

The Limits of Realism after Liberal Hegemony

Aaron McKeil 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

This review essay conducts and works to contribute an assessment of recent realist critiques of liberal hegemony. It finds that realists identify important problems with liberal hegemony, but also finds that under scrutiny the alternative foreign policies that realist critics offer suffer from their own serious limitations. It makes the case that realist proposals of “restraint” and “offshore balancing” avoid the problems realists associate with liberal interventionism, but would also be generative of proxy wars, while offering insufficient additional institutions, practices, and norms for mitigating and managing proxy wars and great power conflict, among other global and international challenges. From closer examination and consideration, that is, the argument is made that these limitations of alternative realist foreign policies question their ability to contribute to international order in the twenty-first century and suggest, quite the opposite, that if pursued they would instead become new sources of international disorder, albeit while avoiding some of the problems associated with liberal internationalism.

Los límites del realismo después de la hegemonía liberal Resumen

Este ensayo de revisión pretende aportar una evaluación de las recientes críticas realistas a la hegemonía liberal. El informe concluye que los realistas identifican problemas significativos relacionados con la hegemonía liberal, pero también descubre que, si se analizan, las políticas exteriores alternativas que proponen los críticos realistas presentan sus propias limitaciones graves. Este trabajo también afirma que las propuestas realistas de “moderación” y “equilibrio offshore” evitan los problemas que los realistas asocian con el intervencionismo liberal, pero también podrían generar guerras por delegación, al tiempo que ofrecen instituciones, prácticas y normas adicionales insuficientes para mitigar y gestionar las guerras por delegación y los conflictos de grandes potencias, entre otros desafíos globales e internacionales. A partir de un examen y una valoración a fondo, se argumenta que estas limitaciones de las políticas exteriores realistas alternativas cuestionan su capacidad para contribuir al orden internacional en el siglo XXI y, por el contrario, sugieren que, de llevarse a cabo, si bien evitarían algunos de los problemas asociados al internacionalismo liberal, se convertirían en nuevas fuentes de desorden internacional.

Limites du réalisme suite à l'hégémonie libérale Résumé

Cet essai de synthèse procède et s'efforce de contribuer à une évaluation des critiques réalistes récentes de l'hégémonie libérale. Il constate que les réalistes identifient d'importants problèmes liés à l'hégémonie libérale, mais il constate également que si elles sont examinées de manière approfondie, les politiques étrangères alternatives proposées par les critiques réalistes souffrent de leurs propres limites sérieuses. Il plaide que les propositions réalistes de « retenue » et « d'offshore balancing »

évitent les problèmes que les réalistes associent à l'interventionnisme, mais qu'elles seraient également génératrices de guerres par procuration, car elles offrent des institutions, pratiques et normes supplémentaires insuffisantes pour limiter et gérer les guerres par procuration et les conflits des grandes puissances, entre autres défis globaux et internationaux. Après une réflexion et un examen plus approfondis, l'argument est que ces limites des politiques étrangères réalistes alternatives remettent en question leur capacité à contribuer à l'ordre international au XXI^e siècle et suggèrent, au contraire, que si elles sont poursuivies, elles deviendront plutôt de nouvelles sources de désordre international, même si elles évitent certains des problèmes associés à l'internationalisme libéral.

Keywords: Liberal Hegemony, Realism, Proxy Wars, International Order, Balance of Power,

Palabras clave: Hegemonía liberal, realismo, guerras por delegación, orden internacional, equilibrio de poder,

Mots clés: hégémonie libérale, réalisme, guerres par procuration, ordre international, équilibre des puissances

Introduction

In this review essay, I conduct and work to contribute an assessment of recent realist critiques of liberal hegemony. I find that realists identify some important problems with liberal hegemony, but also find that under scrutiny, the alternative foreign policies that realist critics offer suffer from their own serious limitations. I make the case that realist proposals of “restraint” and “offshore balancing” avoid the problems realists associate with liberal interventionism, but would also be generative of proxy wars, while offering insufficient additional institutions, practices, and norms for mitigating and managing proxy wars and great power conflict among other global and international challenges. From closer examination and consideration, that is, I argue these limitations of alternative realist foreign policies question their ability to contribute to international order in the twenty-first century and suggest, quite the opposite, that if pursued they would instead become new sources of international disorder, albeit while avoiding some of the problems associated with liberal internationalism.

Liberal Hegemony and Its Critics

“Liberal hegemony” was a policy to use the immense power of the United States in the post–Cold War world to globalize a liberal international order, to promote democracy and liberal principles, to build a free and open global liberal economic order, and to expand multilateral international institutions, with the backing of US power (Ikenberry 2001). G. John Ikenberry, the world’s leading scholar of the liberal international order, explains liberal hegemony as, “a distinctive type of liberal international order—a liberal hegemonic order. The United States did not just encourage open and rule-based order. It became the hegemonic organizer and manager of that order” (Ikenberry 2011, 2–3). This liberal hegemonic

order, as such, implied special hegemonic management responsibilities for the United States, as well as privileges (Clark 2011). The decline and disruption of this liberal hegemonic order in recent years has generated enormous debate about the sources and depth of its disruption, as well as controversy about how “liberal” and “orderly” it ever was (Ikenberry 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). In these debates, realist critics have made the case that liberal hegemony itself is the source of much, if not all, of its own challenges and crisis, in what they argue is essentially a realist world (Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018; Porter 2020). Liberal internationalism, realist critics claim, undermines hegemonic power and generates international instability by intensifying security dilemmas with illiberal powers and squandering US power in costly norm-motivated interventions that foment nationalist and anti-American resistance. Realists as such make a deep criticism that liberal hegemony is the source of its own crisis and is inherently self-defeating, so should be abandoned in favor of a thoroughly realist US-led order.

