Crisis of the International System and International Politics

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Abstract
Despite the Cold War and numerous hot wars, there is an essential continuity in the post-war period based on the Charter International System created in 1945. The United Nations and the associated declarations, organizations and normative orientations remain the framework for the conduct of international relations. At the level of international politics, orders are created in which states contend and hegemonic formations take shape. The Soviet-led bloc disintegrated in 1989-1991, leaving the field clear for the U.S.-led political West to claim universality, and on that basis seek to expand globally. However, the distinction between the system and conjunctural political sub-order is crucial to explain the dynamics in international affairs today. Russia has long resisted the expansive dynamic of the political West, an order created and sustained by Cold War logic, although drawing on U.N. Charter norms and principles. Russia's relationship with the civilizational West is more ambivalent, while the country insists

that it remains by right part of the cultural West. Meanwhile, the expansive ambitions of the political West are countered by the Sino-Russian alignment and the nascent political East. This embryonic formation asserts the priority of sovereign internationalism, the principle at the heart of the Charter International System, and thereby repudiates the political West's assertion of a mode of international politics based on democratic internationalism. The Russo-Ukrainian war of 2022 challenges the foundational principles of the Charter International System, with the UN becoming an instrument in Cold War II contestation rather than a forum for conflict resolution. The conflict potentially ushers in an era of international politics in which the norms and multilateral pre-eminence of the Charter system are repudiated.

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

The international system established in 1945 is in crisis. The creation of the United Nations at that time sought to balance the interests of the great powers (through the creation of a Security Council with the permanent membership of the five leading powers) with the sovereignty of the entire community of nations existing at that time. The UN Charter laid the foundations for a system that repudiated the logic of war and sought to provide a mechanism for peaceful conflict resolution. The Charter International System, as we shall call it, was subsequently fleshed out with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the Genocide Convention of 1951, and numerous later conventions, protocols, and declarations. The UN is also at the heart of a dense network of international organizations, including the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization as well as UNESCO dealing with culture. Despite the Cold War, the UN remained the center of multilateral diplomacy. After the end of the Cold War there were expectations that the Charter system's adjudicatory functions would be enhanced, since without the intense ideological divisions of the earlier period it was assumed that a more cooperative peace order would be established.

These anticipations failed to materialize, and instead by the time of the onset of Cold War II in 2014 the strains in multilateral diplomacy were, if anything, even more intense than in the earlier conflict. The UN had already been marginalized in the bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, but it now looked on largely helplessly as the crisis in European security intensified. It became an arena for airing 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 and augured the death knell for the Charter International System as a whole. All that remained, it appeared, was to write obituaries: R.I.P. 1945-2022.

THE CHARTER INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND THE POLITICAL WEST

The Charter International System sought to learn the lessons from the failure of the League of Nations in the interwar years. Both drew their inspiration from the normative values expressed by an American president, Woodrow Wilson, hence both can be called "Wilsonian." However, the League had failed to restrain Japanese imperialism, and its weak response to the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 was compounded by the inability to avert the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935, let alone to make any meaningful intervention in the Spanish Civil War the following year. Few lamented the formal disbandment of the League in April 1946, handing over its assets and archives to the newly formed UN. The catastrophic failure of multilateralism to avert the war in Ukraine, which even in the nuclear age has the potential to escalate into a direct great-power conflict and even some type of World War III, has prompted calls for the convocation of some new Westphalian-type congress to reset the system.

International systems rise and fall, but each builds on the achievements of earlier versions to reflect the changing realities of international politics. The system inaugurated by the Peace of Westphalia, bringing an end to the Thirty Years' War in 1648, focused on the assertion of the sovereignty of princes, which eventually led

to the definition of the principles of national sovereignty. This was further codified in the Peace of Utrecht in 1715, at the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, formalizing the age of empire. The Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), at the end of the revolutionary convulsions precipitated by the storming of the Bastille in July 1789 and culminating in the Napoleonic wars, introduced a novel ideological element into the international system that bears its name. The Holy Alliance, uniting the monarchist great powers of Austria, Russia, and Prussia, sought to keep republican principles at bay. Although after the revolutions of 1848 that element diminished, with the struggle against Russian autocracy becoming a component of the Crimean War (1853-1856). In broad terms, the Vienna system endured for a century, until its model of great-power politics catastrophically disintegrated in 1914. The search after World War I for a more rational way of managing international politics gave rise to the League of Nations, and then after another bout of the endemic European civil war (1939-1945), the UN.

