103.

77. Jones et al., "The State of the International Order," p. 4.

78. Ikenberry, "The Illusion of Geopolitics," p. 81. Ikenberry also holds that "throughout the Cold War, this American-led liberal international order was the dominant reality in world politics." G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (March 2009), p. 78, doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709090112.

79. Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, p. 2.

80. Within a large literature, see, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 99–142, doi.org/10.2307/2538951; Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, "Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 60–107, doi.org/10.1080/09636410008429406; and Mark L. Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War: Reactions to Shifts in Soviet Power, Policies, or Domestic Politics?" *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 145–179, doi.org/10.1017/S002081830707004X.

81. On the latter, see Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).

even compelling, explanation for the broad effectiveness of NATO and U.S. alliances in East Asia. Perhaps, though, the LIO was critical to NATO's ability to balance the Warsaw Pact, because it was the key to the West's relative economic success. Again, this seems an unlikely explanation; although trade and Western financial systems certainly contributed to the West's economic success, the deep source of divergence was almost certainly between the dynamism of capitalist systems compared to the stagnation of the Soviet communist system. More convincing, as noted above, is that U.S. democracy and the United States' support/promotion of liberal democracy in Western Europe played a role, by providing the information that enabled NATO member states to be reasonably confident that others—especially the United States—would not use force against them. This effect, however, was likely small compared to the balance of threat arguments that emphasize the magnitude of the Soviet threat and overwhelming U.S. power advantages, which played an especially critical role during the formation of the alliance.

Logics of Interaction between Components of the LIO

Despite the limited explanatory power of the LIO concept, collecting the LIO's disparate components under a single umbrella could still have analytic value, if interactions between them result in the LIO being more than the sum of its parts. Discussions of the LIO have said little about the nature and the magnitude of these possible interactions, although Jones and his coauthors note that "virtually every measure of policy undertaken under the goals of peace, prosperity and justice are in the long term mutually reinforcing."[82]

This section reviews the key interactions that the international relations literature has identified between the security and prosperity components of the LIO.[83] The analysis yields two findings. First, the magnitude of these interactions is difficult to establish and remains disputed. Second, the logics that drive these interactions are not those included in the LIO concept. Consequently, although U.S. policy requires analysis of the interactions among its economic, security, and diplomatic policies, the LIO lens is not useful for this purpose.

alliances and greater economic openness

A long-standing debate among analysts of U.S. grand strategy concerns whether U.S. security commitments help preserve the open international

82. Jones et al., "The State of the International Order," p. 7.
83. As discussed above, the political convergence argument includes interaction between LIO components, with openness leading to democracy via economic development; I do not revisit those arguments here.

economy.[84] Presenting the position of a key school in this debate—selective engagement—Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth argue, "The United States' ability to exercise leadership over the existing order is a function not just of its economic size but also partly of its forward security position and associated alliances."[85] In part, this positive interaction occurs because U.S. commitments, by providing security, reduce allied states' concerns about relative economic gains.[86] The more secure a state believes it is, the less it should worry about relative economic gains, because its potential adversary's power is less threatening. Although proponents of selective/deep engagement accept that there is some uncertainty about whether U.S. forward-deployed security commitments are necessary to preserve the open international economic system, they conclude that the value of economic openness warrants buying insurance via these security commitments.

In contrast, proponents of an alternative school of grand strategy—neo-isolationism, which holds that the United States should terminate its major power alliances—hold that the relative gains argument is flawed. First, they argue that the relative economic gains from trade between major powers take a long time to significantly change the overall balance of economic power, which reduces the negative security implications, at least in the short and medium terms.[87] In addition, even large relative economic gains will have smaller security implications when the offense-defense balance favors defense (and, more specifically, when military technology favors deterrence, as is the case between states able to deploy capable nuclear arsenals) and when the global distribution of power is multipolar.[88] Moreover, if political relations among alli-

84. This following discussion assumes that, in the context of a rising China, economic openness serves U.S. interests. Whether this is true depends on the economic interdependence and political convergence arguments that were discussed earlier.

85. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States' Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 159–165, at p. 159. See also Robert J. Art, "A Defensible Defense: America's Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Spring 1991), pp. 30–42, doi.org/10.2307/2539010.

86. This result would usually apply only to allies, but there could be exceptions. For example, if the U.S.-Japan alliance increases China's security by reducing its fears of Japan, China could be more willing to engage in trade. This was China's view of the U.S.-Japan alliance in past decades and may not have entirely changed. Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 49–80, doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.4.49; and the section by Christensen and Kim in Wang Jisi et. al., "Did America Get China Wrong?" p. 189.

87. Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 43–45, doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.4.5. Note that they limit this argument to trade between roughly equal economic powers. Thus, it does not apply to trade between the United States and China over the past few decades, but it would going forward.

88. Peter Liberman argues further that major powers have traded even when they viewed each other as large and imminent security threats. Liberman, "Trading with the Enemy: Security and Relative Economic Gains," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 147–175, doi.org/10.2307/2539111.

ance members are sufficiently good, then members will worry little about relative gains. This is likely the case in Europe today, although it was not during the early Cold War when NATO was created. In combination, these arguments support the neo-isolationist conclusion that ending U.S. alliances would not threaten the openness of the global economy.

Additionally, neo-isolationists hold that, contrary to hegemonic stability theory, economic openness does not depend on a hegemon providing public goods; therefore, even relative gains that weakened the dominant economic position of the United States would not threaten economic openness. Proponents of deep engagement disagree, arguing that although unnecessary for preserving openness, hegemonic leadership does make openness more likely, and, consequently, the United States should continue its forward security engagement.[89]

Finally, some scholars maintain that alliances provide narrow economic benefits to the United States.[90] U.S. military alliances may help preserve the dollar's role as the world's leading currency, enhance the U.S. ability to negotiate favorable trade deals, and improve trade flows that benefit the U.S. economy.[91] Others disagree, at least regarding the magnitude of these effects.[92] In

89. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home America," pp. 43–45; and Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 156–159. On the feasibility of collective action without a hegemon, see Duncan Snidal, "The Limits of Hegemonic Stability Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Autumn 1985), pp. 579–614, doi.org/10.1017/S002081830002703X. Yet another line of argument maintains that the United States' leading role in well-institutionalized alliances helps Washington achieve economic agreements that might otherwise be beyond reach and thereby supports openness. Art, "A Defensible Defense," p. 35. See also Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, p. 160. The question here is whether these specific instances of cooperation were essential for maintaining overall economic openness or were instead relatively small additions to openness; the latter seems likely.

90. In addition, there may be other benefits that accrue to the United States from providing leadership in the economic system that do not depend, at least directly, on U.S. security alliances. See Michael Mastanduno, "System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy," *World Politics*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 121–154, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000057. There may also be other ways in which the military capabilities of the United States contribute to its prosperity that are not related directly to economic openness. Most obviously, the economic damage of wars could hurt the U.S. economy, even if the United States were not directly involved. See, however, Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, "The Effects of Wars on Neutral Countries: Why It Doesn't Pay to Preserve the Peace," *Security Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Summer 2001), pp. 1–57, doi.org/10.1080/09636410108429444. Gholz and Press argue otherwise.

91. For an overview of these arguments, see Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*, pp. 176–184. For a full statement of many of them, see Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: U.S. Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a recent analysis that concludes that U.S. security commitments far more than pay for themselves, see Daniel Egel et al., *Estimating the Value of Overseas Security Commitments* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016).

92. Daniel W. Drezner, "Military Primacy Doesn't Pay (Nearly As Much As You Think)," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Summer 2013), pp. 52–79, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00124; and Richard W. Maass, Carla Norrlof, and Daniel W. Drezner, "Correspondence: The Profitability of Primacy," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), pp. 188–205, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00161.

any event, these arguments bear on whether U.S. security alliances increase U.S. prosperity, not on whether they help preserve the open economic system.

economic openness and greater alliance cohesion/effectiveness

A different possibility is that economic openness increases U.S. security: openness advantages the U.S. economy or its allies' economies, or both, which increases their military potential. Past U.S. policy provides only conditional support for these mechanisms, however; under certain conditions, economic openness decreases U.S. security.

During World War II, U.S. leaders planned for an international system based on free trade. In the early years following World War II, however, the United States shifted to an economic policy that favored and protected its allies. U.S. leaders realized that economic openness would further weaken its war-damaged Western European allies. This realization, combined with growing recognition that the Soviet Union posed a major security threat, which made strong allies more important, fueled the shift away from economic openness.[93]

Once the allied economies had recovered sufficiently, the United States shifted back toward international openness, but the Soviet Union and its allies were not included. Regionally limited openness provided a competitive advantage against the Soviet bloc, which reduced the economic strain the United States incurred to meet its defense requirements. Western economic strength, combined with the Soviet Union's economic weakness and its misguided defense policies, contributed to the ability of the United States to win the Cold War.