Three recent works articulate these realist criticisms with particular intellectual force. John J. Mearsheimer’s *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (2018) offers a powerful critique of liberal hegemony made in the author’s distinctively trenchant and lucid style. This book’s first three chapters also offer a meditation on political liberalism, in its domestic application, as a political theory. These first three chapters seem not entirely necessary to advance the book’s core argument and stated “goal” to “describe what happens when a powerful state pursues this strategy [of liberal hegemony] at the expense of balance-of-power politics” (Mearsheimer 2018, 1). Mearsheimer’s aim in these early chapters is to scrutinize liberalism itself, in order to consider why it struggles to be exported to other countries without great cost and resistance. He distinguishes a moderate “modus vivendi” tradition of

political liberalism from a more radical and ambitious “progressive” tradition, then posits nationalism and the diversity of political cultures as forces that explain some of the persistent challenges that liberalism encounters when exported. In chapters 6 and 7, the core of Mearsheimer’s argument against liberal hegemony is articulated and advanced, making the case that liberal hegemony precipitates costly liberal norm-motivated interventions and agitates counterbalancing in illiberal powers. His final chapter outlines an alternative realist foreign policy of “restraint.”

Mearsheimer’s argument, in sum, holds that liberal foreign policy during an era of US hegemony has failed to spread democracy or produce international stability because it antagonized the forces of nationalism and realist counter-hegemonic power politics, wherever liberal ambitions have been pursued. Liberal ideals and ambitions, moreover, Mearsheimer argues, have generated norm-based imperatives for military interventions as well as diplomatic tensions and quarrels between liberal democracies and non-democracies. For Mearsheimer, and like-minded realist critics, “The costs of liberal hegemony begin with the endless wars a liberal state ends up fighting to protect human rights and spread liberal democracy around the world” (Mearsheimer 2018, 152). This argument makes a particularly powerful critique because it goes beyond the evidence of the failures of liberal interventions and numerous other challenges of liberal foreign policy, to more crucially and fundamentally argue that the sources of those failures and challenges are found in the impulses of liberal internationalism itself.

Joining this critique is Stephen M. Walt’s *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S.* (2018). This book in comparison focuses more narrowly on the foreign policy record of “liberal hegemony” since the end of the Cold War, offering an immensely detailed, thorough, and thoughtful evaluation. Chapter 1 revisits the foreign policy of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, considering how each pursued iterations of “liberal hegemony.” In Walt’s evaluation, the results of this policy constitute a dismal failure, finding limited success in democracy promotion abroad, after a series of costly interventions, which he argues has only contributed to the worsening of numerous global problems. In chapter 2, he makes the case that this policy of liberal hegemony failed because the “utility of force” was overestimated and that the counterbalancing it generated in Russia and China was underestimated, while the possibility of “social engineering” abroad was also misjudged. The electoral success of Trump, Walt also suggests, can be partly attributed to Trump’s critique of this foreign policy’s failures, and Trump’s promise of a different ap-

proach, although Walt also suggests that when in office, Trump’s inexperienced and confused foreign policy only worsened US foreign policy challenges. Focusing his analysis on liberal hegemony, however, the puzzle for Walt is why liberal hegemony persisted in foreign policy, if it contributed to its own crisis. Why did the three consecutive presidents before Trump pursue this foreign policy, despite its limitations and recurrent setbacks? The idea Walt offers in his remaining chapters is the existence of a sclerotic foreign policy elite, “the blob.” He suggests furthermore that a lack of accountability has been a key factor in the perpetuation of the blob itself, before he concludes the book with a proposal for an alternative realist foreign policy of “offshore balancing.”

Walt’s critique, like Mearsheimer’s, makes a deep criticism of liberal hegemony, that liberal hegemony has failed because it overestimated the effectiveness of interventionism and ability of US power to reshape other states, while it also unintentionally intensified security anxieties and balancing in Russia and China. For Walt, “liberal hegemony rested on a distorted understanding of international politics, which led its proponents to exaggerate its expected benefits and underestimate the resistance the United States would generate while pursuing it” (Walt 2018, 69). The essence of the story that realist critics are conveying here is that liberal internationalist policies have not only struggled to address foreign policy challenges, but that they themselves have generated them as they have encountered the realities of power politics and limits of their ideals in disastrous foreign campaigns and agitation of resurgent illiberal powers. This is a damaging critique because it goes beyond the evident failures of liberal interventionism and limits of democracy promotion in recent decades, placing the sources of these challenges facing liberal hegemony on its own “liberal” character.