An international system endows an era with a certain normative framework in which international politics is conducted. However, it is important to stress that the two are not the same. An international system is a combination of norms, procedures, and institutions (although the latter are not necessarily formalized); whereas international politics relates to the conduct of states and their interactions. It is on the latter level that distinctive world orders are created, as a sub-set within the broader international system. Thus, after 1945, the U.S. went on to create a political order of its own, the political West, while the Soviet Union became the head of a communist bloc that lasted until 1989. China has been reluctant to engage in bloc politics, and thus in keeping with long-time traditions sometimes aligns with other states but does not create an alliance system of its own. In his magisterial work on world order, Henry Kissinger notably failed to distinguish between order and system, and this is a failing of many contemporary realist analyses (Kissinger, 2014). For the sake of completeness, although not the subject of this essay, we should say that in addition to the international system and international politics there is the whole world of international political economy as well as the

cosmos of international organizations and transnational civil society. Relations between the four levels is dynamic, and international affairs cannot be understood without a synthetic analysis of the entirety of the four levels, but that is beyond the scope of this essay (for notable attempts to move towards such a synthesis, see the classic work of Hedley Bull (1977/1995)).

It is at the level of international politics that various orders are created. The most enduring and powerful one is the one that was created by Washington when at the height of its power after 1945. This order, until 1989, is usually categorized as being based on liberal internationalism—open markets, free trade, and the espousal of democracy—however much these principles may have been flouted in practice. After 1989, it appeared that a unipolar era was in prospect, and liberal internationalism became radicalized to turn into liberal hegemony—the attempt to make universal the order that had its roots in the Atlantic basin, to the exclusion of any hegemonic pretensions on the part of any other regional power. For its domestic critics, the project was doomed to fail, at the price of disrupting American power at home and abroad. Its major critics include John J. Mearsheimer (2018; 2019), joined by Stephen M. Walt (2019). For an outside analysis, see Patrick Porter (2020).

The argument can be taken further, but in a rather different direction. While the U.S. became the leading power, and the idea of liberal hegemony lacks a territorial ethnonym, the idea of the West requires greater specification. My argument is that after 1945 a specific type of power system took shape.

The political West was created during Cold War I and was shaped by that Cold War. This political West endured after 1989 and claimed (to a degree justifiably) victory in the Cold War, and on that basis generated universal aspirations that shaped the post-Cold War era. It combined hard power (in the form of NATO and a global alliance system), normative and regional geopolitical power, institutionalized in the European Union, and cultural hegemony, propagated through a plethora of ancillary organizations and soft power practices. The political West is based on enduring Transatlanticism, excluding

other forms of territorial organization (such as European pan-continentalism). This entails the effective subordination of European powers to American strategic concerns, although this does not preclude autonomy in economic management, technology and some other spheres.

The political West's self-perpetuating character derives from the dual character 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 (what Michael Glennon later called the "Madisonian state"), and a "security state" (sometimes called a "deep state"), labeled the "Trumanite state" by Glennon. According to Morgenthau (1962, p. 400), the security state enjoys an effective veto over the decisions of the regular state and is based on 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 securitization exercised by the security state.[1] Glennon (2015) argues that this explains why, despite regular changes of the leadership U.S., foreign and security policy remains 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 devotes a chapter to defining the blob and its effects (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 neo-containment practices against potential rivals (these were given theoretical grounding by John J. Mearsheimer (2014)). This renders the political West an inherently hermetic system—meaning that it becomes deaf to the appeals of outsiders. The possibility of diplomacy, which by definition is characterized by dialogue and compromise, is undermined. This is a Manichean world that simplifies

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[1]   Ola Tunander (2009, p. 69, n1) notes that this section of his work was published earlier, in 1955, in the *New Republic* and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. Tunander's own work is a brilliant examination of how the security (Trumanite) state operates in practice, focusing on the case of Italy.

complex issues. Compromises and the pragmatic exercise of statecraft and political judgement are considered the betrayal of virtue; hence rational decision-making and security are undermined (Diesen, 2017, pp. 177-94). It considers questioning the purpose and perspectives of the political West a challenge to the unity of the allies and an attempt to drive a "wedge" between the two wings of the Atlantic power system. The curation of bloc unity becomes an end in itself, even if the consequences become increasingly dysfunctional. All this is based on a strong sense of "exceptionalism," in which benign intent generates malign outcomes. These have been thoroughly examined by Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman (2006a; 2006b).

