THE GREAT UNRAVELLING:
THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM
AND WORLD ORDERS

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Abstract: In 1945, humanity came together to create the Charter international system. It expressed the hope that after the most catastrophic war the world had yet seen, a superior system of international relations could emerge. The result was the United Nations and its foundational Charter, reinforced subsequently by numerous declarations, protocols and conventions. The system worked and delivered many public goods, above all through the system's specialised agencies. The creation of a Security Council with five permanent members sought to remedy the failings of the Versailles system and the League of Nations, created in 1919, by providing a stronger steering committee for international politics. The system remains in operation today, but is facing unprecedented challenges. From the beginning, the practices of international politics were incommensurate with Charter aspirations. The creation of competing blocs (world orders) in Cold War 1 prevented consensus on fundamental matters. When the Soviet bloc disintegrated in 1989-91 the Charter system faced a new challenge – the striving for global hegemony of the remaining world order, the political West led by the US. This bloc claimed certain tutelary privileges, formulated initially in terms of a 'liberal international order' and later in the form of the 'rules-based order' over the Charter international system. This generated conflicts and even wars, with the result that Cold War II today is more challenging and dangerous than the first.

Keywords: Charter international system, United Nations, international politics, sovereign internationalism, democratic internationalism, political West, political East.

An international system endows an era with the normative framework for the conduct of international politics.[1] This paper distinguishes between

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a 'system' and 'world orders', between an international system and international politics. An international system is a combination of norms, procedures and institutions, with the latter not necessarily formalised; whereas international politics relates to the conduct of states and their interactions. It is in the sphere of international politics that distinctive world orders are created. After 1945 the US created a political order of its own, the political West, while the Soviet Union established a communist bloc, which lasted until 1989-91. China formally repudiates bloc politics, despite aligning with other states, and hence will not establish a 'world order' of its own based on alliance ties, although dependencies are not excluded. In keeping with realist thinking, Henry Kissinger (2014) famously failed to distinguish between order and system. As far as realists are concerned, the shifting patterns of alliances, hostilities and balances of power represent the entirety of what matters in international relations. No one suggests that Charter international system today functions as anything akin to a world government, but it does provide the normative framework in which international politics is conducted (cf. Bull, 1977/1995). The increased divergence between systemic norms and the practices of international politics has plunged the Charter international system into the deepest crisis since its foundation after the Second World war.

International system versus international politics

The post-1945 Charter system drew lessons from the failure the League of Nations in the interwar years. The League had been unable to respond adequately to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 followed by the full-scale invasion of China in 1937. Neither was it able to avert the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 or provide any meaningful intervention in the Spanish Civil War the following year. In April 1946 the League was formally disbanded, with its assets and archives transferred to the newly-formed UN. The list of failures of the UN system is also an increasingly long one. Beginning with the US invasion of Panama in 1990, a series of US post-Cold War interventions have been conducted without even the fig leaf of formal UN sanction, and in many cases represent overt breaches of international law. The 1999 bombing of campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, followed by the forced change of an internationally-recognised border, demonstrated the continued divergence between declared norms and avowed practices. US-led interventions in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, accompanied by destabilisation operations in Syria and elsewhere, illustrate how the rules-based order has become a law unto itself. The Russo-

Ukraine war is the culmination of a long period of divergence, in which behavioural patterns of international politics have increasingly deviated from the norms and practices of the Charter system.

In Europe there have been a succession of international systems, but each incorporates the achievements of earlier ones while learning from the failures. The details change, but the fundamental problem of regulating an anarchic state-based international politics remains the same. The Peace of Westphalia brought an end to the Thirty Years' War in 1648 by codifying the sovereignty of princes. This eventually led to the definition of principles of national sovereignty. The Peace of Utrecht in 1715, at the end of the War of Spanish Succession, formalised the age of empire. The Congress of Vienna (1814-15), at the end of the era of revolutionary convulsions and Napoleonic conquests, introduced an ideological element into what became the Congress international system. The Holy Alliance brought together the conservative monarchies of Austria, Russia and Prussia to suppress republican challengers. Russia came to the aid of the threatened Hapsburg monarchy in 1848, but soon found itself the target of an 'anti-autocratic' alliance in the Crimean War (1853-56). The Vienna system nevertheless lasted for a century, but it had little to offer in the age of imperialism and intensifying inter-imperialist rivalries. The system of great power politics generated tensions that finally led to the catastrophic war of 1914-1918. The search after World War I for a more rational way of managing international politics gave rise to the League of Nations, whose failings we have already noted.

