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# Webs of World Order

## A Relational Theory of Rising Powers and the Evolution of International Order

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# Webs of World Order

## A Relational Theory of Rising Powers and the Evolution of International Order

THORSTEINN KRISTINSSON
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE | LUND UNIVERSITY

Webs of World Order

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## A Relational Theory of Rising Powers and the Evolution of International Order

Thorsteinn Kristinsson

LUND
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Doctoral dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University to be publicly defended on December 16, 2022, at 10.00 in Edens Hörsal, Department of Political Science, Paradisgatan 5H.

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Webs of World Order: A Relational Theory of Rising Powers and the Evolution of International Order

**Abstract:**

This dissertation advances a relational theory of rising powers and their influence on international order. The emergence of new great powers and the relative decline of incumbent ones is an inherent feature of world politics. In the modern world, these power transitions have taken place against the background of a core-periphery shaped structure of global relations. Great powers vied for dominance while at the same time expanding their reach across the globe, incorporating smaller states into the empires and spheres of influence in a 'hub-and-spoke' manner. Today, however, this core-periphery structure is unravelling. A unique feature of the current power transition is that it takes place against the backdrop of a dense and decentred structure of global relations. This dissertation argues that this transformation in the global structure of relations has profound implications for the nature of great power competition, as well as the nature and evolution of international order. To grasp those implications, this dissertation advances a relational theory of international order.

Article 1 provides the basis. It argues that the global structure of relations should be posited as the 'subject' of international order. The reach of international order is thus neither ubiquitous nor self-evident, but follows the dynamic structure of global relations between states over time. Today, the subject of international order is growing beyond the reach of the old liberal order.

Article 2 assesses the state of the Liberal International Order in East Asia. Its core argument is that we need to theorise international order independently of the power and preferences of hegemonic states such as the US. International order is thus construed as a supranational political construct. Despite relative US decline, it finds strong support for the liberal order in East Asia.

Article 3 discusses the influence of relational structures on the nature of great power competition. It argues that the dense and decentred structure that is emerging reduces the incentives for aggressive great power competition compared to the previous core-periphery structure. It also argues that this decentred structure gives rising powers more 'space' for international building without impinging on the home turf of existing powers.

**Key words:** Rising powers, international order, relational IR, great power competition

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# Webs of World Order

## A Relational Theory of Rising Powers and the Evolution of International Order

Thorsteinn Kristinsson

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*To my parents*

# Acknowledgements

Writing a PhD takes an eternity at the best of times. In my case, it took a bit longer still. It's also a journey through which I've accumulated many debts – intellectual ones and otherwise. Now, as I'm standing near the end of this road, I look back with gratitude at the many people who have helped me along the way.

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Apart from my supervisors, many people have given me valuable feedback along way. I especially want to thank Magdalena Bexell and Ian Manners for serving as green readers for my manuscript. Their detailed and constructuve feedback helped me improve the dissertation during the final stages. I also want to thank Agustín Goenaga, Hyeyoon Park and Mathieu Mignot who, together with Magdalena and Ian, gave me valuable comments at my manuscript conference. Jan Teorell and Sindre Gade Viksand I thank for their comments at my mid-seminar, as well as Anders Uhlin and Johannes Lindvall for helpful advice at different stages. I owe similar gratitude to colleagues I met at ISA Asia-Pacific in Singapore in 2019, as well as fellow participants at various conferences in Taipei, Doha, Malmö and Reykjavík.

The Department of Political Science has not only been an intellectually stimulating environment, it has also been the source of cherished friendships during the last six years. As older PhD students, Helena Lindberg Gonzales, Ina Möller, Klas Nilsson, Linda Alamaa, Jenny Lorentzen and Elsa Hedling made me and my cohort feel welcome at the department when we arrived, and gave us good advice on how to navigate this strange new role. But more importantly, they taught us the value of cultivating a tight-knit and supportive community of fellow PhD students, in what is otherwise often a solitary journey.

As the years went on, and new cohorts arrived, the roles were gradually reversed. I've long since stopped counting the number of generations that have started their studies after me, and I can't testify to the quality of advice we gave them. But each new generation brought with them a fresh wind of hope and optimism, reminding us of why we embarked on this madness in the first place. My years as a PhD student would have been a lot less enjoyable if it wasn't for Jana Wrange, Katren Rogers, Sindre Gade Viksand, Daniel Gustafsson, Georgia de Leeuw and Caroline Karlsson to name a few.

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I owe thanks to my family for just about everything. My parents, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, have supported me in all possible ways through this process. When I started university in my early twenties, my father would patiently read through my papers and provide me with constructive feedback. Little did he know then, that I would still be sending him papers to read more than a decade later. To my mother and my brother, Sverrir, thank you for all the love and support.

Lastly, but most important of all, I want to thank my partner, Janice Huang. You became part of this journey half way through, but once you did, nothing was ever the same again. One day I might forget why I decided to embark a PhD; and in some ways, I think I already have. But I'll always remember that I finished it thanks to you. Thank you for all your patience, support, and love through the years. I could not have done it without you.

Stenni

November 2022
Lund

# List of Articles with Abstracts

**Article 1:** The Structure of Global Relations: Towards a Subject of International Order

Theories of international order are back at the centre of International Relations debates. In this paper, I argue that theories of international order can benefit from paying explicit attention to the subject of international order – i.e. the phenomenon being 'ordered'. This subject, I claim, is the global structure of relations between states. This structure is nowhere close to its theoretical potential of more than 18 thousand dyads, nor is it static over time. The subject of international order is thus neither ubiquitous nor self-evident, but consists of a dynamic web of global relations. Crucially, this relational structure is currently undergoing a transformation from a long-standing core-periphery shape to a denser and more decentred structure. This perspective provides new ways to understand current developments of the prevailing international order, in particular the rise of new non-Western powers. It shows that the rise of these states has been accompanied by a growth of the global structure of relations beyond the reach of the old liberal order. Instead of framing them purely as revisionists and/or status quo powers vis-à-vis the existing order, this perspective suggests that the rising powers are engaged in international order building on the frontiers of an expanding subject of international order.

Unpublished manuscript

**Article 2:** Networks of Order in East Asia: Beyond Hegemonic Theories of the Liberal International Order

China's rise is widely regarded as constituting a challenge to the Liberal International Order built in the aftermath of WWII and expanded after the end of the Cold War. This paper assesses the state of the liberal order as it is manifested in East Asia's regional order today. It presents two main arguments. Empirically, by analysing international trade in the region over the last four decades, I find that China has already assumed a central position in the region's trade structure. China's economic ascent is also increasingly evident in the

region's institutional architecture. Theoretically, I propose an 'autonomous conception of international order' as a theoretical framework through which to understand these developments. In contrast to much of the existing literature, this approach theorises the liberal order independently of US hegemony. By doing so, it (a) makes a distinction between China's geopolitical ambitions and its supposed revisionism of the rules and norms of the liberal order; (b) posits the liberal order as an independent factor in the strategic environment of smaller- and medium-sized states in the region; and (c) elucidates the increasingly ambivalent policies of the US towards the liberal order. Viewed through this frame- work, I argue that China's rise challenges US's regional hegemony, but has, so far, not resulted in revisions to the rules-based, liberal order.

Published in *International Politics*, 2021

**Article 3:** Entangled Transitions: Great Power Competition and the Global Structure of Relations

The global structure of relations is transforming from a long-standing core-periphery structure into a denser and more decentred structure. This transformation, I argue, has important implications for the dynamics of great power competition. The implications are twofold. Firstly, in a core-periphery shaped relational structure, great powers enjoy relative exclusivity in their relations with smaller states and colonial dominions, allowing them to reap large 'monopoly rents' from these relationships. These benefits, in turn, create strong incentives for them to compete with other great powers to establish networks of such relations and fence them off from rivals. As the structure of global relations grows denser and more decentred, by contrast, such exclusivity (and the accompanying rents) are replaced by more equitable relations between great power and smaller states. This, in turn, reduces incentives for great powers competition. Secondly, the emergence of a denser and more decentred structure of global relations is effectively expanding the 'arena' in which great power competition unfolds. With an increasingly dense web of South-South relations, today's rising powers can focus their energies, and grow their influence, in these parts of the relational structure – thus avoiding the incumbent great powers on their home turf. This reduces friction compared to earlier eras, when great powers competed in a tightly clustered core-periphery shape web of global relations.

Unpublished manuscript

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AIIB | Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank |
| ADB | Asian Development Bank |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| BRI | Belt and Road Initiative |
| BRICS | Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa |
| CENTO | Central Treaty Organization |
| DOTS | Direction of Trade Statistics |
| EU | European Union |
| GDP | Gross domestic product |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| IR | International Relations (academic discipline) |
| LIO | Liberal International Order |
| MERCOSUR | Southern Common Market |
| NAM | Non-Aligned Movement |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organization |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| NIEO | New International Economic Order |
| NDB | New Development Bank |
| RCEP | Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership |
| SEATO | Southeast Asia Treaty Organization |
| TPP | Trans-Pacific Partnership |
| US | United States |

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# 1 Introduction

In January 2017, on the eve of Donald Trump's inauguration as US president, his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, flew to Switzerland to address the World Economic Forum in Davos. In his speech, Xi emphasized China's steadfast support for continued globalization, driven by an open and liberal world economy. In contrast to the populist nationalism that was sweeping through the West – pulling Britain out of the European Union and catapulting Trump to the White House – Xi presented China as a stable and responsible stakeholder, ready to take the wheel and uphold order in turbulent times.