THE APPEAL TO A GREATER WEST

Russia and others have taken to calling this formation the "collective West," and there is some merit to this. However, the term lacks adequate specification and differentiation. It implies a unity that is not always evident and can be misleading as to its origins—such as intransigent, persistent and non-negotiable Russophobia. That certainly exists, but if we talk of the political West, the emphasis is more precisely on the geopolitical roots of the phenomenon. That is why the notion of political West should be distinguished from two other manifestations. The cultural West has its roots in ancient Greece, if not earlier. This is the enduring West, with its peaks and troughs of culture, reflexivity, self-doubt, critique, and self-confidence. Russia, quite rightly, believes that it is an inalienable part of the cultural West, and it has contributed greatly to this culture.

More problematic is the civilizational West, a phenomenon that emerged some five hundred years ago, leading to an era of imperial and normative expansion (for a normative analysis, see Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (1984); and for a reconceptualization of the process, see Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit (2017)). This West was also shaped by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, creating a civilization whose complexity and sophistication inevitably encouraged hubristic illusions of superiority, intensifying the alienation of outsiders. Russia has had a complex but ultimately antagonistic

relationship with this particular civilizational formation. It has tried to emulate its achievements, including imperial expansion of its own, but repeatedly found that antagonism trumped integration (Neumann, 2016). This was the case in the 18th century, and then at the Congress of Vienna Russia could feel satisfied that it had cracked the code for entry into Western civilization, but the Crimean War soon disabused it of this illusion. The Communist experiment, from this perspective, represented only the most consistent and thoroughgoing attempt to forge what was considered an improved version of Western civilization. As many have argued, Marxism was a rebellious child of Western civilizational modernity. It believed that by transcending the capitalist exploitative elements, an emancipated and non-alienated modernity would be achieved. Mikhail Gorbachev's New Political Thinking in the late 1980s repudiated much of the Marxist-Leninist legacy, yet it maintained a transformative agenda. This time, Russia itself would be the improving agency. By joining the civilizational West, Gorbachev believed that a Greater West could be created.

Gorbachev believed that ending the Cold War largely on the political West's terms would provide an entry ticket, but again, this soon proved illusory. The price that Russia (and other countries in its position) would have to pay demanded recognition of the superiority of Western civilization, including its political and economic order. This entailed a degree of subordination, or at the very least, acquiescence in American hegemony. Moscow was ready to accept U.S. leadership on any number of issues, as was appropriate for the world's dominant power, but hegemony required a degree of civilizational change in Russia itself that would have undermined its representation of itself, its culture, identity, and status. Moreover, Russia never considered itself a defeated power at the end of the Cold War and therefore was not ready to "embrace defeat," as Germany and Japan had done at the end of World War II (Dower, 2000). Russia at that time was certainly keen to emulate the technological and economic achievements of the civilizational West, especially since its own attempts to create an alternative modernity in the form of Soviet power had so lamentably failed (Arnason, 1993). However, it also sought to maintain political

discretion for its own state system and its great-power status, generating tension and ultimately conflict with the political West.

Russia's ambivalence was reflected in the ultimately doomed and rather quixotic attempt to change the political West at the end of the Cold War. Gorbachev's idea of some sort of "common European home," which he defined as a house with many rooms (that is, ideological and systemic diversity on a pan-continental scale) entailed a belief that at the end of the Cold War all sides would change. This would entail a return to something akin to the openness of the historical situation evident at the time of the Yalta/Potsdam conferences at the end of World War II in 1945, which helps explain why Russia holds Yalta in such high regard to this day. However, by 1989, the political West had taken shape, and certainly saw no reason to compromise with what it perceived to be a failed social order and defeated power. Later Vladimir Putin reformulated the transformative agenda in terms of creating a "Greater Europe," but by then there was even less chance of achieving this. Even more potent in stoking the latent conflict, the political West's hopes of Russia transforming itself in a manner desired by the West were evidently disappointed, intensifying the alienation of both sides.