Published two years after these books above, Patrick Porter’s *False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion, and the Rise of Trump* (2020) includes similar critiques of liberal hegemony, while also offering caution against the perils of temptations to “restore” a so-called liberal international order. Porter makes the point that it is not entirely accurate and rather misleading to suggest that the US-led order was “liberal”, without including in its history the role of coercive US power in making and enforcing that order. In chapter 2, “Darkness Visible: World-Ordering in Practice,” Porter gathers evidence of the order’s illiberal features, including the use of force in democracy promotion, from Vietnam to the War on Terror, hypocritical claims to special privileges and rule-breaking by the United States, and uneven trade practices that contradict the idea of an open liberal

economic order. This is ample evidence, although somewhat lacking in evidence of the coercion of democracies within the liberal “club.” The reason Porter offers for why it is perilous to attempt to “restore” a liberal order is not that it would require the use of unduly coercive levers, however, but rather that, as Mearsheimer and Walt have also argued, liberal hegemony is a major source of its own crisis. Restoring it would only worsen its crisis, Porter suggests. In chapter 3, Porter argues that the electoral victory of the Trump campaign and several of his key policies were made possible by the failures of liberal internationalist foreign policy. Replacing Trump, with restored liberal internationalism, as Biden has sought to do, Porter argues, only restores the sources of instability that manifest in emergence of Trump in US politics. Porter’s final chapter advances an alternative foreign policy finding a middle ground between isolationism and military overstretch. The strategic aims, Porter (2020, 184) suggests, are for the United States to, “contain a rising China, to divide China and Russia, and to reduce its footprint in the Middle East”. To achieve these aims, Porter (2020, 184) argues, “will require Washington to make bargains with illiberal powers.” Porter is clear furthermore that these bargains will likely require unsavory aspects, as were the bargains made with illiberal powers such as China in the Cold War era.

For Porter, like Mearsheimer and Walt, the key point is that the project of liberal hegemony has been the source of its own crisis, underestimating the security dilemmas it generated with illiberal states, namely Russia and China. The emergence of counter-hegemonic balancing by illiberal powers, Porter argues, is an expected outcome of liberal hegemony in a realist world. According to Porter’s analysis, moreover, the “liberal” hegemonic order was not entirely based on a buy-in logic of liberal international institutions, as liberal theorists have claimed. Rather, Porter suggests it was based more simply on US hegemonic power and ultimately its coercive use in application. For Porter,

Ordering the world requires that others be led, and, if not responsive to coaxing, more forcibly herded... The liberal order proposition, supposed to help develop trust and mitigate the forces of anarchy, underestimates the problem of the security dilemma, the paradox of taking steps to increase security only to heighten insecurity. Even the most well-intended, benign project to order the planet will appear hostile and threatening to rivals and potential adversaries. (Porter 2020, 22)

For Porter, liberal hegemony is a self-contradiction, because of the requirement of applying coercive power

to build and maintain hegemonic order, and because the “liberal” ambitions and demands of that power intensifies security dilemmas, worsening international stability and precipitating counter-hegemonic balancing behavior in Russia and China.

These realist critiques leveled against liberal hegemony hit on important problems, where liberal hegemony has found its limits in world politics, particularly in the limits of democracy promotion, the costly and disillusioning misadventures of liberal interventionism, and in the antagonized security dilemmas between liberal and illiberal powers that it has contributed to. In response to the challenges facing the liberal international order project today, Ikenberry’s *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crisis of Global Order* (2020) offers a magisterial study of the trials of liberal internationalism in international history, from the era of liberal Enlightenment thinking and the Atlantic revolutions to the twenty-first century, searching for lessons for current times. “This book is centrally preoccupied” he explains, “with the historical moments when liberals have lost -and then found- their way” (Ikenberry 2020, xv). Importantly, he suggests, for liberal internationalism to find its way again today, it needs to revive a more pragmatic, agonistic, and less triumphalist form of liberalism. Ikenberry’s argument as such is not so much an engagement or rebuttal of the critics of liberal internationalism (although he offers some counterargumentation), as it is a reconsideration of the liberal internationalist project, through an examination of how it has grappled with modernity in the past and how it might better cope with its challenges today. His style of argument, staunchly defending the values, principles, and ideals of liberal internationalism, but delivered without Kantian universalism, and with a sense of liberalism within history—in such phrases as liberalism’s “anticipations of modernity as a continuously unfolding world-historical drama” (Ikenberry 2020, 65)—gives this text a classic quality that almost fits in alongside the other classics of liberal international thought that it studies and revisits. Ikenberry claims his book “is not written as a battle between ‘realism’ and ‘liberalism’ (Ikenberry 2020, xiii), but he does engage realist critics.” He insists that, “Liberal internationalism, as a project for organizing and reforming international relations, is uniquely able to respond to the perils and opportunities of rising economic and security interdependence” (Ikenberry 2020, 12). This claim can be read to suggest that a purely realist foreign policy may help navigate the balance of power but would do little to manage the other challenges of modernity and would struggle to pick its fruits.

Ikenberry makes his case firstly by revisiting early liberal modernity and its Enlightenment thought. He suggests that liberal internationalism is a collection of principles for ordering and safeguarding liberal democracies, including openness and trade, loosely rules-based institutions, liberal democratic solidarity, cooperative security, and progressive social purposes (Ikenberry 2020, 33–42). He then proceeds to explore how liberal international orders have assembled these elements in different ways, from the nineteenth century, and later Wilsonian and Rooseveltian liberal internationalisms, to the rise of liberal hegemony, which he dates from 1945. He then engages the liberal empire debate against the allegedly inherent imperialism and interventionist impulses of liberal internationalism. To explain liberalism’s history of association with illiberal tendencies, Ikenberry argues,

The most telling critique of liberal internationalism is not its urge for empire or tendency to pursue coercive regime change. It is the opposite: that liberal internationalism is too often weak and easily co-opted by other agendas. (Ikenberry 2020, 254)

For Ikenberry, liberalism is not the source of the problems its critics identify, but rather it is its weakness requiring combination with other forces that has driven liberal internationalism toward imperial tendencies. Because of its weaknesses, liberal internationalism, “needs to tie itself to great powers, capitalist systems, and hegemonic projects,” that produce and manifest the alleged ills of liberalism (Ikenberry 2020, 23–24). His final two chapters address the current crisis and road ahead. He suggests, fairly, that liberal internationalism has always been an evolving and imperfect response to the challenges of modernity. As such, it should not be unexpected for challenges to exist, even in the best of times. And, as it faces today’s challenges, he suggests, liberal internationalism will continue to evolve and adapt, as a global political project. In fairness, liberal internationalism is not without achievements in managing modernity, but it has suffered and perpetuated serious limitations too, as its critics suggest and Ikenberry in places seems to confess or concede. In this respect, at least, liberal internationalism should be given credit for both its successes and failures.