The United States broadened its embrace of economic openness following the end of the Cold War, including supporting the creation of the WTO in 1995 and China's membership in the organization in 2001. China's economy has grown at an extraordinary rate relative to the economies of the United States and its European and Asian allies. U.S. global economic dominance will end sooner than it would have otherwise.[94] Its tremendous economic power has enabled China to significantly increase its military power, in addition to increasing its regional and global economic influence. Because China's economic

93. Art, "A Defensible Defense," pp. 31–33. For more extensive discussions, see Robert Gilpin, *The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 52–62, which highlights the central role of the Soviet threat; Stewart Patrick, *The Best Laid Plans: The Origins of American Multilateralism and the Dawn of the Cold War* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), especially pp. 213–266; Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, pp. 159–219; and Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War*, pp. 247–318.

94. Some observers, however, question whether China will challenge the United States' dominant international position anytime soon. See Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018); and Brooks and Wohlforth, *America Abroad*.

growth has not been accompanied by the political moderation that LIO proponents foresaw, China's growing military capability, built on its economic power, is reducing U.S. security.

In short, there are good reasons to be skeptical of the argument that the LIO is more than the sum of its parts: alliances may not increase economic openness, and economic openness sometimes decreases U.S. security.

Time to Shift Lenses: From the LIO to Grand Strategy

In this section, I first explain why viewing U.S. foreign policy through the LIO lens is dangerous and then argue for employing a grand-strategic lens instead.

ABANDON THE LIO LENS

To improve analysis and debate of U.S. foreign policy, scholars, policy analysts, and policymakers should discontinue use of the term "liberal international order" and its variants, including "hegemonic liberal order." First, for reasons discussed above, the LIO concept provides little analytic leverage; it is inward looking, and certain of its arguments are theoretically weak.

Second, the LIO discourse is a source of significant confusion about both the evolution of global politics and U.S. policy. As I argued at the outset, scholars and commentators do not have an agreed understanding about what the LIO includes. More important, the LIO terminology clouds analysis of international policy by obscuring what is actually occurring. Consider, for example, the common observation that the LIO faces growing threats as a result of China's rise and Russia's assertive foreign policies. These dangers, however, have actually strengthened U.S. alliances and, in turn, the LIO. At least until the Trump administration, China's rise was increasing the depth and cohesion of U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia. Similarly, Russia's increasingly aggressive behavior in Ukraine and elsewhere was helping reinvigorate NATO. In short, the United States is facing growing threats to its security, not to the LIO. Although perhaps counterintuitive, it was the early post–Cold War decades that posed the greatest threat to the security elements of the LIO—the lack of major power threats to U.S. security weakened U.S. alliances. It should also be noted that China is much more integrated into the international economy, including importantly via the WTO, than the Soviet Union ever was. Whether China's economic inclusion is a net positive for the United States remains an open question, but it certainly strengthens the economic pillar of the LIO.

Third, framing analysis of U.S. policy in terms of the LIO builds in a significant status quo bias. Much of the discussion of the LIO starts from the premise that it is desirable and needs to be preserved.[95] During periods

95. Porter, "A World Imagined," pp. 15–18.

of significant change in the distribution of power, however, the United States should be reconsidering whether to preserve its international commitments and exploring how best to achieve its fundamental interests in the decades ahead.[96]

Fourth, by viewing the LIO as an unalloyed good, U.S. leaders risk failing to appreciate fully that adversaries of the United States view central pillars of the LIO—its alliances, in particular—as a source of competition and threat. For example, the LIO perspective contributed to U.S. enthusiasm for expanding NATO eastward to spread democracy, while giving too little weight to Russia's understanding of expansion's negative implications. Similarly, it likely contributes to U.S. underappreciation of the threat that the U.S.-Japan alliance, especially the broadening of Japan's responsibilities in the alliance, poses to China. These U.S. misperceptions increase the probability that the United States will misinterpret adversaries' policies by failing to understand them as reactions to threatening U.S. policies.