THE GREAT SUBSTITUTION

The political West always enjoyed an ambivalent relationship with the multilateralism represented by the Charter International System. Understandably, it resented the constraints that multilateralism imposes. However, in the postwar era the U.S. understood that the unrestricted exercise of power comes with its own costs. America refused to ratify the League of Nations treaty and therefore never joined it, greatly weakening the organization. Washington policymakers from 1940 shifted to the view that embedding U.S. power in a larger multilateral context would not only enhance the legitimacy of its power but would also improve the prospects for a more durable peace than the one so briefly enjoyed in the interwar years (this is brilliantly analyzed by Stephen Wertheim (2020)). This did not prevent the U.S. from exercising its power unilaterally in the Cold War years, conducting numerous regime-change operations and military interventions

without UN approval, but its formal commitment to the Charter system endured.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and with China yet to accumulate the economic power that could sustain any putative great-power ambitions, U.S. power and the expansive ambitions of the political West brooked no challengers. Given its power and pre-eminence, U.S. leadership in international politics had long been expected and mostly even respected, but the post-Cold War striving for primacy was something else. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz, in early 1992, produced a paper that came to be known as the doctrine bearing his name, which later provided the foundations for what became known as the Bush Doctrine.[2] The document was imperial in tone and proclaimed a policy of unilateralism and pre-emptive military interventions to counter threats to American leadership. 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, but the document did not mention Europe or the West more broadly. Although dominated by the U.S., the political West of Cold War I was more of a common enterprise in the face of a common danger. Even then, there was scope for substantive political divergence, including Charles de Gaulle's expulsion of NATO from France, German's *Ostpolitik* and Europe's economic and energy engagement, often against U.S. wishes, with the Soviet Union. In Cold War II the scope for European independent political initiatives narrowed, despite endless talk of "strategic autonomy," and diminished almost to a vanishing point from 2022 (broader changes in the political West will be analyzed in my *The Revolutionary West and International Politics* (in preparation)).

Russia's appeal to the deeper commonality of European culture provided a weak foundation for rapprochement, while reconciliation with the civilizational West remained as ambivalent as it had been over the last half millennium (Karaganov, 2021, pp. 416-34). As for a merger with the political West, despite the numerous agreements

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[2]   A leaked version was published in the *New York Times* on 7 March 1992.

on "strategic partnership" and avowals of cooperation at the end of the Cold War, fundamental institutional obstacles remained. Russia's sheer size, distinctive historical traditions, aspirations for autonomy, and commitment to great-power status acted as impediments, but ultimately the absence of an inclusive institutional settlement proved decisive. The political West's security organization, NATO, remorselessly advanced to Russia's borders, while the European Union's expansion into the post-communist world only amplified rather than transcended historical antagonisms.

The fundamental predicate for the New Political Thinking was an appeal to the genuine universalism of the Charter International System. Despite accusations that Gorbachev failed to defend Soviet/Russian national interests and effectively capitulated to the political West, the key to his thinking, which was entirely rational in the context and remains valid to this day, was an appeal to the sovereign internationalism at the heart of the Charter system. This meant the renunciation of hegemonism by all parties and commitment to Charter multilateralism. This certainly did not mean some sort of move towards a world government, but it did entail a particular vision of how international politics should be conducted. This was to be based on respect for the concerns of others, with dialogue and diplomacy to take priority over coercion, unless sanctioned by the UN.

Instead, the radicalized political West offered an alternative model of international politics based on democratic internationalism. This democratic inflection of international politics has deep roots, but finally took shape in the 1970s and was given expression in the "third basket of the Helsinki Final Act" in August 1975. Thereafter, human rights dominated the agenda, while social and economic concerns were relegated to a secondary concern, as analyzed by Samuel Moyn (2012). Democratic internationalism asserts that international politics is little more than an emanation of the domestic political order, repudiating the realist view that the international arena operates according to a fundamentally different logic. If democratic peace theory, which posits that consolidated democracies do not go to war with each, is right, then it is logical to assume that the more democracies there are, the greater

the chance for peace. For the political West, this became an article of faith in the post-Cold War era. This was accompanied by the expansion of the liberal trading order, generating enormous benefits to capitalist economies while transforming countries like China. In the heartlands of what had become the neoliberal world, the benefits were distributed in a grotesquely unequal manner, ultimately generating a populist backlash that delivered Brexit in June 2016 and the triumph of Donald J. Trump later that year.