After another bout of the endemic European civil war between 1939 and 1945, the Charter international system provided a formula to prevent a reversion to the great power conflicts of the past while providing the framework for a positive peace order in the future. In 1945, humanity came together to create the Charter international system. It expressed the hope that after the most catastrophic war the world had yet seen, a comprehensive set of normative principles and institutional practices would prevent a recurrence of such a conflict. By coming together on a set of shared principles, the hope was that an improved system of international relations would emerge. The result was the United Nations and its foundational Charter, reinforced subsequently by numerous declarations, protocols and conventions. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted as well as the Genocide Convention, and in 1966 the UN adopted its Convention on Social and Economic Rights. The system worked and delivered many public goods, above all through the system's two dozen specialised agencies. The creation of a Security Council with five permanent

members sought to remedy the failings of the League of Nations by providing a stronger steering committee for international politics.

The UN seeks to balance the interests of the great powers (through the Security Council comprising what at the time of its founding were the five leading powers) with the sovereignty of the community of nations. The UN Charter provides the foundations for a system that repudiates the logic of war and provides a mechanism for the peaceful resolution of conflict. The UN is also at the heart of a dense network of international organisations, including the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation as well as UNESCO, dealing with culture. The UN remains the centre of multilateral diplomacy and provides the normative framework for international politics. It is far from a world government, but its norms and statutes establish the framework for what is considered legitimate and legal, and what is not. The system remains in operation today, but is facing unprecedented challenges.

The Charter peace order moderates great power politics, seeking to transcend the traditional lexicon of the balance of power and spheres of interest. Its operative principle is sovereign internationalism. Gerry Simpson couches this in terms of 'charter liberalism', advancing a pluralist concept of international politics. He describes charter liberalism as a 'procedure for organizing relations among diverse communities'. Simpson contrasts this with 'liberal anti-pluralism', which he defines as 'a liberalism that can be exclusive and illiberal in its effects', above all in its 'lack of tolerance for non-liberal regimes'. In the terms described above, this is analogous to democratic internationalism, imposing standards on the conduct of international affairs that constrains traditional forms of diplomacy between great powers, respecting their interests even when divided by ideological and ethical differences. Thus, in Simpson's analysis, liberalism divides into two traditions: 'an evangelical version that views liberalism as a comprehensive doctrine or a social good worth promoting and the other more secular tradition emphasizing proceduralism and diversity' (Simpson, 2001, pp. 539, 560).

This division is crucial to understanding international relations in the post-Cold War era. The tension between sovereign internationalism, in which respect for sovereignty is tempered by commitment to Charter values, and democratic internationalism, the expansive and illiberal view of international politics, shapes international politics. It can be described as the metapolitics of our era. There is not only a clash between world orders, in particular the US-led rules-based order, and the alignment of Russia, China and some other

states, but also ontological contestation at the level of the international system. This was not the case in Cold War I, and explains why Cold War II is so much deeper and more intractable. The palpable ideological differences of Cold War I, with capitalist democracies pitted against the legacy powers of revolutionary socialism, in this light appear as relatively superficial. Cold War I was conducted *within* the framework of the Charter international system (however much observed in the breach), whereas Cold War II is *about* the system itself. This double conflict, operating simultaneously at the level of system and orders, imbues the conflict with unprecedented depth, while at the same time remaining amorphous and protean.