In his study, Ikenberry acknowledges the post–Cold War hegemonic liberal international order has suffered limitations and suggests modifications. He recognizes that free trade has generated destabilizing inequality in developed democracies, while contributing to the rise of an illiberal challenger in China. He recognizes, furthermore, that the rise of authoritarian China has posed a new and serious challenge not only to US hegemony,

but also to liberal modernity, by fielding a new alternative authoritarian-capitalist vision of modernity in world politics. In response, Ikenberry calls for a collection of modifications to the liberal international order project. He suggests that a renewed domestic policy is needed to manage the more severe effects of capitalism at home. Internationally, he suggests that the club of developed democracies should regroup, with US leadership, to protect democracy and liberal principles in international society, while being more careful and cautious when engaging in free trade, searching for ways to better manage its domestic and international effects. The liberal international order project, for Ikenberry, can be corrected, by working to set the developed democracies in order domestically, and by defensively protecting democracies abroad, while striving to maintain and develop a functional global international order in which all powers have a stake.

In practice, the Biden administration has to some extent begun to initiate and implement these kinds of proposed modifications. It has committed to greater domestic investment for instance and sought to carve out a foreign policy to revive and advance strategic cohesion among democracies, while committing to ending the “forever wars.” The depth of realist critiques suggests, however, that any modifications will be unsatisfactory for realists. “There is no such thing as a good liberal hegemony,” the realist critic Stephen Walt has suggested, for instance (Walt 2020). The logic of realist critiques suggests that modifying liberal hegemony as Ikenberry has argued for and the Biden administration has begun to implement, both on the domestic and foreign policy fronts, will do little to address the norm-motivated impulses it generates toward costly interventions, while further exacerbating security tensions between democracies and non-democracies. In particular, Biden’s search for deeper solidarity among democracies will produce greater tensions with illiberal powers, realists will argue. Ikenberry argues interventionist tendencies are not inherent to liberalism, but realist critics make this a key premise of their arguments. Crucially, realist critics also maintain a higher threshold for using US forces in interventions and instead recommend using the forces of US allies and partners more heavily. Realist critics, among others, have maintained that the United States is overly “forward deployed.”¹ This criticism is not entirely persuasive firstly because in practice the Biden administration has committed to withdraw from Afghanistan, and secondly because in principle liberal internationalism does not necessarily

1 For an excellent history of the rise of US military supremacy, see Wertheim (2020).

require US forces to be as “forward deployed” as they have been. This is a strategy sometimes referred to as “divested hegemony,” to describe the strategy of limiting and selectively stationing US force deployment (Kitchen 2020). Liberal internationalism also at least in theory offers means for developing conditions in which reducing the numbers of forward deployed forces would be feasible, by making investments in stabilizing international institutions.

These points of disagreement between liberal internationalists and their realist critics may be at the level of assumptions. There is nevertheless also a sense that in the realists’ frustration with US foreign policymakers, they have laid too much blame for foreign policy challenges on liberal foreign policy elite thinking. Realists critics, Mearsheimer and Walt most persistently, have focused their criticisms on “the blob”, which they claim has captured US foreign policy thinking, and which they argue is the ultimate source of misguided liberal foreign policy. For realists, continuities between the Obama and Biden administrations, even with policy modifications, is evidence for the existence and effects of the “blob.” Yet, the Trump administration sought to make a break from the “blob,” but its policies were in several respects not entirely distinct from previous administrations. This suggests there are other factors shaping continuities, as much if not more than dogmas of foreign policy thinking. Furthermore, although Washington elites may have insider status and interests, they also reside in and arise from a broader liberal society that has produced several generations of liberal foreign policy practitioners and thinkers. The United States itself, moreover, exists within a larger collection of liberal states, where initiative for liberal intervention also has found its sources, with Canada’s advocacy of R2P, for example. Even if liberal foreign policy thinking has dominated US foreign policy elites, there are broader domestic and international factors to explain why, beyond the existence of a “blob.”

This point should be stressed. While the amount of blame that realist critics place on liberal internationalism gives their critiques a quasi-polemical powerful impact, by attacking liberal internationalism root and branch, the amount of blame they place on liberal internationalism is too much to sustain the entirety of their arguments. As reviews of realist arguments elsewhere have noted, although it can be readily accepted that liberal foreign policy orthodoxies surely matter as a source of costly US interventionism, for instance, realist critics underplay how external factors mattered too, including the sheer imbalance of power afforded to the United States in recent decades, and the exogenous shock of 9/11 resulting in the war on terror (Bellamy 2019; Jervis 2020).