The LIO's status quo bias and its contribution to these U.S. misperceptions are potentially dangerous, because they encourage the United States to exaggerate the threats it faces and to pursue unduly competitive policies. Framing China as a threat to the LIO reflects and combines both of these dangers, and thereby unnecessarily aggravates U.S.-China relations.[97]

For all of these reasons, scholars and policymakers should use LIO terminology, at most, for descriptive purposes. The LIO would simply refer to the international situation, including the key international institutions, the rules that support them, and the regime types of its members. It would not imply desirability or the ability to generate, even contribute to, specific international outcomes, beyond those generated by its individual elements. Even this usage has disadvantages, among others that there is no agreement on which elements the LIO includes.

Advantages of a Grand-Strategic Lens

To generate greater clarity about the international challenges facing the United States and its options for confronting them, analysts should employ a grand-strategic lens. By grand strategy, I mean the broad policies—military, diplomatic, and economic—that a state pursues to achieve its vital interests.[98] The

96. In this spirit, see Rebecca Friedman Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "The Day after Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 7–25, doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1445353.

97. The author thanks Avery Goldstein for bringing this possibility and the NATO example to his attention.

98. For an understanding along these lines, see Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*, pp. 18–20. For a recent analysis of what is meant by grand strategy, see Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy,'" *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2018), pp. 27–57, doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073.

LIO is simultaneously a product of U.S. grand strategy and a part of U.S. grand strategy. The U.S. Cold War grand strategy of containment called for protecting Western Europe from the Soviet Union; NATO was created for this purpose and is a key component of the LIO. The economic dimension of U.S. grand strategy is the liberal international economic system, which is a second key component of the LIO; it reflects long-held U.S. beliefs in both the economic benefits of openness and the potential of openness to support peace.

Adoption of a grand-strategic lens would improve the analysis of issues raised by the LIO discourse by placing them in the wider context of U.S. options for dealing with current geopolitical challenges. It would have three specific advantages. First, it would improve analysis of U.S. interests and threats to those interests. The initial step in any analysis of grand strategy is to identify a state's fundamental interests; typically, security and prosperity rank highest. The next step is to consider threats to these interests. The LIO lens essentially skips these steps by assuming that the LIO is a fundamental U.S. interest; anything that threatens the LIO is therefore a threat to U.S. interests. As I explained at the outset, however, the LIO is not an end/interest; instead, it is a means for achieving U.S. interests. Shifting to a grand-strategic framework should impose the analytic discipline required to avoid these errors.

Second, adoption of a grand-strategic framework would require engaging with theories and theoretical disputes relevant to the formulation of U.S. international policy. Grand strategy reflects beliefs/theories that play a central role in identifying threats and provide the logical connection between a state's interests and the available means for achieving them. The LIO concept includes some theories/mechanisms about the nature of threats to U.S. interests and about possible solutions: authoritarian regimes are dangerous, democracies are not; economic engagement can reduce incentives for war; economic growth will convert authoritarian regimes to democracies; and so on. The LIO discourse proceeds as though these theories are widely accepted, when in fact scholarly debate over them continues. In addition, a range of additional theories must be employed to adequately analyze U.S. international policy, including those that address deterrence, power transitions, alliance formation, the security dilemma, and other causes of war. Employing a grand-strategic framework should result in this more complete and transparent theoretical analysis.[99]

Third, a grand-strategic framework would identify the full spectrum of

99. An excellent example is Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Summer 1989), pp. 5–49, doi.org/10.2307/2538764.

broad options for achieving U.S. security and prosperity, ranging from neo-isolationist policies that would terminate U.S. alliances to global hegemony that requires intense military and economic competition with China. In contrast, the LIO lens starts with a single option and the assumption that it is desirable. A grand-strategic lens would generate comparisons and assessments of the range of possible grand strategies.

Conclusion

This article has argued that framing U.S. foreign policy in terms of the LIO is deeply problematic. The LIO lens lacks analytic value, both because the LIO concept is inward looking, which leaves it unable to address U.S. interactions with its adversaries, and theoretically weak, which leaves it unable to explain much about the United States' interactions with its allies. Furthermore, the bundling of the security and economic components of U.S. international policy under the LIO umbrella does not define a whole that is significantly greater than the sum of its parts. Still worse, employing the LIO lens is potentially dangerous, because it is biased toward the current geopolitical status quo and therefore discourages analysis of changes in U.S. policy, including retrenchment and concessions to China, and it inflates threats to U.S. security. Shifting to a grand-strategic lens has the potential to avoid all these problems.