Post-cold war contradictions

The Charter formula for postwar peace has lost none of its relevance, but the post-catastrophe spirit of the era in which it was formulated has dissipated. Instead, the spirit of the 1910s and the 1930s has returned, with pre-war tensions and illusions running rampant, with few restraining voices. The distinction between system and order outlined above helps explain the reversion to a new type of cold war. When the Soviet bloc disintegrated in 1989-91 the Charter system faced a new challenge – the striving for global hegemony of the remaining bloc, the political West led by the US. This bloc claimed certain tutelary privileges, formulated initially in terms of a 'liberal international order' and later in the form of the 'rules-based order' (Dugard, 2023). The part effectively tried to substitute for the whole, the particular for the universal. This generated conflicts and even wars. The second Cold War today is more challenging and dangerous than the first.

From the beginning, the practices of international politics came into contradiction with Charter aspirations. The creation of competing blocs in Cold War 1 prevented consensus on fundamental matters. At the same time, these contradictions were exacerbated by fundamental differences at the level of international political economy, although tempered to a degree by some universalistic international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, and the World Council of Churches. The end of Cold War I provided an opportunity for the practices of international politics and the norms of the Charter system to come into closer alignment. The intense ideological divisions of the earlier period were no longer relevant, and the world appeared to be converging on a set of common standards and norms. In the negative peace of Cold War

I conflict was managed rather than transcended, but after 1989 it was assumed that an era of positive peace would be inaugurated, in which cooperative endeavour would allow development and greater well-being (Sakwa, 2023). This was also the era of globalisation, in which the economic imperatives of global trade and investment were assumed to generate a more pacific set of behaviours. Competition would shift from military confrontation to economic rivalry (e.g., Pinker, 2011). The course of history proved to be very different.

Without the constraining influence of bipolarity one of the blocs created in Cold War I now claimed tutelary rights over the system as a whole. The US had always been wary of subordinating its autonomy in foreign policy to an external agency. This was the reason for the Senate failing to ratify US membership of the League of Nations in 1920. By contrast, after 1945 the US was a founder member of the Charter system and invested in its development, in the belief that the legitimacy of US actions would be enhanced when sanctioned by an international authority (Wertheim, 2020). However, the US always reserved the right to act independently, and it did so in the majority of Cold War I conflicts. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its alliance system, the unipolar era was marked by a great substitution. Liberal hegemony acted as the substitute for Charter norms, and for the pluralism that they represented.

The Charter system is based on sovereign internationalism, the equality of all states engaging in international politics, combined with a commitment to the multilateralism represented by the Charter system. It was on this basis that the Soviet Union, China and some other great powers associated to become founder members. However, after 1991 the political West usurped the rights and norms of the Charter system. Democratic internationalism was advanced as the operative norms. Democratic internationalism, with its emphasis on human rights and liberal constitutionalism is outwardly attractive, but it is based on the ideology of democratism – the instrumental application of democratic norms in the service not of the democratic preferences of an actually existing demos but an idealised representation of these preferences (Finley, 2022; Sakwa, 2023). Democratism is to democracy what dogmatic Marxism-Leninism is to socialism.

The practices of international politics, driven by the ambitions of the US-led political West, increasingly diverged from Charter norms (Devji, 2024). The notion of a 'liberal international order' makes sense in terms of power politics and the development of a globalised economic order, but by definition it presumes a distance from the international system in which it

is ostensibly embedded. During Cold War I the parallel systems more or less coexisted, since excess ambitions were constrained by the existence of a powerful military and ideological alternative. This rival order, indeed, prompted the political West to implement reforms drawn from the adversary to maintain its own viability. The creation of welfare states in Western Europe had deep internal roots, but rivalry meant that domestic constituencies had to be satisfied to avoid alienation and sympathy for the enemy. Even the US was affected by this dynamic, although tempered by the prosperity generated by the permanent war economy and an all-encompassing informational ecosystem.