International factors such as these suggest realists have placed too much causal weight on the role of liberalism inside the state. Both the sources of US foreign policy and its limits and challenges require a larger explanation involving a number of other crucial factors, both domestic and international. This is not to say that realists have not made un insightful critiques of the flaws and dangers of liberal hegemony, only that they have been unduly focused on liberal internationalism, in their attribution of a wide range of complex problems and challenges.

The Limits of Realist Policy Alternatives

Regardless of any analytical limitations of their critiques, however, the pragmatically more significant shortcoming of realist critiques is their struggle to offer more promising alternative paths to international order. Although realist critics identify important problems with liberal hegemony, what of the alternative international order strategies they offer? Are defenders of a US-led “liberal” international order project right that despite its flaws it is still nevertheless the best international order strategy among bad options, if modifications are made? While the critiques leveled by realists may identify important problems and make some damaging points, the alternative policy proposals they offer suffer from their own serious limitations, when scrutinized. From closer examination and consideration, that is, these limitations of alternative realist foreign policies questions their ability to contribute to international order in the twenty-first century and suggest, quite the opposite, that if pursued they would instead become new sources of international disorder, albeit while avoiding some of the problems associated with liberal internationalism.

Realist critics have offered variations on balance of power foreign policy proposals, suggesting that the deployment and use of US forces should be restricted to only vital US interests, while abandoning ambitions of democratizing other states. Mearsheimer and Walt in particular make cases for “restraint” and “offshore balancing,” meaning a reservation of the use of force to the most serious threats to US power, coupled with a policy to prevent China’s assumption of regional hegemony in Asia (Mearsheimer and Walt 2016). Mearsheimer explains that when following a realist policy of restraint,

there are only a limited number of regions where [the US] should be willing to risk a war. Those places include the great power’s own neighbourhood and distant areas that are either home to another great power or the site of a critically important resource. For the United States, three regions outside the Western Hemisphere are of vital strategic importance

today: Europe and East Asia, because that is where the other great powers are located; and the Persian Gulf, because it is the main source of an exceptionally important resource, oil. (Mearsheimer 2018, 222)

Mearsheimer argues this more strategically “restrained” policy will better manage the balance of power, reduce the amount of wars by eliminating liberal interventionism, and improve great power diplomatic relations by easing liberal antagonism of non-democracies. Walt likewise strongly argues for realist foreign policy of “offshore balancing”, meaning a deployment of US forces only where necessary, while more heavily relying on allies and strategic partners to balance regional challengers and Russia and China. Walt provides a clear description of this policy and its logic, worth quoting at length, to fairly convey its contents:

Under a strategy of offshore balancing, the proper role and size of the U.S. national security establishment depends on the distribution of power in the key regions. If there is no potential hegemon in sight in Europe, Northeast Asia, or the Gulf, there is little reason to deploy U.S. ground or air forces there and little need for a national security establishment that dwarfs those of the major powers.

If a potential hegemon does appear, the United States should turn to local forces as the first line of defense. It should expect them to uphold the regional balance of power out of their own self-interest and to deal with local security challenges themselves. Washington might provide material assistance and pledge to support certain regional powers if they were in danger of being conquered, but it should refrain from deploying significant U.S. forces under most conditions...

In essence, this strategy aims to keep U.S. forces “offshore” for as long as possible while recognizing that sometimes the United States will have to come onshore even before a conflict starts. If that happens, the United States should get its allies in the region to do as much of the heavy lifting as possible and go back offshore once the threat has been defeated. (Walt 2018, 262–63)

The realist foreign policy alternative of “offshore balancing” aims to balance against potential hegemony in overseas regions, but with emphasis on using US allies to invest in that balancing. The benefits of this policy, Walt argues, are partly that it reduces costs by requiring allies to contribute more, but more importantly that it preserves US power by managing its de-

ployment and avoiding costly interventions with US forces.

Compared to a policy of liberal hegemony that has been troubled by costly military interventions, these realist policy alternatives on a superficial reading appear sensible and even peace-loving, because they advocate restricting intervention to a much higher threshold condition of defending vital security interests. Yet, under scrutiny, these realist policy proposals suffer from two key limitations that ultimately question their ability to contribute to international order in the twenty-first century and suggest that if pursued they would instead become new sources of international disorder (McKeil 2021), even if they avoided the problems associated with liberal interventionism. Firstly, and most troubling, is the likelihood that realist policy alternatives would contribute to proxy wars between the great powers in strategic regions. That is, a realist policy of restraint and offshore balancing means less US-led interventionism, but an equal amount and plausibly more proxy wars, where the United States would seek to defend its strategic interests indirectly. In fairness to realist policies, they prudently cede key states neighboring Russia and China, such as Ukraine and Myanmar, thereby avoiding proxy wars in such strategically sensitive territories (Mearsheimer 2014). It is nevertheless concerning, however, that realist proposals for “restraint” and “offshore balancing” do not offer a genuine foreign policy alternative for crises such as Syria, where both the Obama and Trump administrations have already sought to avoid direct intervention, by waging protracted proxy wars with regional consequences and casualties in the hundreds of thousands. The costs and dramatically circumscribed successes of interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as Libya, have already made it an increasingly common-sense belief that direct interventions are infeasible, even misguided, but this has suggested to many that therefore more use of proxies is the only feasible policy option for certain crises. The literature on proxy wars suggests that states engage in proxy wars when their interests are perceived to be threatened, but direct intervention with their own forces is also perceived to be too high-risk or too costly (Groh 2019, 8). Proxy wars are “war on the cheap” and they have the advantage of reducing potential escalation to direct great power conflict and nuclear war at the highest and last stage of escalation. A policy of restraint as such follows the perception that use of US forces in small wars is too costly and too high-risk where great powers may come into direct conflict. Yet, by increasing this threshold for intervention, realist policy alternatives decrease the threshold at which the United States would use strategic partners to wage proxy wars

against assumptive hegemony, or to suppress terrorist groups, or secure vital resources.