In conceptual terms, a great substitution had taken place. The appropriate hierarchy had been inverted. Instead of the U.S.-led political West remaining a sub-set of the Charter system, it now claimed certain directive prerogatives that properly belonged to the system as a whole. These claims were couched in terms of a "rules-based order," as if the Charter system did not adequately provide for globally applicable rules and norms. The inordinate claims of the sub-system were roundly condemned by Russia and China and were rightly disdained by much of the Global South as a new manifestation of neo-imperial ambitions and the hegemonism to be expected from the civilizational West. This alienation had profound consequences, shaping the international politics of Cold War II. The imputed claims of a part to the whole inevitably generated resistance. However, as far as the political West was concerned, unilateral action was the only way to deal with the recalcitrance of powers in what was increasingly framed as a struggle between democracies and autocracies. This framing represented a gross simplification, but it acted as a mechanism of bloc discipline on the one side, while stigmatizing opponents in an increasingly Manichean world.

PRACTICES OF COLD WAR II

In the nuclear age, a Cold War is a struggle in which the main parties fear entering into direct conflict, hence the prevalence of proxy conflicts as well as information wars. A Cold War is also a struggle between interpretations and a way of explaining the world and international affairs. Every interpretation in a Cold War becomes part of the struggle of narratives. This degrades classic Victorian representations of media

impartiality, giving rise to neo-journalism in which facts are made to fit the story. Academic life is not immune to the Cold War contagion, and the embittered and condemnatory tone of many discussions is yet another symptom of the broader slide into Cold War partisanship. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, the world has come full circle and ended up in a potentially more entrenched and certainly more dangerous renewed confrontation.

Cold War II shares certain common features with the first, but each iteration has distinctive features. In this case, the results of the great substitution were soon apparent. First, it undermined the very idea of sovereign internationalism, the foundation of the Charter International System, and thereby eroded these foundations. The rights and interests of states were judged legitimate only to the degree that they were in conformity with the rules and norms advanced by the rules-based powers. Most, of course, were compatible with UN Charter norms, reflecting the common origins of both in the postwar period and shaped in part or in whole by the U.S. However, the fundamental difference is that democratic internationalism implies a higher source of legitimate international authority, namely an appeal to ineffable and incontestable human rights, as adjudicated not by the UN or its agencies but by the rules-based powers themselves—in other words, by the political West.

A second result flows from this, namely the suffocation of diplomacy and the complementary generation of mimetic violence. If human rights become an absolute value, then an absolutist political practice is generated—how can there be compromises with evil? This took the stark black-and-white divisions of Cold War I to a wholly new level, in part because of the very slipperiness of the categories. In the earlier conflict, the struggle between communism and capitalism was comprehensible and easily mobilized, on both sides, to ensure loyalty and bloc discipline, Now, the very lack of precision generated a more intense arbitrariness. Fear that the other side was insidiously subverting the domestic order generated 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.[3] The ritualized 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 the dominance of Charter institutions themselves. In the Security Council, the political West increasingly voted as a disciplined bloc, and sought to use the UN as an instrument in Cold War struggle. China increasingly assumed leadership roles in multilateral agencies and organizations, including the World Bank and the IMF, discomforting the political West. By 2021, China led four of the UN's fifteen specialized agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Telecommunications Union, the UN Industrial Development Organization, and the International Civil Aviation Organization. This prompted a horrified backlash 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). The potential shift from rule-taker to rule-maker inevitably eroded the hegemony of the political West.

The status quo mobilized the West to oppose such appointments, particularly against Russia—a phenomenon that long predated 2022. As

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[3]   The best recent study of Girard's work is Wolfgang Palaver, René Girard's Mimetic Theory (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 2013).