With the constraints removed, the political West went into over-drive. The language of unipolarity, of 'the indispensable nation' and 'exceptionalism' rendered sovereign internationalism redundant. In the economic sphere, the imperatives of globalisation allegedly compressed the imperatives of time and space. The universalistic aspirations of liberal hegemony transcended particular histories and traditions. The liberal international order rebranded itself as the rules-based order, based on the presumption that it was something separate and distinct from the Charter system. The UN was marginalised in the bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and was unable to resolve the deepening crisis of European security. NATO enlargement in technical terms may have been rational, but in substantive terms it represented the repudiation of the idea of indivisible security embedded in all the fundamental agreements regulating the European security order, from the Helsinki Final Act of August 1975, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in November 1990, through to the Istanbul declaration of November 1999 and the Astana Declaration of December 2010. The UN became an arena for the airing of divisions rather than a forum for their resolution. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the culmination of a long period in the degradation of the conduct of international politics. The divergence between Charter norms and the practices of international politics practices is complete.

The political East

Two models of world order are becoming increasingly distinct. They are based on contrasting ideas of how international affairs should be conducted – sovereign internationalism versus democratic internationalism. These diverging representations are now gaining an increasingly sharp spatial (geopolitical) profile. The loose alignment that we call the political East

brings together states defending sovereign internationalism. At its core is the Sino-Russian alignment, which is an unprecedented phenomenon. Two great powers, perhaps better described as civilisation-states, with divergent although entangled histories, have come together in a novel manner. Sometimes described as a quasi-alliance relationship, its foundation is a common approach to international politics.

This was reflected in the wording of the Joint Statement of 4 February 2022, issued by President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin when they met at the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics. The statement condemned the attempt by 'certain states' to impose their 'democratic standards', asserting that China and Russia both have 'long-standing traditions of democracy'. Hence, 'it is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their state is a democratic one'. The statement condemned 'further NATO enlargement' and called on the alliance to 'abandon its ideologised Cold War approaches'. Above all, the statement affirmed the centrality of the UN Charter and the UDHR as 'fundamental principles, which all states must comply with and observe in deeds'. This was summed up as follows:

> The sides underline that Russia and China, as world powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, intend to firmly adhere to moral principles and accept their responsibility, strongly advocate the international system with the central coordinating role of the United Nations in international affairs, defend the world order based on international law, including the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, advance multipolarity and promote the democratization of international relations, together create an even more prospering, stable, and just world, jointly build international relations of a new type.

> The fundamental principle was that 'No state can or should ensure its own security separately from the security of the rest of the world and at the expense of the security of other states' – a position that Russia advanced since the end of Cold War I. Interstate relations between Russia and China were defined as superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two states has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation, strengthening of bilateral strategic cooperation is neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment and circumstantial changes in third countries (Joint Statement, 2022).

Russia's longstanding critique of US exceptionalist and hegemonic ambitions was now joined by a China intent on asserting its status as a global

power. The statement rejected the notion that the two countries were 'global autocracies' out to subvert Western liberal democracies and instead appealed for pluralism in an international system based on Charter principles, the 'Charter liberalism' identified by Simpson. Order in international affairs could only be established on this basis. The alternative was disorder and permanent conflict.

Not all commentators in the political east hold this view. An influential group argues that the rupture with the political West at the level of international politics should be extended to a break with the international system in its entirety. For example, the Russian academic Sergei Karaganov argues that 'The United Nations is going to extinct [*sic*], saddled with Western bureaucrats and therefore unreformable. There is no need to tear it down, but it is necessary to build parallel bodies based on BRICS+, and an expanded SCO {Shanghai Cooperation Organisation], and their integration with the Organization of African Unity [the African Union], the Arab League, ASEAN, and Mercosur. In the interim, it may be possible to create a permanent conference of these institutions within the UN' (Karaganov, 2024). In other words, the alternative was to be nurtured within the UN system, but it was not clear whether the goal was to supersede the Charter system or to wrest control back from the political West.

The mainstream view in the political east remains committed to making the Charter system work as originally intended. This view is no longer restricted to Russia and China. Its is echoed in all the fundamental statements of the BRICS+ organisation, consisting of the five original members (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and five new members as of January 2024: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It is also reflected in the statements of the SCO, currently uniting eight countries: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and six 'dialogue partners': Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey. The mere enumeration of these countries demonstrates the utility of the concept of a 'political East'. It encompasses the distinctive dynamics of Northern Eurasia (formerly described as the post-Soviet space), Southwest Asia (once known as the Middle East), East and South Asia, as well as the Global South (once described as the Third World). This is reflected in the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) aligning integration processes within the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The political East reflects the maturation of the international system, within whose framework decolonisation was conducted in the postwar

years. The 200 countries now making up the inter-state system each asserts its sovereignty, although many remain burdened by neo-colonial legacies. At the same time, sovereignty is tempered by commitment to Charter internationalism, and thus is far removed from the statist fundamentalism considered a hallmark of the Westphalian international system.