Let me unpack these points further. A degree of skepticism is warranted about the extent to which realist policies of restraint and offshore balancing would be conducive to international order, and not a series of protracted proxy wars. As a recent study on proxy wars notes, “If the United States does less, it must rely on others to do more” (Berman and Lake 2019, 3). Inversely, however, if the United States does less, its proxies must also rely on the United States for more support, and when allies and partners engage in conflict for their own interests, for instance, they likely will call for support in terms of kit, including heavy arms, finance, training, and perhaps air support, even while US “boots on the ground” are denied. Where crises emerge and allies and strategic partners become unstable or engaged in a local or regional conflict, a realist-guided US foreign policy would be inclined to support US partners and allies as proxies for US forces. Because the use of US forces would have a higher threshold, but because realists also advise maintaining the material balance of power, a realist-guided US foreign policy would become more easily persuaded to engage in proxy wars. Furthermore, because it is a “cheap” way to balance, the United States could engage a wide number of proxy wars simultaneously, almost indefinitely. This strategic environment would also tempt the United States to trap Russian or Chinese forces in costly protracted wars against US proxies, along the model of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as a strategy to drain the power of China and Russia and limit their ability to engage in other conflicts.

The potential for a wide number of proxy wars could potentially condemn the twenty-first century to the miseries and suffering of a series of protracted proxy wars waged with ever-more sophisticated weapons technology. Proxy wars are an immense source of international disorder because they tend to be protracted, devastating the countries in which they are waged. They are also generative of regional consequences including humanitarian and refugee crises, as well as new military groups operating across borders, whose long-term alignment with the United States is not always ensured. The Syrian civil war, for example, evolved into a proxy war with immense loss of life and consequences for regional stability (Hughes 2014). It involved embedding of US forces in proxy forces against Russian-supported government forces. At the same time, the diminishing presence of the United States in the region and inconsistent US support for key partners has been a critical contributor to the intensity, duration, and regional involvement in the Syrian conflict (Phillips 2020). Real-

ists rightly suggest diplomacy is required to unwind the conflict in Syria, yet, where the United States withdraws its presence, as realist policies advise, proxy wars will tend to continue and emerge without diplomatic breakthroughs, which require years to develop, achieve, and implement.

Realist thinkers foresee as an emerging “bounded order”, divided between China and the United States (Mearsheimer 2019). A bounded order pocketed by a series of proxy wars is not unimaginable and well within the realist vision of the emerging twenty-first century. The conditions of potential nuclear war and the global scope of the struggle made proxy warfare a common ingredient of the Cold War. A realist policy of US restraint and offshore balancing without sufficient additional measures to develop a stable international order likely would contribute to a series of proxy wars between the great powers seeking to support their partners and defend their vital interests through proxy forces in key regions. The fighting itself would invariably differ from that of the Cold War with state and nonstate proxies likely being mixed with use of remote weapons and cyber war, for instance (Innes 2012; Krieg and Rickli 2019). The ideological contest between the great powers will also instead likely become increasingly geo-cultural and geo-civilizational, not simply geostrategic or purely geopolitical (Coker 2019; Acharya 2020). But the conditions of security competition, high risks of direct conflict, lower costs of proxy warfare, and realist proposals for doctrines limiting the use of US forces with little other institutional measures for managing conflict likely would precipitate protracted proxy wars where conflicts emerge. Proxy wars, moreover, are an international activity with virtually no international rules beyond those applying to the conduct of war in general.

This assessment of realist foreign policy proposals suggests that additional policy measures are required for developing a stable international order, to avoid proxy wars where possible and to contain and resolve them when they do emerge, in addition to further global challenges. Realists are not opposed to the use of diplomacy to avoid and manage conflict. To the contrary, they encourage it, but in encouraging the use of diplomacy it is crucial to recognize that diplomacy also requires the support of international institutions and established diplomatic networks. Diplomatic breakthroughs are difficult to achieve, requiring years of skillful and patient negotiations. Diplomacy, moreover, is an inconstant and limited tool without the support of broader international institutions that provide mechanisms of delay, ongoing networks of collaborative great power pressure on belligerent parties, and collaboratively developed processes

and agreed terms of dispute resolution, negotiation, and mediation.

Realist critics of liberal hegemony often suggest policy-fuzzy gestures toward diplomacy and accommodation. Porter for instance argues that the United States should abandon liberal hegemony in favor of détente-style collaboration with illiberal powers in the making of global order (Porter 2020, 170–99). The key strategic proposal Porter advances is to

attempt a settlement with Russia with significant mutual concessions, including sacrificing the interests of non-NATO countries on its eastern flank, in order to ease the growing sense of mutual threat. To facilitate negotiations, the USA should revive government-to-government dialogue to reach a new bargain. (Porter 2020, 187)

This is a strategy to ease pressure on Russia, in the hopes of encouraging tensions between Russia and China, which Porter proposes to combine with a reduction of forces in the Middle East, and a containment strategy against China in Asia, by cultivating regional strategic partners. This proposal in the abstract sounds promising and genuinely contains helpful strategic thought, but does not propose sufficient measures to produce a lasting and stable order, and crucially requires the willingness to collaborate from Russia, which Porter admits is not guaranteed to be forthcoming (Porter 2020, 188). There is surely more needed for the construction of a stable and lasting order between the United States and China than a containment balancing strategy, even if it were successful in dividing Russia from China. Where the first proxy war between the United States and China would emerge can only be speculated. China, like the United States, has the capacity to wage indirect warfare, incentives to avoid direct conflict, and experience from the Cold War.