The irony of the situation did not go unnoticed. While the US president – the supposed leader of the free world – was busy erecting tariffs and tearing up trade agreements, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party was reassuring business elites in Davos, offering a safe pair of hands to steer liberal globalization. In the Financial Times, Amitav Acharya suggested that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the emerging powers might end up becoming the "saviours of the global liberal order".[1] G. John Ikenberry, in markedly more sombre mood, wrote that America's Liberal International Order was in mortal peril, not from outside challengers, but from potential suicide.[2]

For International Relations theorists the situation presented an enigma.[3] From at least the writings of Robert Gilpin and onwards, theories of international

[1] Amitav Acharya, 'Emerging Powers Can Be Saviours of the Global Liberal Order', *Financial Times*, January 2017, https://on.ft.com/3ovN86p.

[2] G. John Ikenberry, 'The Plot against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?', *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017): 1.

[3] International Relations (capitalised) refers to the academic discipline, abbreviated IR. International relations, by contrast, refers to the subject under study.

order had the inbuilt assumption that the rules and norms of international orders served the interests and values of its leading state. Indeed, that's why international orders were created in the first place.[4] Threats to international orders should come from great power challengers, not from internal sabotage. But here we seemingly had the opposite. China, and other emerging economies, had thrived within and embraced key elements of the liberal order. Within the US and its allies in the West, however, there was an increasing ambivalence towards the liberal order they had created, fuelled by growing discontent with the disruptive effects of economic globalization. Indeed, for populist leaders like Trump, the liberal order amounted to little more than a collection of bad deals that the US needed to extract itself from.[5]

What ensued was an intense and often confusing debate about the status and future prospects of the liberal order. The discussion was not restricted to academia. It took place amongst politicians and policy-makers, as well as columnists and pundits. The liberal order was variously pronounced dead,[6] said to be "resilient",[7] or to have always been a "myth" in the first place.[8] Everyone, it seemed, had something to say about the liberal order. But few of them seemed to agree what the liberal order was.

While the shock waves of the arrival of the Trump presidency were still reverberating through the US network of alliances of trade partners, China spared no time in picking up the pieces. It had recently launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with the participation of major economies in the region and beyond, as well as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a globe-spanning infrastructure development plan centred on the Eurasian connectivity. Together

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[4] David Rapkin and William Thompson, 'Power Transition, Challenge and the (Re)Emergence of China', *International Interactions* 29, no. 4 (October 2003): 317.

[5] Doug Stokes, 'Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order', *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 133–150.

[6] Richard Haass, 'Liberal World Order, R.I.P.', *Project Syndicate*, March 2018, https://www.cfr.org/article/liberal-world-order-rip.

[7] Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal World: The Resilient Order', *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 4 (2018): 16–24.

[8] Graham Allison, 'The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom', *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 4 (August 2018): 124–133.

with the other BRICS countries,[9] it had launched the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, alternative institutions to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund respectively. And when Trump withdrew the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, China and other states in Asia redoubled their efforts to conclude negotiations on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership – a rival trade agreement which was eventually signed in 2020, becoming the world's largest free trade agreement by GDP.[10]

China and other rising powers, in other words, are now willing and able to play an important role in shaping the prevailing international order. There is little agreement amongst IR scholars, however, on how best to characterise this development. Was China challenging the Liberal International Order, and seeking to supplant it with a different, perhaps China-centred, world order? Or are China and other rising powers relatively content with the liberal order, and merely seeking more power, influence, and status within it? Alternatively, are we seeing the emergence of multiple international orders?[11] As we shall see, the answer to that question is theoretical as much as empirical, and boils down to how we conceptualise international orders. Amongst other things, it hinges on whether we define the existing distribution of power as an inherent feature of the prevailing international order, or whether international orders are a more autonomous phenomenon that can survive despite a transition of power between the stakeholders that underpin them. It also depends on how encompassing our conception of international orders is in terms of their scope, content, and

[9] BRICS is an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. On the BRICS, see for example Oliver Stuenkel, *The BRICS and the Future of Global Order* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

[10] The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was an ambitious trade agreement straddling the Pacific, which had formed a central part of the Obama administration's strategy to shore up US influence in the Asia-Pacific. See, Trine Flockhart, 'Order through Partnerships: Sustaining Liberal Order in a Post-Western World', in *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World* (Transatlantic Academy, 2014), 145–147; Matteo Dian, 'The Strategic Value of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Consequences of Abandoning It for the US Role in Asia', *International Politics* 54, no. 5 (2017): 583–597. GDP stands for gross domestic product.

[11] Trine Flockhart, 'The Coming Multi-Order World', *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 1 (January 2016): 3–30.

purpose. It depends on what it is, exactly, that international orders bring order to. As Mazarr et al point out, there is a striking lack of clarity on conceptual issues such as these in the literature on international order.[12] And implicit differences in how such issues are approached, in turn, often lurk behind the disagreements about the status and future prospects of the liberal order.

But such conceptual ambiguity is not the only problem. In this dissertation I also argue that existing frameworks are ill-equipped to account for what is, perhaps, the most consequential contemporary global development: The explosive growth in South-South relations. The emergence of China and other rising powers as important shapers of the prevailing international order is based on more than filling the void left by the relative retreat of US leadership. Equally important, I argue, is the rapidly expanding web of political and economic relations that rising powers are weaving throughout other parts of the global South.

In decades prior, China's economy had grown at a staggering pace, becoming the centre of gravity for the Asia's regional economy and, increasingly beyond the region as well. China is today the world's largest trading power by a considerable margin, and is also the largest source of development financing. Although China's weight is in a league of its own amongst the rising powers, a fast-growing India is already a political and economic heavyweight with a globe-spanning network of relations. Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, meanwhile, are, at the very least, crucial players within their respective regions, and increasingly beyond them as well. Whether it's in Asia, Africa, Europe or the Americas, these rising powers are now a formidable political and economic presence, competing with the long-standing influence of the West. The aggregate result is that most countries are now managing a much more diverse portfolio of important international relationships.

The positions of China and other rising powers at the helm of a new collection of international institutions and agreements are thus mirrored by their positions at the centre of a dense web of relationships for those institutions and agreements to govern. Putting this in the language of relationalism, rising powers

[12] Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 17.

have come to occupy an increasingly prominent position in the global structure of relations.

This marks an important change. The US and its Western allies had long sat at the centre of the global structure of relations, a position that reflected the core-periphery shaped structure that took hold during colonial times. This structure persisted throughout most of the 20th century, lending significant structural power to US and its allies. Today, however, this structure is unravelling, as rising powers from the global South make themselves felt in around the developing world, weaving an increasingly dense web of South-South relations. The emerging global structure of relations is both denser and at the same time more 'decentred'.

In this dissertation, I argue that the contemporary transformation of the global structure of relations has important implications for the prevailing international order and the nature of great power relations. These implications are insufficiently understood, however, because they are not captured by existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks of international order. While the ongoing transition of power is at the heart of the contemporary literature on rising powers and international order, the accompanying transformation of the global structure of relations has fallen to the wayside. The global structure of relations thus represents a crucial blind spot in existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks of international order.

I argue, however, that the global structure of relations is intimately connected to international order and that they both need to be studied in tandem. If international order is comprised of global rules, norms and institutions, then the global structure of relations is the collection of relationships to which the forces of international order present themselves. When China and other states in East Asia sign a free trade agreement, they are shaping the prevailing international order. But they are only able to do so, because there is a dense web of trade relations between those countries that the agreement will cover. Signing the same agreement fifty years ago, when those relations where sparse, would have been an empty gesture. The key point here is that while the forces of international order are irreducibly abstract in nature, the collection of relationships that those forces govern is not. This collection of international relationships – the 'global structure

of relations' – is thus the *subject* of international order.[13] And crucially, the global structure of relations is today undergoing a rapid transformation.

What I offer in this dissertation is a theoretical and conceptual framework of international order, that foregrounds the global structure of relations and how it evolves over time. This framework builds on existing frameworks of international order, but reconfigures them from a relational approach. Employing a relational approach is the key here, because without it, the transformation of the global structure of relations would remain invisible.

In contrast to the most of the existing literature, I argue that the most important developments concerning the current international order are not to be found at the high table of great power politics, but in the quieter expansion of rising powers across other regions of the global South. Instead of just focusing on the rising and incumbent great powers themselves, we should be looking more closely at the institutions and ordering principles that are being put in place to manage the proliferation of new relationships that tie the rising powers to other regions of the developing world.

Importantly, these are to a large extent new sets of relationships; in material terms, they hardly existed before. The leaders of the Third World movement that grew out of the 1955 Bandung Conference had long dreamt of re-orienting global relations along South-South lines, to lessen their structural dependence on the North.[14] In the postwar decades, however, South-South relations remained mainly an ideological aspiration, with limited success in practice. Centuries of imperialism had left a deep mark on the world economy, and its relational structures could not be replaced overnight. During the last two decades, however, this has finally started to change. A growing group of emerging economies are

[13] The term 'subject' carries various connotations in the social sciences depending on context and theoretical framework. In this thesis, I use the term in the same way as 'subject matter'. When I say that relations are the 'subject' of international order, I mean that relations are subject to the forces of international order; they are the subject matter on which those forces present themselves.