The political West

On the other side, there is a restless and expansive political West. As noted, this 'world order' makes claims that subvert the prerogatives of the Charter international system. The ideology of democratic internationalism brooks no compromises (at least, when it comes to adversaries), and undermines the accustomed practices of diplomacy. Liberal hegemony lacks a territorial ethnonym but it is not spaceless or timeless. My argument is that after 1945 a specific type of power system took shape. The political West created during Cold War I was shaped by cold war practices. Its survival after 1989 precisely perpetuated those cold war characteristics. It claimed victory in the Cold War, but that very framing was not only problematic but destructive of the very victory that was claimed. It perpetuated rather than transcended the Cold War, which was no victory at all (except in a very narrow and impoverished philosophical sense).

The political West's normative framework is congruent with the Charter international system. It was on this basis that the US was able to contribute so much to its establishment. This brings us to a fundamental point. The political West combines two powerful impulses. The first can be labelled the spirit of 'commonwealth', the developmental and democratic agenda at the heart of the liberal international order. However, in cold war conditions this was accompanied by the creation of an overweening 'imperial' dimension. America's overwhelming military and economic power at the end of the Second World War was translated into a permanent war economy, the creation of NATO and a network of military bases globally. The political West is based on an Atlanticism that excludes other spatial configurations, such as European pan-continentalism.

The Atlantic power system ensures the permanent subordination of European powers to American strategic concerns. Nevertheless, the political West of Cold War I was more of a common enterprise in the face of a common danger. There was scope for substantive political divergence, including Charles de Gaulle's expulsion of NATO installations from France, German's *Ostpolitik* and Europe's economic and energy engagement, often

against US wishes, with the Soviet Union. In Cold War II the scope for European independent political initiatives narrowed, despite much talk of 'strategic autonomy'. After 2022 bloc discipline further reduced autonomy almost to vanishing point, although the threat of a second Trump presidency revived such aspirations. Autonomy in economic management, regulatory regimes, technological innovation and industrial strategy remain, but the development of a common European foreign, security and defence identity remain circumscribed.

The political West's dual character – between empire and commonwealth – is reflected in a duality at the heart of the American polity. As early as 1955 Hans Morgenthau identified a 'regular state hierarchy' operating within the bounds of the constitutional state, the law and democratic institutions, and a 'security state', sometime called a 'deep state'. According to Morgenthau, the security state enjoyed an effective veto over the decisions of the regular state and is based on an effective choicelessness. Its definition of security trumps all other options, whereas the regular state operates in the realm of political alternatives – although they are foreclosed by the securitisation exercised by the security state (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 400; see also Tunander, 2009). Michael Glennon (2015) took up the theme, describing how a 'Trumanite' state was forged in the Cold War, establishing enduring connections between the various branches of the military and intelligence agencies, the political class, the media, think tanks and some universities. This represented a structural transformation of the American state, in which military contractors, the armed services and their civilian acolytes play an outsize role, to the detriment of diplomacy and traditional statecraft. Constitutional control withered because of the inherent complexity of national security issues as well as the enduring bipartisan ideological consensus on America's primacy and hegemony in world affairs. Hence the 'Madisonian' constitutional state, the formal institutions of governance encompassing democratic organs such as the presidency, Congress, the judiciary and elections, are overshadowed by Trumanite imperatives. Dwight D. Eisenhower (1961) referred to this in his farewell address on 17 January 1961 when he warned against the corrupting influence of the 'military-industrial complex', the combination of 'an immense military establishment and a large arms industry', which he noted was 'something new to the American experience'. He warned that 'the potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist'. Eisenhower argued that the creation of a permanent war economy would skew the priorities of American foreign policy and divert resources from domestic needs. There is a large literature which argues that this indeed took

place (e.g., McCartney, 2015). Glennon argues that the bipartisan consensus of a militarised US grand strategy endures despite the regular turnover in political leadership. US foreign and security policy remain remarkably consistent. Barack Obama's White House staffer Ben Rhodes attributed this policy continuity to the enduring influence of the foreign policy establishment, which he labels 'the blob' (Walt, 2019, pp. 91-136).