This as such poses a second limitation of realist policy alternatives; they are insufficiently ambitious in developing new and revised ordering of international institutions and take for granted the role of deeper primary institutions in producing international order (Mearsheimer 1994–1995).² With limited confidence in the use of international institutions, realists struggle to provide a substantive and sufficient strategy for producing international order. Realists do acknowledge the importance of major institutions such as the United Nations or World Trade Organization for providing general

“rules of the road” that clarify expectations among states (Mearsheimer 2018, 131; Walt 2018, 71). Yet, realists offer no suggestions for reforming these institutions for current challenges, nor do they see much promise in developing new institutions, and ultimately claim international institutions are ineffective because they have “no coercive leverage over states” in a context where states in anarchy find themselves in security competition precipitating conflict (Mearsheimer 2018, 131). As Mearsheimer states, “The nub of the dispute between liberals and realists regarding both institutions and economic interdependence has to do with whether they promote world peace. Liberals believe they ameliorate conflict; realists do not” (Mearsheimer 2018, 143). Walt provides a clear explanation of the realist lack of confidence in institutions where he states,

As multilateral organizations such as NATO, the World Bank, or the World Trade Organization have shown repeatedly, international institutions can facilitate cooperation when states have clear and obvious incentives to work together, but they cannot stop powerful states from acting as they wish and thus cannot remove the danger of conflict and war. International institutions are simply a tool that states use to advance their interests, and they inevitably reflect the interests of the most powerful states. (Walt 2018, 71)

Because institutions lack an ability to coerce great powers, realists claim, they have little to no impact on conflict between great powers that arises as a result of security competition.

Because of this lack of realist confidence in institutions, Walt and leading economist Dani Rodrik have instead advanced a global order proposal for constructing a collection of select global “meta-norms” as conflict avoidance and resolution mechanisms at a global level (Rodrik and Walt 2021). This proposal is important and in the right direction, as a needed element of building shared global order, but it is also a thin set of meta-norms, highly modest and limited in their order-making capacities and ambitions. The proposal does not include integrative institutions to formalize and embed meta-norms, nor does it provide inclusive principles to legitimate those meta-norms beyond the imperative to avoid direct great power conflict. Walt and Rodrik, moreover, suggest that their international order proposal exists within an emerging “bounded order” marked by proxy wars, and concede their meta-norms do little to help mitigate or resolve proxy wars, focusing more on avoiding direct great power conflict (Rodrik and Walt 2021, 20).

In modern international history, the international system has developed new institutions through a trial

2 In this discussion, I define international institutions both narrowly as regulative organizations and broadly as bundles of constitutive and patterning rules and norms.

and error process—surely encountering new and unanticipated forms of disorder along the way as well as old ones—but nonetheless in a learning process of gradually broadened and deepened institutions that today realists themselves acknowledge as important. The decline of the liberal hegemonic order project invites new ideas for adapting international organizations and ordering practices. Under closer scrutiny, realist critics of liberal hegemony offer problematic international order proposals, while they nonetheless identify major problems in the liberal hegemonic order project. From closer examination and consideration, that is, these limitations of realist policy alternatives question their ability to contribute to international order in the twenty-first century and suggest, quite the opposite, that if pursued they would instead become new sources of international disorder, while nevertheless avoiding some of the problems associated with liberal internationalism.

Realists may be unpersuaded by this critical assessment of their foreign policy proposals because realists accept as an assumption the picture of international relations as they see it, a world where conflict and war are to be avoided and mitigated but ultimately something to be expected. Conflict and war, as such, for realists emerges in any international order, either as a mechanism of the balance of power or as failure of foreign policy to heed its dictates. Yet, this position reveals the limitations of their assumptions, which explains the limitations of their policy prescriptions. That is, the source of realists' insistence on insufficient disorder generative balance of power-ordering proposals is ultimately found in their limited conception of the balance of power itself. Because realists assume that order is contingent on the balance of power, that is, they have limited appreciation of the role of other ordering rules, norms, and institutions, which limits the ordering proposals of realists to only minimum rules, making them insufficient as international order proposals. This is to say that realist theories of order-making are reductive to the balance of power and are thereby unduly modest, ultimately being limited to the maintenance of the material balance of power and a limited set of rules and norms, to the neglect of various other essential means of order-making. To be clear, different schools of realists hold different conceptions of the balance of power, but they nevertheless commonly hold limited conceptions of it, limiting the range and depth of their ordering proposals. Structural realists, such as Mearsheimer, hold what Randall Schweller has described as a “mechanical” or “automatic” theory of the balance of power, assuming that balancing behavior emerges spontaneously in an anarchic structure (Schweller 2016). Classical realists instead hold a “semi-automatic” theory,

assuming that balancing emerges in conditions of anarchy, but that it includes balancing by states that “hold the balance,” lending their weight to the weaker side to maintain a balance. Regardless of these differences, however, either realist conception restricts the balance of power to material balancing and reduces international order to its operation (Schweller 2001).