[14] In this thesis, I generally use the more common contemporary term 'global South' rather than 'Third World', except when discussing the Third World movement during the Cold War. For an overview of these concepts see: Sebastian Haug, Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner, and Günther Maihold, 'The "Global South" in the Study of World Politics: Examining a Meta Category', *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 9 (September 2021): 1923–1944.

weaving an increasingly dense web of economic, political and social relations amongst themselves and more generally throughout regions of the global South. Processes of regionalism have further added to this development. Ironically, as the ideological fervour of the Third World movement is fading into history, the material reality of South-South relations is finally being built at record speed. Since these are to a large extent new sets of relationships, they effectively represent a new international 'space' to be governed. The ways in which rising powers and their partners are constructing order in these new spaces should therefore be of key concern to theories of international order.

I thus conceive of the global structure of relations as the metaphorical ground on which international order is built. As the global structure of relations today is growing larger and denser, there is a lot more ground to cover. The contemporary proliferation of new institutions and agreements led by rising powers, is in important respects a way of covering this new ground. How well these institutions fit into (or are at odds with) the prevailing liberal order remains to be seen. We should, however, avoid hasty assumptions about these institutions and agreements constituting a revisionist challenge to the prevailing order.

The proliferation of these South-South relationships is not only expanding the global structure of relations which needs to be covered; they are also, I argue, remaking the terms on which smaller countries in the developing world relate to the established great powers in the North. With an expanded set of great power partners to engage with, states in the global South today enjoy an improved bargaining position in their foreign relations. This improved bargaining position is most pronounced in the economic sphere, but it also spills over into the political and security domain, where erstwhile Western leverage is crumbling under the weight of a more competitive geopolitical environment. This structural transformation, I argue, also has important implications for the nature of great power competition.

## 1.1 Rising Powers and International Order – Aim and Approach

This dissertation is about rising powers and international order. My approach is primarily theoretical and conceptual. The aim is to improve upon existing theoretical frameworks of international order, making them better at explaining the implications of today's rising powers for the prevailing international order and the nature of great power relations. I do this by reconceptualising the concept of international order from a relational perspective.

Before explaining my theoretical approach, it is useful to briefly outline the empirical premise. I start from two main observations. Firstly, there is now widespread agreement in the literature that a significant transition has taken place in the global distribution of power over the last two decades.[15] The unipolar moment has come and gone, and non-Western rising powers are gaining in influence relative to the United States and its allies.[16] This, of course, is why there is a burgeoning literature on 'rising powers' in the first place. In important respects, this transition simply reflects that populous countries in the global South such as China and India are narrowing the gap between themselves and the Western world in terms of economic development. But it's not just about globe-reaching behemoths like China and India. Large parts of the developing world have grown at a faster pace than the Western world. While not all of these countries are large and powerful, the aggregate result of their rise is a larger political and economic pie of which the West is a smaller part than it used to be.[17]

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[15] Christopher Layne, 'The US–Chinese Power Shift and the End of the Pax Americana', *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 89–111.

[16] Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge Malden, MA: Polity, 2014), 13; Trine Flockhart and Li Xing, 'Riding the Tiger: China's Rise and the Liberal World Order', DIIS Policy Brief (Danish Institute for International Studies, 2010), 2.

[17] Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: Release 2.0* (New York: W.W. Norton., 2011); Charles Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (Portfolio Penguin, 2012).

As the long period of Western dominance subsides, we are increasingly living in a "post-western world".[18]

Secondly, and partly as a result of this power transition, the global structure of relations is transforming. The global structure of relations has long taken the form of a core-periphery structure, where countries in the global North sat at the centre of the world's political and economic relations. This structure came into being during colonial times but persisted to a large extent throughout most of the 20th century. Today, however, this structure is transforming.[19] As non-Western powers have risen in recent decades, they have spun an increasingly dense web of South-South relations that previously did not exist. The growing importance of regionalism in the developing world is similarly adding to this development. Together, these processes are transforming the global structure of relations into a denser and more decentred structure.

These two developments can be summarised as 1) a transition in the global distribution of power; and 2) a transformation of the global structure of relations. While these two developments are related, they are not one and the same. The first one is mainly a 'unit level' observation, whereas the second one is a 'relational' observation. The existing literature on the rising powers and the prevailing international order is mainly focused on the first observation – the power transition –paying little attention to the transformation of the global structure of relations.

In this dissertation, however, the global structure of relations is at the centre of analysis. I argue that a key to understanding the dynamics of the contemporary power transition and their implications for the prevailing international order, is to look at the transformation of the global structure of relations that has accompanied it. I argue that this transformation has important implications for the prevailing international order as well as the nature of great power relations.

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[18] Trine Flockhart et al., 'Liberal Order in a Post-Western World', Other (Washington D.C., USA: Transatlantic Academy, April 2014), https://kar.kent.ac.uk/54483/.Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

[19] Naazneen Barma et al., 'A World Without the West? Empirical Patterns and Theoretical Implications', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 4 (December 2009): 577–596.

It should be emphasized that the transformation of the global structure of relations is only visible from a relational perspective. Despite the name of the discipline, many existing theoretical frameworks in IR do not put relations at the centre of analysis. Instead, their focus is on actors (e.g. states) and how changes in unit level attributes affect the systems level. They thus side-step the relational level, and are subsequently unable to see how the structure of relations between actors changes over time. The aim of this dissertation is to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework that puts the structure of relations at the centre of analysis, and to explain why and how this is important.

With some simplification, this dissertation can be said to revolve around two empirical observations and two theoretical concepts that sit at the heart of my theorising.

- Empirics:
    - The global distribution of power (which is undergoing a transition)
    - The global structure of relations (which is being transformed)
- Theoretical concepts:
    - International order (whose fate is being debated)
    - Great power competition (whose nature I argue is changing)

The three articles in this dissertation all revolve around these four categories in one way or another.

My approach is mainly theoretical and conceptual. The empirical developments I describe are largely, but not exclusively, drawn from secondary literature. These macro developments – a transition in the relative distribution of power and a change in the global structure of relations – are widely documented and generally accepted. What I aim to add, however, is a theoretical and conceptual framework that explains how these developments fit together. In particular, the aim is to explain how the transformation of the global structure of relations is influencing the prevailing international order and the nature of great power competition. To understand these dynamics, we need to adopt a relational approach. This is the main novelty of what I aim to offer: A relational approach to the study of international order and great power competition.

## 1.2 Main Contributions

The main contributions of this dissertation are theoretical and conceptual. These contributions can be distilled into three separate but interrelated arguments. Each of them gets their fullest elaboration in one of three articles respectively, which, together with this kappa, make up this dissertation. Taken together, they are meant to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework to analyse the ongoing power transition and its implications for the prevailing international order and the nature of great power competition.

**Contribution 1:** A relational theory of international order

Firstly, article 1 offers a relational approach to international order. As mentioned in the introduction, the global structure of relations is today undergoing a significant transformation as it changes from a core-periphery shaped structure to a denser and more decentred structure. In the existing literature on international order, however, there is limited engagement with this development and its implications. In article 1, I offer a theoretical framework that incorporates the global structure of relations and explain why this is important.

I do this by positing the global structure of relations as the subject of international order. While many existing approaches have implicitly (or explicitly) posited relations as the subject of international order, they have not appreciated the full implications of this. Rather than being all-encompassing by definition, the overall subject of international order is the collection of relationships that exists at any given time. And the global structure of relations is neither static nor self-evident, but transforms over time as new relationships are created and others are terminated. This is why the contemporary growth of South-South relations is so important. The long-standing liberal order regulated global relations in a world that was characterised by a core-periphery shaped structure of global relations. In the first two decades of the 21st century, however, the rapid growth of South-South relations has effectively expanded the subject of international order beyond the reach of the old liberal order.

**Contribution 2:** Theorising international order as a dynamic political construct

Secondly, I offer a conception of international order that is analytically separate from the distribution of power in the international system. While most of the existing literature remains ambiguous on this issue, I demonstrate the advantages of theorising international order as a contested and dynamic political construct that is influenced by – but separate from – the distribution of power that underpins it.

This means that conceptually, the Liberal International Order needs to be fully divorced from US hegemony. This provides us with more nuanced tools to assess the preferences of rising powers such as China vis-à-vis the liberal order, as well as a potential way out of the paradox of hegemonic self-sabotage of the prevailing order. International order, thus conceived, is a dynamic political construct, one that is constantly being pushed and pulled in different directions as states try to mould it in ways that best serve their interests. Power is thus not irrelevant, but is instead posited as an exogenous variable – one that states use to construct, preserve, or attempt to change the prevailing order. This also points towards the possibility of evolutionary change to international orders, rather than a strictly cyclical vision. This argument is laid out theoretically in article 2 and parts of article 1. Furthermore, article 2 employs this theoretical approach to assess the state of the liberal order in East Asia, finding that the liberal order is in relatively good shape, despite the ongoing transition of power in the region.

**Contribution 3:** A relational approach to great power competition

Thirdly, and building on the first point, article 3 offers a relational approach to great power competition. I argue that the aforementioned transformation of the global structure of relations has important implications for the nature of great power competition in two separate ways.