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, complained, "the Americans have shown a tendency to privatize the secretariats of international organizations. 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?" (Lavrov, 2022). The intensifying crisis of multilateralism prompted the creation of alternatives to Charter institutions in which the views of Russia and China were constitutionally entrenched. The political West also engaged in the creation of alternatives, including such ideas as a "League of Democracies." The Charter International System faced unprecedented threats.

CHALLENGES TO THE CHARTER INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

There is an essential unity to the period from 1945 to 2022. Although marked by some major political disjunctions, including the onset of the Cold War, decolonization, the end of Cold War I, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the cold peace and then the renewed onset of the New Cold War, the broad framework for the conduct of international affairs remained constant. Even when the authority of the UN was flouted and its norms breached, there was a general awareness that some offence had taken place. This was accompanied by increasing demands for UN reform, above all, by expanding the permanent membership of the Security Council to include, at a minimum, India, Brazil, and a representative from Africa.

Today, the postwar period may be coming to an end. The relative stability ensured by the common understanding that the UN and its norms were the gold standard for international behavior, long eroded, may finally be crumbling.[4] In the past, major wars signaled the collapse

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[4]   This term is used in the analysis of the crisis by the Valdai Club report of October 2018, *Living in a Crumbling World,* prepared by Oleg Barabanov, Timofei Bordachev, Yaroslav Lissovolik, Fyodor Lukyanov, Andrei Sushentsov, and Ivan Timofeev. The theme was taken up, inter alia, in the October 2022 report, *A World Without Superpowers*, by the same authors. Like Kissinger and others in the structural realist tradition, they fail to distinguish between the international system and the orders of international politics contained within it, quite apart from the relative neglect of international political economy and transnational civil society. Nevertheless, the Valdai Club reports remain one of the most serious attempts to engage with fundamental developments in international politics.

of one international system and, once the conflict ended, attempts to create a new one. Are we today at such a juncture, an inflection point indicating the end of one system and the search for another? What are the indications that we may be at such a turning point?

Firstly, and most pertinently, it is the war in Ukraine. Russia's invasion on 24 February clearly represented a breach of fundamental UN principles, even though Moscow argued that the right of self-defense is enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter. However, Russia was not in any imminent danger of being attacked, although the advance of the political West to its borders had long been signaled as a "red line" that would sooner or later prompt a robust response. Equally, Moscow's defenders argue that this was far from the first time that pre-emptive military action had been launched without UN sanction, notably NATO's 78-day bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the egregiously broad application of UN Resolution 1973 in March 2011 imposing a limited no-fly-zone in Libya. From this perspective, there had been a long slide towards lawlessness in international politics, and the "special military operation" in Ukraine in 2022 did not mark such a significant rupture. There is some validity to such arguments, but that does not negate the underlying trend towards the erosion of Charter norms in international affairs.

This perception, the second factor, was exacerbated by personal criticism of the purported personal inadequacies of the UN secretary-general at the time of the Ukraine crisis. A former Portuguese prime minister, António Guterres, was alleged to have been partisan, and instead of advancing a peace agenda he was accused of favoring the political West. The UN certainly failed to act as a forum for a negotiated peace, and instead this role was assumed by intermediaries, notably the Turkish leadership. The UN did help broker a grain deal to allow the export of Ukrainian foodstuffs from Odessa, but in the early stages of the conflict it had failed to provide an impartial forum for the assessment of battlefield accusations. For much of the time the UN was notable by its absence, but this was the pattern in many earlier conflicts. The relatively minor role of the UN in the Ukraine conflict does not in

itself indicate a breakdown of the system. The normative foundations remain in place, even if their implementation is inadequate.

The third indication of a possible ontological break is the entire process of substitution. The claim by the rules-based sub-system to the prerogatives that ostensibly belong to the entire international community inevitably undermines the centrality of the Charter International System. The creation of alternatives, in the form of self-selected leagues and alliances of democracies only heightened the sense that the universal principle of sovereign internationalism was being lost. From this perspective, the political West is seen as usurping the rights of the system as a whole, and thereby eroding the practice of international law and impartial norms. The fact that the substitution is justified precisely by defense of the norms only increases the perception that a self-serving misappropriation is taking place. If a particular group of nations can claim to be the arbiter of the rules, then what is the point of the referee in the form of the UN and its agencies?