The political West is intolerant of external challenges, and thus despite rhetorical support for pluralism and tolerance, it immanently generates Simpson's 'liberal anti-pluralism'. This in turn generates neo-containment practices against potential rivals (Mearsheimer, 2014). This makes the political West inherently hermetic – deaf to the appeals of outsiders. By definition, diplomacy is about dialogue and compromise, but in a Manichean world complex issues are simplified and dialogue is considered a reward to be doled out sparingly only to those considered deserving of the privilege. Compromise is considered the betrayal of virtue. The return of the category of evil in international politics precludes normal interstate politics. Rational decision-making, diplomatic statecraft and security dialogue are undermined (Diesen, 2017). Moreover, questioning the purpose and perspectives of the political West is suppressed through ramified systems of information management. External critique is classed as a challenge to the unity of the allies to drive a 'wedge' between the two wings of the Atlantic power system. Bloc unity becomes an end in itself, even if the consequences became increasingly dysfunctional. The 'exceptionalism' that has long characterised US national identity is now projected through the collective agencies of the political West. Predictably, benign intent generates malign outcomes (Lieven and Hulsman, 2006, 2006). Empire triumphs over commonwealth.

Unravelling the Charter system

As the postwar titan, the US resented the constraints imposed by multilateralism. Nevertheless, in the postwar era the US understood that the unrestricted exercise of power comes with its own costs. Learning from its failure to join the League of Nations, influential Washington policy makers from 1940 argued that embedding US power in a multilateral format would enhance the legitimacy of its power and enhance the prospects for a more durable peace (Wertheim, 2020). The US repeatedly exercised unilateral power in Cold War I, including numerous regime change

operations and military interventions without UN sanction, but its formal commitment to the Charter system endured.

After 1989, the political West radicalised. In the absence of even a near competitor, US power and the expansive ambitions of the political West tolerated no challengers. US leadership in international politics was expected and routine, but the post-Cold War urge towards primacy was something else. Undersecretary of defence for policy, Paul Wolfowitz, in early 1992 produced a notorious paper that came to be known as the doctrine bearing his name. This later provided the foundations for what became known as the Bush Doctrine. The document was imperial in tone and proclaimed a policy of unilateralism and pre-emptive military interventions to counter threats to American dominance. The core postulate was 'to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power' (Wolfowitz, 2000, p. 309). This is a classic principle of offensive realism, as outlined by John Mearsheimer, and wholly rejects the normative dimension represented by Charter multilateralism.

A great substitution was in motion. Instead of the US-led political West remaining a sub-set of the Charter system, it now claimed directive prerogatives that properly belonged to the system as a whole. These claims were couched in terms of a 'rules-based order', implying that the Charter system did not adequately provide for globally-applicable rules and norms. The inordinate prerogatives claimed by the sub-system were roundly condemned by Russia, China and the political East more broadly. They were branded as a revived manifestation of neo-imperial ambitions and the traditional hegemonism of the West. The substitution of a part for the whole generated resistance. For the political West hegemony was the price to pay in defence of democracies against resurgent autocracies. This framing generated bloc discipline on the one side while stigmatising opponents on the other. The great substitution has a number of effects.