Firstly, as the global structure of relations expands beyond the confines of the old liberal order (per article 1), it has effectively enlarged the 'arena' in which great powers compete in shaping and building international order. This, I argue, provides rising (and declining) powers with more space to adapt to the ongoing power transition, and thereby mitigates conflict. Secondly, I argue that the ongoing transformation from a core-periphery structure of global relations to a

more decentred structure is evening out the bargaining positions between great powers on the one hand, and smaller and weaker states on the other. This reduces the 'monopoly rents' that great powers can reap through such relations, and thus reduce their incentive for engaging in intense competition over those relationships in the first place. Both of these dynamics, I argue, thus mitigate the intensity of great power rivalry, and offer some hope that the ongoing power transition will be peaceful.

## 1.3 Theoretical Positioning and Limitations

The articles in this dissertation belong to the literature on rising powers and international order. This literature has grown rapidly in recent years, especially after the global financial crisis of 2008, when it became widely accepted that a transition was taking place in the global distribution of power. China and other non-Western rising powers, it was agreed, were growing in influence relative to the US and its Western allies.

A central concern of this literature is what this power transition entails for the prevailing international order, which is typically construed as a US-led Liberal International Order. Most famously theorised by G. John Ikenberry, the Liberal International Order is portrayed as an open, multilateral, and rules-based system, constructed under US leadership after World War II. It was at first not a fully global order, but became so once the Cold War ended, leaving the US uncontested amongst the great powers. The Liberal International Order, in this literature, is thus closely tied to US hegemony.

The literature on the Liberal International Order comprises a mixture of liberal IR theory, hegemonic stability theory, and classical realism. In fact, debates on the Liberal International Order often reflect the different weight scholars assign to these theoretical inputs. Although this literature has grown rapidly in recent years, it remains rather US-centric. This is true both in terms of the scholars who contribute to this literature, most of whom are US academic or at least based at US universities, and in terms of its empirical focus. Indeed, as will be discussed in later sections, a great deal of this literature effectively conflates the liberal order

with US hegemony, and is concerned with the liberal order only insofar as it concerns US global power.

In the articles in this dissertation, I build on and engage with the debates in the Liberal International Order literature. However, I also challenge certain arguments and aspects of this literature, especially its US-centrism. Indeed, one of my key arguments is that we need to divorce US hegemony from our conception of the liberal order. Nevertheless, my work shares many (but not all) of the core assumptions of this literature and belongs in that genre. My theoretical viewpoint can be said to include a similar sort of eclectic mixture of liberal IR theory and the basic tenets of classical realism.

In particular, my viewpoint shares a similar state-centrism as the aforementioned literature. Although it draws on elements of liberal IR theory, it keeps with realism in viewing states as the primary actors in world politics. In contrast to some other strands of liberal IR theory, there is little focus on non-state actors such as NGOs and social movements. Economic actors, on the other hand, from companies to individuals, are implicitly present in the argumentation, in the sense that their individual economic decisions coalesce to form the global economic relations that I analyse. These actors remain implicit, however; a formal treatment of them falls outside the scope of this project. International institutions, by contrast, receive a bit more attention, since they play a crucial role in my conception of international order. This, of course, mirrors their treatment in the existing literature on the liberal order. Nevertheless, here they are largely construed as derivative of the states that create them, albeit ones that leave a certain path dependency in their wake. International institutions, in other words, are construed as the crystallisation of interstate bargains, but ones that can take on a life of their own that can endure beyond the conditions in which they were created. My conception of order, thus goes beyond a strictly state-centric view of world politics, by theorising international order as a supranational political construct above the states themselves. The creators and shapers of international order, however, remain states.

Furthermore, when it comes to the global structure of relations, which I conceive as the subject of international order, these relations are viewed through a state-centric framework, i.e. as a web of relations between states. When I argue that the global structure of relations is changing from a core-periphery structure

to a denser and more decentred structure, I am making that argument about relational structures at the inter-state level. This state-centric focus adopted here inevitably carries its limitations, and leaves out elements that others might want to highlight. When analysing contemporary changes in the global economy, for example, some scholars would choose to pry open the black box of the state and place individual economic sectors, corporations, or classes at the centre of analysis. While I subscribe to a relatively state-centric view of world politics, I also concede that other actors at times play important roles. Their exclusion from my framework is indicative of the more general limitations inherent in macro theorising of this kind. The arguments I present are pitched at a high level of abstraction, and my arguments are painted with broad brushes. Despite the inevitable simplifications and omissions that my approach entails, I believe those limitations do not fatally undermine the core of my arguments. I can only hope the reader will agree.

The literature on international order shares notable overlaps with the global governance literature. This is particularly true of the literature on contemporary rising powers, which often straddles this divide: The rising powers are variously framed as shapers of the prevailing international order and/or as increasingly important actors in existing frameworks of global governance respectively.[20] With some degree of simplification, one can say that the international order literature leans more towards the geopolitical aspects of these processes, whereas the global governance literature is more focused on the technical and normative aspects of global steering through new and old international institutions and regimes.[21] The global governance framework, furthermore, is more sensitive to role of non-state actors. I see these two literatures as somewhat different lenses through which to analyse closely related processes. Although I frame my work in the international

[20] The work of Acharya is instructive in this regard, where he moves seamlessly between 'world order'/'international order' and 'global governance' in discussing the current power transition. Acharya, *The End of American World Order*; See also: Miles Kahler, 'Rising Powers and Global Governance: Negotiating Change in a Resilient Status Quo', *International Affairs* 89, no. 3 (May 2013): 711–729; Miles Kahler, 'Global Governance: Three Futures', *International Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (June 2018): 239–246.

[21] For a very different view on the relationship between these two concepts, see: Arie M. Kacowicz, 'Global Governance, International Order, and World Order', in *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*, ed. David Levi-Faur (Oxford University Press, 2012).

order literature, I do not see these as mutually exclusive bodies of work, and draw on authors from both sides.

Another aspect of my theoretical positioning that is worth highlighting is relationalism. This marks a certain break with a great deal of the existing literature on the liberal order. Indeed, as discussed above, one of the dissertation's main contributions is to advance a relational approach to international order, that posits the global structure of relations as the subject of international order. While relationalism is often portrayed as theoretical approach, it is not an 'ism' in the same way as Realism or Liberalism, in the sense that it does not provide "substantive wagers about the causal factors that provide the most explanatory leverage."[22] Instead, as Nexon and Jackson argue, "relationalism constitutes a family of theories united by an emphasis on the theoretical and analytical significance of connections, ties, transactions and other kinds of relations among entities."[23] The relational approach adopted here should therefore not be understood as a theoretical school to be contrasted with Liberalism or Realism. Instead, it should be seen as an epistemological disposition that emphasises the importance of relations, without necessarily contravening the main tenets of the theories listed above.[24]

Lastly, it is worth noting that international order is also a key concept in the English School theory. As Trine Flockhart points out, however, in the English School vocabulary, "international order" sits alongside "international society" and the "international system", the meanings of which do not directly mirror their usage in the Liberal International Order literature. Indeed, she points out that current debates in the Liberal International Order literature revolve mainly around what the English School would conceptualise as the "international system".[25] In English School vocabulary, by contrast, "international order" refers to "a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society

[22] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Reclaiming the Social: Relationalism in Anglophone International Studies', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (September 2019): 583.

[23] Jackson and Nexon, 583.

[24] Section 3.1 provides a fuller explanation of the ontological and epistemological aspects of relationalism as it pertains to this dissertation.

[25] Flockhart, 'The Coming Multi-Order World', 5.

of states, or international society".[26] In the English School, international order is thus a "condition" created and driven by shared normative aims of international society.[27] Somewhat confusingly, the English School literature on international order thus runs orthogonal to the Liberal International Order literature, employing different definitions of the key concepts, and is often concerned with somewhat different questions. It also builds on certain assumptions, such as a shared normative purpose of international society, which are not necessarily present in the Liberal International Order literature.

Moreover, writing in the English School tradition, Flockhart and Korosteleva make a distinction between the "liberal international order" and the "global rules-based order", which differ in terms of "the depth and scope of their ideational foundations." The former is "restricted to those who share its core values" of "democracy, the rule of law, economic and political freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion" and thus pertains only to a smaller group of states, whereas the latter is "universal" and prioritises "pluralist state centric principles such as sovereignty and the principle of egality with more space for cultural and political diversity." The liberal order, in Flockhart's and Korosteleva's framework, is therefore only one of several orders that are nested within the overall global rules-based order in the emerging "multi-order world".[28]

It is worth emphasising that my point of departure for conceptualising international order is based on the Liberal International Order literature and not on that of the English School. My conception of the liberal order is thus much closer to what Flockhart and Korosteleva refer to as the "global rules-based order", although I would additionally emphasise that this order is geared towards an open world economy. In my approach, the Liberal International Order is conceived as *the* international order (although it might be in the process of evolution) and is thus not restricted to states that share the values of freedom and

[26] Hedley Bull, The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics, 3rd ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 8.

[27] Flockhart, 'The Coming Multi-Order World', 5.

[28] Trine Flockhart and Elena A. Korosteleva, 'War in Ukraine: Putin and the Multi-Order World', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (July 2022): 466–472.

democracy. What Flockhart and Korosteleva refer to as the "liberal international order", I would refer to as the community of liberal democracies. While this is certainly important, it falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

None of this is to say that I disagree with their arguments. The point is to highlight the fundamentally different ways in which the term 'international order' is conceptualised in these different bodies of work, which, as Flockhart points out, can be the source of considerable confusion in the literature.[29] While this does not preclude a conversation between the two bodies of work, it does require a careful recalibration of the key terms for such conversation to be fruitful.