Given the extent of the problems with the LIO lens, why is it so widely employed in the current U.S. foreign policy debate? Although sorting out the many possible answers to this question is beyond the scope of this article, a short discussion illustrates the range of possibilities. To start, some analysts' use of the term "international order" may be for purely descriptive purposes—simply referring to the international situation or a set of international institutions. Another possibility is that analysts use the LIO terminology to refer to a geopolitical status quo that they find desirable. In this case, the term reflects a normative preference, although this is not explicit.

Still another possibility is that framing U.S. policy in terms of the LIO obscures, intentionally or unintentionally, the potentially assertive nature of U.S. policies. For example, policies pursued in the name of the LIO sound less competitive, assertive, and threatening than those pursued to preserve a state's sphere of influence or its international dominance. Because they are explicitly exclusionary, spheres of influence are understood to reflect some degree of competition. In contrast, international order can imply broad acceptance, even though China and Russia reject some of the LIO's key elements. Cloaking U.S. policy in terms of the LIO can certainly make less clear how ambitious U.S. policy actually is—preserving the LIO means that the far-flung alliances

and spheres of influence that the United States established during the Cold War will be maintained for the indefinite future, even as the distribution of global and regional power shifts significantly.

Employing a grand-strategic lens requires engagement of key issues that the LIO essentially assumes away. Should the United States continue its security commitment to East Asia? Whereas the LIO analysis implicitly assumes that the answer is yes, the current debate over U.S. grand strategy is deeply divided on this issue.[100] Should the United States continue to favor economic openness? Again, the LIO analysis assumes the answer is yes, but careful analysis is warranted. The increase in China's power and the threat that it poses to U.S. interests does not mean that fully integrating China into the global economy was necessarily a mistake. Whether U.S. policies that supported China's extraordinary relative growth were misguided depends partly on whether the United States will be able to meet its security requirements over the next few decades. Whether this will be possible without the United States enjoying a large stable power advantage is the source of extensive scholarly and policy debate.[101] China's integration into the global economy is likely now so extensive that greatly reducing it would be too costly and would do little to forestall further U.S. relative economic losses.[102] In this case, the United States will need to commit itself to long-term domestic policies designed to preserve its overall ability to compete.[103]

If the United States retains its security commitments in East Asia and Chinese economic growth continues, then, for the foreseeable future, the world will not be the liberal hegemony described by the LIO literature. Instead it will be a non-liberal, non-hegemonic world. How should U.S. policy adapt, if at all? One possibility, which is largely precluded by the LIO frame, is to consider changes in the rules, understandings, and commitments that guide U.S. security engagement in East Asia, with the goal of finding concessions and compromises that would help reduce tensions, misunderstandings, and possible

100. In addition to previous grand strategy citations, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).
101. See, for example, Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 360–411; and Charles L. Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War? Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March/April 2011), pp. 80–91, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2011-03-01/will-chinas-rise-lead-war.
102. The U.S. tariffs that the Trump administration has imposed and threatened to impose could begin to test this proposition, but will do little to reduce China's economic engagement with other countries. On some of the factors that support the U.S. shift, see Daniel H. Rosen, "A Post-Engagement U.S.-China Relationship" (New York: Rhodium Group, January 19, 2018), https://rhg.com/research/post-engagement-us-china-relationship/.
103. See Richard K. Betts, "American Strategy: Grand vs. Grandiose," in Richard Fontaine and Kristen M. Lord, eds., *America's Path: Grand Strategy for the Next Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, May 2012), pp. 29–42.

conflicts with China.[104] Alternatively, the United States could reject such modifications and adopt more assertive policies and military doctrines in the region. Often under uncertainty, a mix of these more cooperative and more competitive policies is the best bet.

The United States risks reducing its security by assuming that the LIO must be preserved, thus failing to ask these fundamental questions. It will be inclined to exaggerate its insecurity by not distinguishing small threats from large ones and, therefore, will be willing to use military force when not warranted by the threat. U.S. foreign policy will be inflexible, when the shifting balance of power may call for concessions and revised understandings of appropriate behavior. In addition, the United States may find itself overextended with outdated commitments. With luck, none of these possibilities will materialize. Preserving the LIO may be the United States' best option. But instead of depending on luck, analysts of U.S. foreign policy should shift from the LIO lens to a grand-strategic lens, which promises to better explore the path forward.

104. Along these lines, see, for example, James Steinberg and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Charles L. Glaser, "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 49–90, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00199; and Michael D. Swaine, Wenyan Deng, and Aube Rey Lescure, *Creating A Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.-China Balance of Power* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016).