First, it undermines the very idea of sovereign internationalism, the foundation of the Charter international system, and thus erodes these foundations. The rights and interests of a state is judged legitimate only to the degree that they are in conformity with the rules and norms advanced by the rules-based powers. Democratic internationalism assumes a higher source of legitimate international authority, namely the appeal to ineffable and incontestable natural rights, as adjudicated not by the UN or international law but by the rules-based powers themselves – in other words, by the political West. The great substitution marginalised the UN

and its agencies. Over the decades, the General Assembly adopted 180 resolutions on the Palestine issue and the Security Council 227, but Israel has consistently violated the stipulations. In particular, the Security Council's paralysis over wars in Palestine and Ukraine undermined the credibility of the UN as a whole. Multilateral institutions were ill-equipped to deal with such crises in international politics. As one commentary puts it as the war in Gaza after the 7 October 2023 atrocity dragged on, killing over 30,000 in the first five months, half of whom were women and children: 'Israel, with the backing of the US and the various pilot fish that follow it, has begun – or resumed, better put – a concerted attack on the UN, global justice, and altogether on international public space' (Lawrence, 2024). In the heartland of Europe, the public sphere has 'been cranking up the old mechanism of sanitising Germany by demonising Muslims' (Mishra, 2024, p. 11). The wars in Palestine and Ukraine intensified continuing discussion about the redundancy of the UN as the supreme voice of the international community (e.g., Klimkin and Umland, 2020). This was accompanied by calls for Russia to be stripped off its permanent Security Council seat (Carpenter, 2023).

A second outcome flows from this, namely the stifling of diplomacy and the generation of mimetic violence. If human rights are an absolute value, then an absolutist political practice is appropriate – how can there be comprises with evil? The Manichean black-and-white divisions of Cold War I have been taken to a wholly new level. The struggle between communism and capitalism was comprehensible and easily mobilised against the adversary, but today the lack of precision (how to define a democracy or an 'autocracy', and how to distinguish between friends and foes) generated an intense arbitrariness feeding into systemic practices of double standards. In Cold War II, double standards are not an epiphenomenon of hegemony but a systemic feature of an imperial mode of governance. This is where mimetic violence comes in. Fear that the other side is insidiously subverting the domestic order generates mimetic contagion, scapegoating and repression. René Girard (2003) identified the victim mechanism as sustaining social order by redirecting violence to the scapegoat and appropriative mimesis. He considered the imitation of the desire to possess an object (which includes status and identity) a characteristic of humans throughout the ages (see Palaver, 2013). The ritualised mimetic violence of scapegoating relieves a society of accumulated tensions. The symbolic allocation of responsibility for social ills to a particular subject deprives them of the most basic right, the right to life. The scapegoating principle is a universal phenomenon, although it takes many different forms (Girard, 2005; Girard and Freccero,

1989). As far as Moscow is concerned, the prevalent Russophobia in the political West (significantly, the Global South is largely immune) is a token of the scapegoating mechanism at work, with Russia held responsible for subverting Western democracies and a host of other ills. The Kremlin naturally is no stranger to the mechanism, holding the West responsible for stirring up domestic dissent and thus discrediting legitimate opposition.

Third, the struggle for mastery over Charter institutions has intensified. The political West increasingly votes as a disciplined bloc in the Security Council while deploying all manner of intimidatory techniques against recalcitrant powers to ensure that they vote the right way. This reduces the UN and its institutions into an instrument of cold war and great power struggle, and thereby undermines its autonomy and efficacy. As China assumed more leadership roles in multilateral agencies and organisations, including the World Bank and IMF, the political West fought back. By 2021 China led four of the UN's 15 specialised agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Telecommunications Union, the UN Industrial Development Organisation, and the International Civil Aviation Organisation. This prompted a coordinated response by the political West, fearing that the so-called 'revisionist' powers were subverting liberal order from within: 'They [the revisionist powers] begin by calling for reform of existing institutions, but over time the "salami slicing" of 'existing rules and norms can create significant weaknesses in international institutions that undermine the broader institutional order' (Goddard, 2022, p. 35). As the political East shifted from rule-taker to rule-maker, the hegemony of the political West eroded. Sergei Lavrov (2022), the Russian foreign minister, observed that 'the Americans have shown a tendency to privatise the secretariats of international organisations. They place their people in leading positions. To our great regret, they have influence over countries voting on personnel decisions. Americans are rushing round the world. What sovereign equality of states?'. A case in point is the alleged 'privatisation' of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) by agents of the political West, preventing impartial investigations into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria and elsewhere (Maté, 2019).