Lastly, contrary to the English School, I do not conceive of international order as a condition brought about by a shared normative purpose, but instead as a dynamic political construct that emerges by means of compromise between conflicting aims and interests. Nor do I have use for the concept of 'international society'. Although my work engages with authors from the English School canon, a direct comparison of their arguments about international order is necessarily limited by the incommensurable ways in which international order is conceptualised and employed in the two respective frameworks. While I find much of use in English School literature, its work on international order is, in crucial ways, about *something else* than what I am writing about here, and much of it thus falls outside of the scope of this dissertation.

## 1.4 Outline of the Kappa

The following chapter presents the theories and concepts of the dissertation. Since the nature of this project is largely theoretical, this chapter covers a lot of ground. In it, I seek to distil the main theoretical arguments of the three articles. These arguments get a fuller treatment in the articles themselves, but the aim here is to stitch them together in a more abstract way, and situate them within the larger debates in the literature.

[29] Flockhart, 'The Coming Multi-Order World', 5.

Chapter 3 discusses methodological considerations relevant to the dissertation. This involves both the methods employed in article 2, where I used network analysis to trace the development of the international trade structure in East Asia over the last four decades, as well as a more general discussion of the methodological consideration that arise when relational theories in IR are operationalised.

Lastly, the conclusions in chapter 4 provide a meta-theoretical reflection on the process of building a theoretical and conceptual framework. It also draws together the dissertation's conclusions and offers some reflections on the future of great power competition and struggles over the nature of international order. Finally it discusses the dissertation's implications for future research.

# 2 Theories and Concepts

As laid out in the introduction, this thesis builds on the existing literature on international order as well as relational approaches in International Relations. The aim is to draw out insights from these somewhat disparate literatures, and use them to construct a novel theoretical argument about contemporary rising powers and their implications for international order and the nature of great power relations. In this chapter, I introduce the main theories and concepts on which the thesis builds, and situate my work within the debates that surround them.

Section 2.1 briefly sketches out the dissertation's key concepts, and how they relate to each other in my overall theoretical and conceptual framework. Sections 2.2 through 2.5 deal with different aspects of international order and the place of the concept in contemporary IR debates. In these sections, I place my work in the existing literature and motivate my proposed theoretical and conceptual framework. In doing so, these sections also present the main arguments and findings about international order from articles 1 and 2, arguing why they provide a fruitful way forward in theorising international order. Since the articles themselves are largely theoretical, there is a lot of ground to cover. The aim here is not to reproduce the arguments of the articles in their entirety, but rather to situate their main contributions within the wider literature, and explain how they fit together to form the overall argument of the dissertation.

Section 2.6 discusses the need for theorising a 'subject' of international order, which is the topic of article 1. The 'global structure of relations' is the key concept here, which, building on relational theorising in IR, I argue should be posited as the subject of international order. The key point is that the global

structure of relations is today being transformed, which has important, but under-appreciated, consequences for theories of international order.

Section 2.7 moves to the concept of 'great power competition', which is the topic of article 3. There I argue that the nature of contemporary great power competition is being transformed due to changes in the global structure of relations. This section discusses dependency theory (and related paradigms) and how the legacy of those frameworks contains surprising lessons for relational theorising of contemporary developments in world politics. I argue that the almost complete rupture between the theory's dwindling adherents on the one hand, and the larger mainstream in the discipline on the other, has largely prevented both parties from recognising the paradigm's contemporary value.

Lastly, section 2.8 discusses the role of smaller and medium sized states in struggles for international order, and their role in shaping great power competition. While none of the three articles is devoted to small states as such, they play a crucial – if sometimes implicit – role in the argumentation of the articles.

## 2.1 The Key Concepts: International Order and the Global Structure of Relations

International order is the key concept in this dissertation. The way in which international order is defined and used is itself a key contribution of this dissertation, and requires extensive elaboration and contextualisation in the existing literature. This is the subject of the following sections. Here, however, I lay out my definition up front. I define international order in the following way:

- *International order is a contested and dynamic supranational political construct that comprises the rules, agreements, international institutions, norms, and ideologies that guide relations between states.*

This definition packs quite a few terms, so let us briefly go through each of them in turn. International order is 'contested' because states do not always agree on

what international order should be, and are engaged in a continuous struggle to determine that. It is 'dynamic' because those struggles result in an evolution of the content and institutional make-up of international order over time. It is 'supranational' because it exists above the states in the system, and cannot be reduced to the power and preferences of any single state. And lastly, it is a 'political construct', because the aforementioned contestation can be understood as a continuous political process, where states compete and negotiate over what the prevailing international order should be. As such, international orders can thus be construed as an evolving negotiated settlement, albeit one that carries a heavy path-dependence in its wake. My definition builds on G. John Ikenberry's theorisation of international order, but also breaks with it in certain respects. It also settles some ambiguities that are present in his work, as well as the (arguable) evolution of his definition over time. The similarities and differences are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

A crucial feature to note here is that international order, by this definition, is not synonymous with the power and preferences of any one state. Indeed, power is deliberately posited as an exogenous variable that states use to maintain, adjust, revise or overturn the prevailing international order. Hence why I define it as a 'contested political construct'. This definition stands in contrast to 'hegemonic conceptions of international order', which construe international orders as symbiotic with the hegemonic powers that supposedly create them.

Furthermore, this definition of international order is deliberately narrow, so that international order can be juxtaposed vis-à-vis other phenomena. Most importantly, international order is defined as analytically separate from its own subject. In other words, the definition allows for the question: What is it that is being ordered? The answer is already embedded in the definition: The subject of international order is *relations*. International order guides and regulates relations between states. And since there are multiple sets of meaningful relationships in world politics at any given time, the overall subject of international order is the 'global structure of relations'.

The global structure of relations is the second key concept in this dissertation. It is defined in the following way.

- *The global structure of relations is the aggregate of meaningful relationships that exist in world politics at any given time.*

The main point to note here is that the global structure of relations can and does change over time. Not every state has meaningful relations with every other state, especially not relations of a substantive magnitude. Thus, of all potential relationships in world politics, the global structure of relations comprises only a minority. Given that this structure can change over time, it means that the 'subject' of international order changes over time.

Taken together, this conception of international order can be visualised in the following way by means of a base-superstructure model:

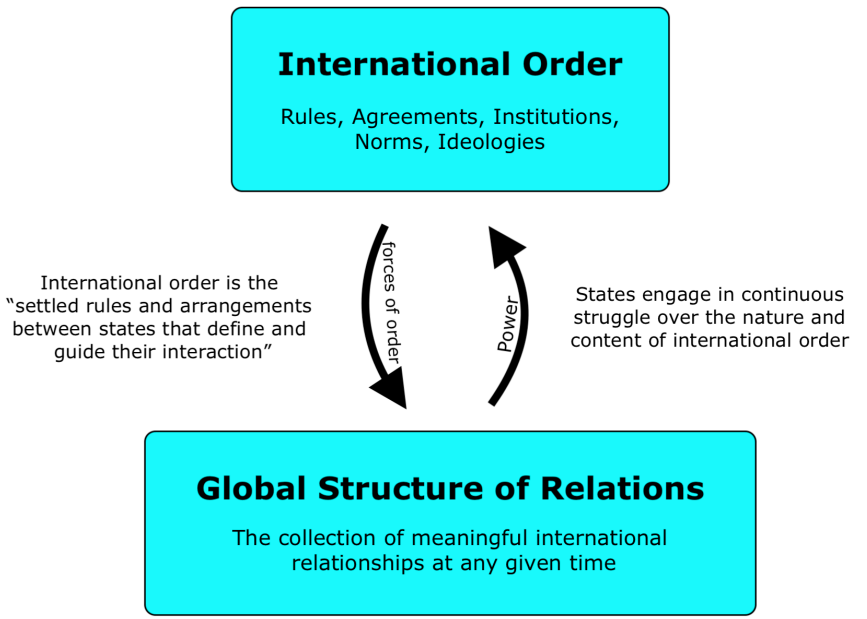


*Figure 1: Base-superstructure model of internatinal order and the global structure of relations*

International order is thus a supranational political construct that is continuously contested and re-negotiated by all states, each of whom seeks to push and pull it in different directions, trying to shape it in ways that best serve their own interests.

The global structure of relations, meanwhile, is the collection of existing international relationships that international order has a bearing on. It is the subject of international order.

Power is thus construed as an exogenous variable to international order. As I will show, this conceptual move marks a break with most existing approaches, which tend to write the prevailing distribution of power into their conception of international order. In my framework, power is construed as something that states possess to different degrees and which they use (among other things) to influence the nature and content of international order.

Power has many facets. The power states employ to influence international order can either draw on unit level factors or structural/relational aspects. An example of unit level power being employed, is when a state uses the resources they devote to an international institution (e.g. financing or personnel) as leverage to influence the rules and conduct of that institution. An example of structural/relational power being employed, is when a state leverages its centrality in a relational structure (e.g. structural centrality in a trade network) to influence the content of a free trade agreement.