By contrast, alternative constructivist and English School approaches for instance hold more comprehensive conceptions of the balance of power, appreciating both its material and social aspects (Clark 2011; Goh 2019). These more comprehensive conceptions of the balance of power, for example, suggest alternative world order strategies that seek negotiated bargains on different and shifting balances of power, and legitimate and institutionalize different distributions of power while establishing shared and stabilizing expectations for its shifts and legitimate use. These more ambitious approaches to the management of the balance of power itself are more policy-demanding, requiring consistent commitment and greater diplomatic investment and effort from multiple actors in policy formation and implementation. Yet, unlike liberal internationalists but similar to realists, alternative constructivist and English School international order strategies also have the advantage of deliberately avoiding and mitigating diplomatic tensions generated by strong democracy and liberal human rights promotion associated with liberal internationalism. Moreover, such alternative international order strategies offered by constructivist and English School approaches may likely become increasingly necessary, if the worst effects of purely realist power politics are to be avoided too, as US power declines.

Conclusion

Liberal internationalists and political realists have long offered prominent contrasting perspectives on how to produce order in international politics. Yet, there is a sense that their strengths derive at least in part from each other's weaknesses and that neither is entirely compelling on its own. Neither liberalism nor realism appears sufficient when examined closely and each has a mixed track record of successes and failures in international history. Today, as the limitations of liberal internationalism have become increasingly apparent, realists have enjoyed a revival, leveling deep criticisms against liberal hegemony, identifying it as the source of its own crisis. Yet, while realist critics identify important problems with liberal hegemony, under scrutiny the alternative foreign policies they offer suffer from their own serious limitations. Realist proposals of “restraint” and “offshore balancing” may

avoid the problems realists associate with liberal interventionism, but would be generative of proxy wars, while offering insufficient additional institutions, practices, and norms for mitigating and managing proxy wars and great power conflict, among other global international challenges. These limitations of realist policy alternatives suggest that if pursued they would not produce a more stable international order, but instead would become new sources of international disorder.

While this assessment of realist critiques of liberal hegemony has concluded that alternative realist proposals suffer their own serious limitations, this assessment has not established what international order strategies states will adopt or what kind of international order will emerge. As suggested in the discussion above, because the Biden administration is developing a foreign policy reviving US-led liberal internationalism, albeit with important modifications at home and abroad, realist critics will likely continue to advance their critiques of liberal internationalism, illuminating some of its limitations in theory and practice. Yet, without offering more promising alternative international order strategies of their own, they will shed little light on the paths to constructing a more inclusive and stable international order in the twenty-first century.

References

- Acharya, Amitav. 2020. "The Myth of the Civilization State: Rising Powers and the Cultural Challenge to World Order." *Ethics & International Affairs* 34 (2): 139–56.
- Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, and Ayse Zarakol. 2021. "Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of Its Discontents." *International Organization* 75 (2): 611–34.
- Bellamy, Alex J. 2019. "Book Review: The Hell of Good Intentions and the Great Delusion." *International Affairs* 95 (5): 1201.
- Berman, Eli and David A. Lake, eds. 2019. *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Clark, Ian. 2011. *Hegemony in International Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coker, Christopher. 2019. *The Rise of the Civilizational State*. London: Polity.
- Cooley, Alexander, and Daniel Nexon. 2020. *Exit from Hegemony: The Unravelling of the American Global Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goh, Evelyn. 2019. "Contesting Hegemonic Order: China in East Asia." *Security Studies* 28 (3): 614–44.
- Groh, Tyrone L. 2019. *Proxy War: The Last Bad Option*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hughes, Geraint Alun. 2014. "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25 (3): 522–38.
- Ikenberry, G. John. 2001. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2011. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2018. "The End of the Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94 (1): 7–23.
- . 2020. *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Innes, Michael A., ed. 2012. *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates & the Use of Force*. Washington, DC: Potomac.
- Jervis, Robert. 2020. "Liberalism, the Blob, and American Foreign Policy: Evidence and Methodology." *Security Studies* 29 (3): 434–56.
- Kitchen, Nicholas. 2020. "Why American Grand Strategy Has Changed: International Constraint, Generational Shift, and the Return of Realism." *Global Affairs* 6 (1): 87–104.
- Krieg, Andreas, and Jean-Marc Rickli. 2019. *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- McKeil, Aaron. 2021. "On the Concept of International Disorder." *International Relations* 35 (2): 197–215.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 1994–1995. "The False Promise of International Institutions." *International Security* 19 (3): 5–49.
- . 2014. "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs* 93 (5): 77–89.
- . 2018. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- . 2019. "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order." *International Security* 43 (4): 7–50.
- Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. 2016. "The Case for Offshore Balancing." *Foreign Affairs* 95 (4): 70–83.
- Phillips, Christopher. 2020. *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East New Edition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Porter, Patrick. 2020. *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Rodrik, Dani, and Stephen Walt. 2021. "How to Construct a New Global Order." HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series. Harvard Kennedy School, 1–36.
- Schweller, Randall L. 2001. "The Problem of International Order Revisited: A Review Essay." *International Security* 26 (1): 161–86.
- . 2016. "The Balance of Power in World Politics." Oxford Research Encyclopedia, 1–20.
- Walt, Stephen M. 2018. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of the U.S.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2020. "There's No Such Thing as Good Liberal Hegemony." Foreign Policy.
- Wertheim, Stephen. 2020. *Tomorrow the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.