The fourth indicator of a possible erosion of the Charter system is the changing power balance within international politics. For some, a power transition is taking place as the hitherto supreme pre-eminence of the U.S. gives way to the emergence of a serious long-term peer challenger in the form of China. Undoubtedly, there are major shifts in the balance of power at the level of international politics. For those who see international order emerging entirely out of the correlation of forces at this level, the old U.S.-dominated hegemonic order is crumbling, and a new order will only emerge after a long period of great-power contestation. However, if the model outlined above has any validity, then such a reading is misleading. Power shifts within international politics are undoubtedly important, but they do not in themselves affect the constitutional foundations of the international system. They certainly provoke intense conflict and mutual recriminations in the Security Council, and stymie consensus on fundamental issues, but they do not change the system as a whole. The collapse of the Soviet Union earlier had nurtured hubristic notions of universal pre-eminence of the political West, but this did not represent an epistemological break with the system.

The fifth indication that the 1945 international system may have reached its expiry date is the emergence of the increasingly formalized political East, to counter the expansive claims of the political West. The notion of 'the East,' like that of 'the West,' can be disaggregated into its cultural, civilizational and political components, but that is the subject of another paper. Here we briefly indicate the emergence of a sustained alternative to the formerly dominant West, encompassing the powers of the East, although aligned in a far less hegemonic manner than the political West. Indeed, the notion of the 'political East' should be treated with considerable caution, since it is almost inconceivable that its putative members will engage in bloc formation based on the Western model. Nevertheless, some sort of political East, with its Eurasian and West Asian core, is beginning to take shape, if only as a response to the perceived usurpation by the "rules-based order" of the universal norms of the Charter system. This is accompanied by the creeping advance of the political West into Asia, in the form of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), AUKUS (Australia, UK and U.S.), and the increased activism of NATO in the Asia-Pacific region.

At the heart of the nascent political formation, although without a formal hierarchy, is China. The immediate indication of China's more assertive stance in international politics is the Belt and Road Initiative, a multi-billion-dollar project encompassing over a hundred countries for investment in transport infrastructure, networks, and ports. Beijing has also created the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which already now invests more in development projects than the World Bank. Most countries in the Global South are wary of aligning with China, if only out of fear of being hit by U.S. sanctions, yet an alternative global financial and economic architecture is beginning to emerge. The Bretton Woods institutions are gradually being by-passed. Russia and China have aligned more closely and worked with a growing list of partners in the Global South in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) bloc. Many more organizations and associations give substance to the emerging political East. Most importantly, their proclaimed normative foundations insist on sovereign internationalism and other

core ideas of the Charter International System An endless parade of resolutions and declarations assert UN norms, although occasionally complemented by reference to the 10-point Bandung Declaration of 1955—which itself incorporated the principles of the UN Charter. In other words, the emergence of the political East does not threaten the Charter International System but strengthens it. This may not be the way the political West sees things, and the advance of representatives from the political East to leadership positions may well prompt some sort of boycott or walk-out.

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The Charter International System is under threat as never before. This is accompanied by the fragmentation of globalization, and the general degradation of diplomacy and the culture of international politics. Sanctions have become less 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 absence of some major powers and regions from the Security Council undoubtedly undermines its credibility, yet the enduring issue of UN reform is no closer to resolution today than in the past. The preventable war in Ukraine further signals, as if it were needed, a breakdown of the aspirations for an enduring post-Cold War peace (Sakwa, forthcoming). However, while the post-1945 international system is in crisis, 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 still conducted in the long shadow of the great wars of the 20th century, and no one has come up with better ideas on how to conduct matters. UN reform is necessary, but it is not a sufficient condition to resolve the crisis. The Charter International System will remain the foundation of international affairs 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 times are undoubtedly perilous, and the world is increasingly disordered. A period of increased fluidity is in prospect. The various 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. Above all, the fossilized structures of the Cold War reproduce themselves in new forms, prompting conflict and global polarization. The political West is now challenged by the steadily 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 globalization, focused more on delivering public goods for domestic constituencies, accompanied by a new emphasis on equality and control over unbounded financialization and the power of capital. 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 there remains a framework for progressive initiatives and some sort of global peace order. There really is no alternative. After the next world war it is unlikely that there will be anyone left to create a new international system.

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