I thus conceive of power as the hammer and chisel that states use to carve out the marble of international order. Some states have bigger hammers, and some are better at using them, but ultimately everyone is chipping away, trying to mould the prevailing international order in ways that suit them the best.

Relational power plays a special role in this dissertation, especially in article 3 that deals with the nature of contemporary great power competition. I define it in the following way:

- *Relational power is power that derives from a state's position in a structure of relations.*

Relational power is thus a distinct form of power, separate from power that derives from unit level attributes. An example of relational power is a state that occupies a central position in trade network and is connected to several peripheral states (states that have only one trade partner). This relational structure provides the central state with leverage vis-à-vis the peripheral states, since it has more options at its disposal than the peripheral ones. When it draws on this leverage to skew outcomes in its favour, this state is using relational power.

Relational power co-exists with power based on unit level attributes and neither should necessarily be assumed to take preference over the other. In fact, they often reinforce each other. To take an example, a militarily powerful state (unit level power) could use its military to enforce relational exclusivity on smaller states in its sphere of influence (thus creating relational power). Conversely, a state can use its monopolistic bargaining positions (relational power) to extract benefits from its peripheries to strengthen its economy or military (thus creating unit level power).

Lastly, a few words on great power competition, which is the topic of article 3. The concept is rather transparent.

- *Great power competition describes competitive relations amongst great powers*

The relations between great powers are a key concern in International Relations in general, and during power transitions in particular. One way to evaluate these relations, is to place them on a scale of competitive intensity. At one extreme end of the scale there is a complete harmony of interests (which is rarely the case). At the other extreme, competition descends into large scale war (for example during World War II). Most of the time, however, the dynamics of great power relations fall somewhere in between, reflecting a mixture of competition and pragmatic efforts at coexistence. Competing efforts to shape the rules, norms, and institutional frameworks of the prevailing international order are an important way in which great power competition unfolds in contemporary world politics. This is why the evolution of international order is tightly bound up with the process of great power competition. This is a key theme in article 3.

## 2.2 Theories of International Order[30]

'International order' has long been a key concept in the discipline of International Relations, but one that appears in considerably different guises depending on the

[30] This section draws on a more detailed overview of the same topic in article 1.

author and the theoretical tradition. In fact, the variety of its usage has prompted scholars in the field to question whether international order is a useful analytical concept at all.[31] When different schools of thought employ it in widely different ways, there is a danger that the concept ends up obscuring, rather than clarifying, points of disagreement and convergence. In addition to its heterogeneity, there is also a worry that the concept is too all-encompassing – that it has become a vague catch-all phrase that stymies rather than clarifies more detailed discussions. If international order encompasses most things that concern us in the discipline of IR, then it becomes difficult to juxtapose it against other variables of interests since they are endogenous to the concept itself. It thereby becomes difficult to trace the origins of international orders, or query their consequences.

Even though I sympathise with some of these complaints, I argue that the international order remains an invaluable theoretical concept, but one that needs to be clearly defined and demarcated. In this section, I introduce the concept as it has been used in the theoretical literature on which I build. In particular, I highlight G. John Ikenberry's work and his conception of the Liberal International Order, which forms my point of departure for theorising international order in this dissertation.

Structural realism provides the most minimal definition of international order, using it mostly as a descriptive term for the form that the balance of power takes at any given time. For structural realists, the closest thing to order in world politics is found in a relative stability in the balance of power between great powers. As Ikenberry argues, structural realism sees order as the "result of the balancing interaction of states competing for security in a decentralized state system. Order is manifest as a power equilibrium."[32] As such, international order is largely defined by the number of great powers – producing either 'unipolar', 'bipolar' or 'multipolar' orders. While structural realists provide arguments about

[31] See of example discussion in: Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of Americal Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 31–34.

[32] G. John Ikenberry (2014) "Introduction: power, order and change in world politics" in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

the relative stability of different types of orders,[33] they are sceptical of attempts to imbue international orders with any substantive meaning beyond the underlying distribution of power.

This minimalist definition of international order stands in contrast to approaches that include elements beyond the crude distribution of capabilities. Classical realism and hegemonic stability theory both see international order as a complex political construction that mediates power relations through rules, norms and institutions. While the distribution of power remains a defining element of international order in these approaches, its character is infused with socially constructed elements. For classical realists, the balance of power is 'managed' by rational statesmen through diplomacy, such as in the Concert of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century.[34]

In hegemonic stability theory there is a similar political component at work, but one that emphasises the leadership role of a single hegemonic state in the system.[35] In perhaps the most famous work of this tradition, Robert Gilpin offered a cyclical view of international orders, based on the rise and decline of hegemonic powers. In Gilpin's work, systemic wars provide the window of opportunity for change. The victor of such a war builds a new international order on the ruins of the old one and presides over it as long as it can sustain its hegemony. Hegemony never lasts forever, however, as the rise of new great powers gradually shifts the distribution of power on which the old order was built. Ultimately the change in the underlying distribution of capabilities makes it impossible for the hegemon to maintain the prevailing order, leading to systemic conflict and a new hegemonic cycle.[36]

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[33] Waltz, for example, argued that bipolar orders are the most stable form of international order. Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Stability of a Bipolar World', *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881–909; Hegemonic stability theorists, by contrast, see unipolarity as the most stable system. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[34] On realism and diplomacy, see Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 15–17.

[35] David A. Lake, 'Dominance and Subordination in World Politics: Authority, Liberalism, and Stability in the Modern International Order', in *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*, ed. G. John Ikenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 61–82.

[36] Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics.

G. John Ikenberry is arguably the most influential contemporary theorist of international order. Following in the tradition of Gilpin, Ikenberry sees the contemporary international order as a creation of the United States in the aftermath of World War II.[37] The contemporary order, in Ikenberry's work, is a Liberal International Order, whose main architecture was put in place by the US and its allies in the immediate postwar period. In contrast to Gilpin, however, Ikenberry seems less wedded to a strictly cyclical view of international orders. Instead, he highlights the lineages of "liberal internationalism", seeing it as a secular trend that runs through both the British and American hegemonic orders.[38] Indeed, in his later works, Ikenberry places less and less emphasis on the contemporary role of the United States in maintaining the Liberal International Order, and instead proposes ways in which the liberal order might survive the decline of its creator.[39]

In his book *Liberal Leviathan*, Ikenberry offers the following definition of international order:

> International order is manifest in the settled rules and arrangements between states that define and guide their interaction. War and upheaval between states—that is, disorder—is turned into order when stable rules and arrangements are established by agreement, imposition, or otherwise. Order exists in the patterned relations between states. States operate according to a set of organizational principles that define roles and the terms of their interaction. International order breaks down or enters into crisis when the

[37] G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[38] G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1.

[39] G. John Ikenberry, 'Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive', *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 22–25; G. John Ikenberry, 'The End of Liberal International Order?', *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 7–23; Deudney and Ikenberry, 'Liberal World: The Resilient Order', 20–22.

> settled rules and arrangements are thrown into dispute or when the forces that perpetuate order no longer operate.[40]

It is this definition of international order that forms the point of departure for my theorising of international order in this dissertation. However, while Ikenberry's definition provides a good starting point for discussing international order, it also leaves a lot of questions unanswered. What is the relationship between power and international order? What elements are included in the Liberal International Order? Is it purely an 'explanatory' concept, meant to help us understand contemporary international relations through liberal IR theory? Or does it have an integral normative component, intended to inform US foreign policy (or that of other countries)? And lastly, what is the subject of international order? What is being ordered? On most of these questions, Ikenberry's work leaves some room for interpretation. Moreover, I would argue that there is a discernible evolution from his earlier works to the later ones on some of these questions.

For the purposes of this dissertation, these questions are important, because they have far-reaching implications for how we think about rising powers, such as China and India, and their relationship to the existing international order. A great deal of the debates on rising powers is framed around the question of whether they are 'revisionist' or 'status quo oriented' vis-à-vis the prevailing international order.[41] In other words, the literature is preoccupied with whether the rising powers are largely content with the existing international order and wish to become responsible stakeholders in it, or whether they intend to challenge it and revise it. In order to address this question adequately, however, we have to be clear on what constitutes the prevailing international order in the first place.[42] Too much of the debate ends up making little headway, because people are

[40] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 12–13.

[41] For an overview of these debates, see: Gregory T. Chin, 'The State of the Art: Trends in the Study of the BRICS and Multilateral Organizations', in *Rising Powers and Multilateral Institutions*, ed. Dries Lesage and Thijs Van de Graaf (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 21–27.

[42] As Mazarr et al point out, the literature is 'surprisingly vague' on this question. Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, 17.

implicitly drawing on different conceptualisations of what constitutes the existing international order.

In the following sections, I open up these questions and situate them in the wider debates in the literature. In doing so, I also motivate my own answer to them, showing how the theoretical framework I propose provides a fruitful way to probe the implications of today's rising powers for the existing international order and the dynamics of great power competition. First, however, the following section sketches out a rough overview of the existing debates about the Liberal International Order. If these debates sometimes seem contradictory and confusing, it is because they often tend to move seamlessly between academic debates about the liberal order as an analytical/explanatory concept on the one hand, and political debates about the normative desirability of the liberal order on the other. The following section seeks to clarify some of these differences.