Fourth, the intensifying crisis of Charter multilateralism encourages the creation of alternatives and the bifurcation of international politics. The political West did this within the framework of the rules-based order, seeking to entrench its power within an alternative constellation. This included the idea of creating a 'League of Democracies', the first steps towards which were annual 'summits of democracies'. The political East

focused initially on creating alternative financial institutions and institutions in which the views of the non-Western powers were constitutionally entrenched. The world can be seen as dividing, on the one side, between defenders of 'empire', the tutelary role of the US and its allies over the multilateral institutions of the Charter international system, and on the other side, advocates of 'commonwealth', the belief that a better order of international politics is not only possible but essential, if humanity is to survive the various calamities it faces – ranging from irreversible and runaway climate change to the nuclear Apocalypse. This division in broad and far from consistent terms corresponds to 'historical divisions between colonizing states and colonized states and ethnic/cultural divisions between "white" states and "non-white" states' (Lawrence, 2024). Russia now positions itself at the head of a renewed anti-colonial drive, while the US and its allies are presented as avatars of a new-style liberal imperialism.

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

Conclusion

The Charter international system is threatened as never before. Globalisation is fragmenting into at least two potential streams, accompanied by the general degradation of diplomacy and the culture of international politics. Sanctions have become not an alternative to war but a way of conducting hostilities. Given the deadlock in the UN Security Council, the only universally legitimate source of sanctions and other global managerial and deterrence policies, nations have turned to the creation of alternative blocs and alignments to achieve their goals. The war in Ukraine from 2022 and the Israel-Hamas war from 2023 signal the breakdown of the aspirations for an enduring post-Cold War peace. Earlier, when the authority of the UN was flouted and its norms breached, there was a general awareness that some offence had taken place. Today this consensus is unravelling. The postwar period is coming to an end.

The relative stability ensured by the common understanding that the UN and its norms were the gold standard for international behaviour, long eroded, may finally be crumbling (Barabanov et al, 2018; see also 2022). Major wars in the past signalled the collapse of one international system accompanied by preparations for the creation of a new one. There are many indications that today we are at such a juncture, an inflection point indicating the end of one system and the search for another. However, unlike in earlier epochs, there are no substantive ideas of what a fundamentally new system would look like. There are no ideas waiting in the wings. The Charter international system still has mileage and potential. Some reforms, above all to the permanent composition of the Security Council, are necessary, and possibly in the relationship between the General Assembly and the Security Council. However, in the main, the principles and norms underlying the system remain the only realistic foundations for a viable international system.

The post-1945 international system is in crisis, but it is not necessarily a terminal one. New international systems are usually created after a major war and when novel ideas and potential institutional innovations have matured to the point that old ideas become anachronistic and old institutions outdated. This is not the case today. International politics is today still conducted in the long shadow of the great wars of the twentieth century, and no one has come up with better ideas on how to conduct international affairs. Reform of the UN is necessary, but not a sufficient condition to resolve the crisis. The Charter International System will remain the cornerstone of the international community for the foreseeable future. What is required to resolve the crisis is not a new international system but a new pattern in international politics. For that to occur leadership at the national level is required, accompanied by pressure from political associations and popular movements.

The fossilised structures of the Cold War have reproduced in new forms, prompting conflict and global polarisation. The wars of our times distract attention from the pressing challenges of climate change and global development. There is no common vision of the future or even a perspective that the future can be an improvement on the past. The political West is challenged by a slowly-constituting political East, a process that may restore balance in international politics and moderate the larger changes in the balance of power in international politics. It may also inspire a new type of globalisation, focused more on development and the delivery of public goods for domestic constituencies. A new emphasis on equality and control

over unbounded financialisation and the power of capital is part of the new political agenda. The opportunity to establish some sort of positive peace order after the end of the Cold war in 1989 was squandered, but as long as the Charter international system remains in place the framework remains for progressive initiatives and some sort of global peace order. The alternative is a global anarchy that threatens the very existence of humanity.

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