## 2.3 Debating the Liberal Order – Normative or Explanatory Concept?

As an IR concept, the 'Liberal International Order' enjoys the rare privilege of being widely used outside of academia. As Nexon and Cooley point out, the "idea that the United States is a hegemonic power that has been constructing and defending liberal international order since the end of the Second World War also routinely appears in official speeches and policy documents."[43] However, such popular usage comes with downsides as well. As a vague and abstract concept, the Liberal International Order all too easily becomes an ideological battering ram in the hands of politicians and pundits, eager to demonstrate the moral superiority of their country's foreign policy, while condemning the actions of other states. Leaders of the United States, in particular, conflate their own interests and policies with the liberal order, while portraying any obstacles they encounter, or challenges to their leadership, as threats to the liberal order itself.

Through its usage in general political discourse, the liberal order has also acquired certain normative (and even partisan) connotations, which often muddy

[43] Cooley and Nexon, Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of Americal Global Order, 18.

the waters when it is used as an analytical concept. Section 2.4 looks in more detail at the relationship between the concept international order and the global distribution of power – in particular between US hegemony and the Liberal International Order. In this section, however, the focus is on the tension between the normative and analytical aspects of the concept of the liberal order.

When it comes to theories of the Liberal International Order, it is useful to distinguish between two general approaches. On the one hand, one can use it as an *analytical/explanatory* concept, one that is intended to describe and explain objective realities of the current international system. Most of the academic work that uses the concept leans into this category. On the other hand, one can use it as a *normative* concept, one that outlines a desirable (or objectionable) state of world affairs, one that states should (or shouldn't) strive to achieve and/or preserve. In the hands of foreign policy makers and in general political discourse, the concept tends to tilt more in the normative direction. As with other theories derived from the liberal canon, however, these two aspects of the Liberal International Order are not always easily disentangled in practice.[44] Indeed, some of its main theorists deliberately blend aspects of both. Nevertheless, thinking consciously about these differences, and trying, as far as possible, to tease them apart, is a necessary step towards clearing up some of the confusions that surround current debates about the liberal order.

Debates about the Liberal International Order appear on both sides of the analytical/explanatory and normative side of the divide. As we will see, however, they tend to revolve around somewhat different issues. This effectively creates four different positions: For and against the liberal order as an analytical/explanatory concept on the one hand, and support for (or opposition to) the liberal order's normative virtues on the other. These four positions overlap and contrast in complex and sometimes surprising ways. In this section, I review each of them in turn.

[44] On the complex nature of liberalism in social theory as it pertains to the liberal order, see Tim Dunne, Trine Flockhart, and Marjo Koivisto, 'Introduction: Liberal World Order', in *Liberal World Orders*, ed. Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5–8; See also Heather Rae and Christian Reus-Smit, 'Grand Days, Dark Palaces: The Contradictions of Liberal Ordering', in *Liberal World Orders*, ed. Tim Dunne and Trine Flockhart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87–105.

As stated earlier, most IR theorists employ the Liberal International Order mainly as an analytical/explanatory concept. This is also true of its main proponents. Most of this work is not intended to proselytise about the virtues of liberalism, but to describe the postwar international order that United States built, and to explain how it operates.[45] While Ikenberry's normative sympathies are often close to the surface, one can in principle read and agree with his work, but still come away with a different normative conviction, believing that the liberal order should be changed or overturned.

As an analytical/explanatory concept, the liberal order also has its critics. Realists, in particular, are typically doubtful that it is meaningful to speak of any such thing as an international order beyond the global distribution of power. They are sceptical that norms and international institutions actually constrain and shape the behaviour of states, or that economic interdependence mitigates conflict. They might very well be normative liberals at heart, but that is beside the point. They simply do not believe that this is how international relations work.[46] Their criticism is directed at the analytical/explanatory level. Simply put, they do not believe that a liberal order as such exists, and even warn that mistaken beliefs to the contrary may lead to dangerous foreign policy miscalculations.[47] In the words of Patrick Porter, "the claim that a unitary "liberal order" prevailed and defined international relations is both ahistorical and harmful."[48]

Moving over to the normative side of the fence, a very different debate takes place about the liberal order. On the supporting side are those who extol the virtues of the Liberal International Order, often emphasising its role in

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[45] Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order', *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 1999): 179–196; Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

[46] As Barma et al put it, "The liberal order is today still largely an aspiration, not a description of how states actually behave or how global governance actually works." Naazneen Barma, Ely Ratner, and Steven Weber, 'The Mythical Liberal Order', *The National Interest*, no. 124 (2013): 57; See also: Allison, 'The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom'.

[47] Charles L. Glaser, 'A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided', *International Security* 43, no. 4 (April 2019): 51–87.

[48] Patrick Porter, 'A World Imagined: Nostalgia and Liberal Order', *CATO Institute: Policy Analysis*, no. 843 (June 2018): 1; See also: Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump* (Polity Press, 2020).

bringing peace and prosperity to those within its reach. As mentioned earlier, these tendencies are often found in US foreign policy discourse. But also in Europe, there are those who emphatically support the benevolence of the liberal order.[49] It is worth noting that those who normatively support the liberal order largely take its existence for granted. In praising its benevolent virtues, normative supporters of the Liberal International Order have already implicitly placed themselves on the affirmative side of the analytical/explanatory debate, assuming that the concept of a liberal order describes something real about the state of world politics. They may sometimes complain that the liberal order is 'incomplete', or that there have been regrettable 'deviations' from it, but overall they have no doubt that the liberal order is something real.

For our last category, those who *normatively oppose* the liberal order, the issue becomes more complicated. Do they believe the liberal order is real? Why, after all, would one normatively oppose something that one doesn't believe exists in the first place? Firstly, we have critics of the liberal order from the leftist/anti-imperialist side of the political spectrum. For some of them, the criticism effectively concerns the shortcomings of the supposed liberal order. Pointing out the US's frequent breach of liberal norms and values, from the invasion of Iraq to the systematic use of torture in its war on terror, they highlight the ways in which the liberal order fails to restrain its hegemon. In this sense, they effectively agree with the realists: When the stakes are high, the liberal order is not really there. Thus, theirs is not so much a normative critique of the liberal order, as it is a critique of the hypocrisy of those who maintain that the US leads a liberal order in the first place.

However, on the left there are also normative critics that take the concept more seriously. Instead of just dismissing it as hypocritical rhetoric, these authors agree that there is such a thing as a US-led Liberal International Order. Instead of praising its benevolence, however, they tend to see it as an exploitative hegemonic order. Often inspired by Marxist theory, they see the liberal order as a global

[49] Brice Didier, 'The European Union and the Liberal International Order in the Age of "America First": Attempted Hedging and the Willingness-Capacity Gap', *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 17, no. 1 (February 2021); On Europe and the liberal order, see also: Ole Wæver, 'A Post-Western Europe: Strange Identities in a Less Liberal World Order', *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 75–88.

system of capitalist exploitation at the expense of workers and/or people in the global South. The norms and values of the liberal order are recast in Gramscian terms, as a hegemonic ideology that serves the interest of US hegemony and its ruling classes.[50] Thus, in analytical/explanatory terms, their stance is not necessarily that far from that of Ikenberry or other theorists of the US-led hegemonic order. But they place themselves on the other side of the normative spectrum.

Lastly, normative opponents of the Liberal International Order are also found on the political right – especially in the United States. This group deserves special attention, because they are the ones that have arguably come closest to derailing the whole project. Usually conservative, this group does not believe in the universality (or even desirability) of liberal values, and even less so in the wisdom of exporting them abroad. It is worth emphasising that this group very much believes in the objective *existence* of a US-led Liberal International Order. They just think this is bad foreign policy. Indeed, their opposition is often based on the belief that the liberal order is a benevolent undertaking that allows the rest of the world to free-ride on US largesse. By providing – and paying for – a wide array of global public goods, they believe that in maintaining the liberal order, the US is being overly generous. Instead, they want a more selfish foreign policy. This is part of the platform that got Donald Trump elected to the White House and informed his promise that, from now on, he would put "America First".[51]

The basis of this worldview was well encapsulated in Trump's inauguration speech:

> For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; Subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military; We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own; And spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

[50] As Inderjeet Parmar argues, the liberal order "is a class-based, elitist hegemony—strongly imbued with explicit and implicit racial and colonial/imperial assumptions—in both US domestic and foreign relations." Inderjeet Parmar, 'The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?', *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 152.

[51] For an overview of the sources and logics of Trump's 'America First' worldview, see: Stokes, 'Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order', 135–138.

> We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind. The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed across the entire world. [...] We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.[52]

As Doug Stokes puts it, "[a]t the core of Trump's 'America First' world-view, then, is an abiding scepticism towards existing global regimes that subsidize others at US taxpayers' expense, or that have perceived negative externalities for US economic interests."[53]

The Trump worldview forms a fascinating contrast to the Gramscian anti-imperialist view of the liberal order. Both see the liberal order as an elaborate system that delivers unequal and unjustified outcomes. But whereas the anti-imperialists see the liberal order as a hegemonic system that privileges US interests over those of others, the Trumpian worldview sees the liberal order as a system that allows everyone else to feed off the United States. Of course, Trump is not the first to voice scepticism towards US overseas commitments.[54] But while advocates of US strategic retrenchment have a long history in US foreign policy debates,[55] Trump's unvarnished hostility to the liberal order is without precedent in the top tiers of US government.[56]

When Trump's vision prevailed in the 2016 US presidential election, long term critics of US foreign policy found this turn of events more than a little bit ironic. Outside the US, many had long argued that the US-led order was far less

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[52] Donald J. Trump, 'Inaugural Address' (January 2017), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/.

[53] Stokes, 'Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order', 137.

[54] Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, 'The Wisdom of Retrenchment: America Must Cut Back to Move Forward', *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (2011): 32–47.

[55] Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[56] Ikenberry, 'The Plot against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive?'

benevolent than claimed.[57] And they were getting tired of listening to US politicians selling their narrow national interests as the universal interests of the whole world. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the excesses in the US War on Terror, had done immense damage to the image of the United States as some sort of benign hegemon.[58] US foreign policy discourse notwithstanding, fewer and fewer outside the US itself believed that US foreign policy was guided by any sort of altruism or concern for the greater good.

Back home in the US, however, there was one group that still believed in the purported generosity of US foreign policy: the 'America First' conservatives. And they concluded that this was bad foreign policy and opted to change course. This saga illustrates the dangers of dressing up your foreign policy in a discourse of benevolence, as liberal foreign policy makers in the US had long done. In the end, instead of convincing the rest of the world that their foreign policy was altruistic, all they succeeded in doing was convincing a large chunk of their own electorate that US policy was guided by the interests of others – which of course they didn't like, and started tearing it down as a result.

The academic literature on US liberal hegemony has always been more nuanced, and more honest, about the motivations behind upholding the liberal order. In addition to providing global public goods, the liberal order was also a means of advancing the economic and geopolitical interests of the US.[59] It helped the US to project power globally, by tying other states into US-led institutions and making them dependent on the US market.[60] By financing a disproportionate share of NATO and other security relationships, the US was not just subsidising its allies' security, it was consciously making those allies more reliant on the US

[57] Parmar, 'The US-Led Liberal Order'.

[58] On US unilateralism under George W. Bush and its consequences, see: Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, 221–277.

[59] Carla Norrlof puts it bluntly: "The United States is self-interested, not altruistic." She claims "not merely that America has benefited from its hegemonic position but that it has benefited disproportionately, and that the system through which it benefits is sustainable." Carla Norrlof, *America's Global Advantage: US Hegemony and International Cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3, 5; See also: Carla Norrlof, 'Hegemony and Inequality: Trump and the Liberal Playbook', *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 63–88.

[60] Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment', *International Security* 37, no. 3 (2012): 40–50.

and subordinate to its geopolitical interests.[61] Lastly, the liberal order, with the US at the centre of it, had always been kind to US corporate interests. The liberal order was, it turns out, never a purely benevolent undertaking after all.

This much has been clear on the pages of IR journals for decades. But this part of the story tended to get lost as it travelled from academia to foreign policy discourse. Overly eager to sell it abroad, American politicians portrayed the US as the 'indispensable nation' – and ultimately believed it themselves. What had started as self-serving justifications, ended up confusing, and ultimately poisoning, the domestic debate. Instead of the intended global audience, it was Americans themselves that were drinking the Kool-Aid.

Proponents of an American-led liberal order now found themselves in an uncomfortable place, having to awkwardly re-adjust their message for the domestic audience. One could almost see them giving their compatriots a metaphorical kick under the table: "Sssshhh, come on – don't be silly. Of course the whole thing is all about advancing US interests all along. Just don't make us to say that out loud!" But it was too late. The horse had already bolted, and when they did say it out loud, a large part of the electorate wasn't listening. They had already tied their fortunes to an 'America First' style populism, convinced that these liberal elites never had America's true interests at heart in the first place.

***Writing from Outside the Beltway***

As this section has outlined, the literature on the Liberal International Order reflects a complex symbiosis between the IR theory and US foreign policy discourse. While such real world relevance is certainly to be celebrated, this symbiosis has also tended to blur the line between normative and explanatory aspects of this debate, as well as the distinction between scholarship and policy advocacy.

This inevitably presents certain challenges for a dissertation like this. Writing about the liberal order from outside the United States, existing debates

[61] As Rapp-Hooper puts it, "the asymmetry between Washington's spending and that of its allies is a feature of the alliance system, not a bug: it gives the United States more influence over its partners, who depend on American strength for their security." Mira Rapp-Hooper, 'Saving America's Alliances: The United States Still Needs the System That Put It on Top', *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March 2020): 134.

can seem hopelessly US-centric – not to say parochial – in their focus and formulations. This dissertation is not intended to be an intervention in US foreign policy debates. Indeed, I argue that one of the main problems with the current debate is precisely how US-centred it is. In arguing about the nature and consequences of the liberal order, both critics and supporters implicitly agree that US hegemony is a defining element of – if not synonymous with – with Liberal International Order.

In this dissertation, I take issue with this US-centric conception of the liberal order. While it certainly enjoys a unique position in today's liberal order, the United States makes up less than 5 percent of the world's population. If the liberal order is a truly international order that shapes our current international system – as I think it is – then we need to theorise and understand it as a phenomenon unto itself, instead of seeing it merely as derivative of US global power.

As I argue in the following sections, moving to a more autonomous conception of the liberal order helps us better understand the strategies and interests of rising powers like China and India, as well as the dynamics of hegemonic self-sabotage. Lastly, I believe that seeing the liberal order as a phenomenon unto itself is particularly important for regions like Europe, who have played a crucial role in building and sustaining the liberal order, but must now reckon with US decline as well as its partial abdication of leadership.[62]

## 2.4 Power and International Order – Killing Ikenberry's Leviathan

As discussed in the previous section, a lot of debates about the Liberal International Order seemingly take for granted that it is an 'American order'.[63] As

[62] On the abdication of US leadership under Trump, see: Trine Flockhart, 'Is This the End? Resilience, Ontological Security, and the Crisis of the Liberal International Order', *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 2 (April 2020): 12–13.

[63] Miles Kahler, 'Who Is Liberal Now? Rising Powers and Global Norms', in *Why Govern?: Rethinking Demand and Progress in Global Governance*, ed. Amitav Acharya (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 55.

its creator and most powerful state, the United States is seen as the centre of gravity around which all the other pieces of the liberal order are arranged; US power and influence are the lifeblood of the liberal order.[64] The liberal order, thus conceived, is one and the same with the US hegemonic order.[65]

A key argument of this dissertation, however, is that this view of the liberal order is historically problematic and analytically unhelpful. We need to divorce the liberal order from US hegemony in our conceptual framework, and instead conceptualise it as a dynamic political construct in its own right. While their histories are closely interwoven, the liberal order was always based on more than US hegemony; other states played important roles as well.[66] Moreover, as Evelyn Goh points out, the US itself has a questionable track record in adhering to the rules and norms of the liberal order.[67] Conflating the two is not only historically and normatively problematic, however, it also creates serious analytical blind-spots, especially when it comes to understanding today's rising powers.

Article 2 covers this issue in depth. The article assesses the state of the Liberal International Order in East Asia, against the background of China's growing power in the region and the US's relative hegemonic decline. In making the assessment, however, it employs an 'autonomous' conception of the Liberal International Order, one that is defined by the rules, norms and institutions that guide the interactions of states, but leaves out assumptions about the configuration of power that underpins it. It thus conceptualises the liberal order as a dynamic political construct in its own right as laid out in section 2.1.

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[64] Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order.

[65] Christopher Layne makes this quite explicit: "the [liberal, rules-based international order] actually is the international order—the Pax Americana—that the United States constructed after the Second World War". Layne, 'The US–Chinese Power Shift and the End of the Pax Americana', 89.

[66] For the importance of other states in the creation and maintenance of the liberal order, see: Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order*, 1–6; Kahler, 'Who Is Liberal Now? Rising Powers and Global Norms', 55.

[67] Evelyn Goh, 'In Response: Alliance Dynamics, Variables, and the English School for East Asia', *International Politics* 57, no. 2 (April 2020): 283; Furthermore, as Alice Ba points out, conflating US hegemony and the liberal order creates a normatively problematic status quo bias. Alice D. Ba, 'Multilateralism and East Asian Transitions: The English School, Diplomacy, and a Networking Regional Order', *International Politics* 57, no. 2 (April 2020): 259–277.

This conceptual move provides three main advantages. Firstly, it helps us to distinguish China's geopolitical ambitions on the one hand, from its preferences regarding the rules, norms and institutions of the liberal order on the other. When the liberal order is conflated with US hegemony, this nuance is lost, and China's 'revisionism' of the existing order is overestimated. Secondly, it helps us to better understand the strategic environment of smaller and medium sized states, who have a strong interest in maintaining liberal, rules-based modes of interaction regardless of their geopolitical allegiances. Divorcing the Liberal International Order from US hegemony thus allows us to appreciate the role that smaller states play in maintaining the liberal order, and how they use their agency to navigate the ongoing power transition. Thirdly, it helps us make sense of the increasingly ambivalent relationship between the US itself and the Liberal International Order. Having inscribed US power and interests into the definition of liberal order, many existing approaches have a difficult time explaining why the US government set about attacking some of its core elements as it did under the Trump administration. Separating the liberal order from US hegemony allows us to appreciate how both the liberal order and US interests and preferences can evolve over time, and not necessarily in the same direction.

All of these aspects are laid out in more detail in article 1 itself. Viewing the issue on a more abstract level, this conceptual move consists of removing the variable of 'power' from the definition of international order altogether. As outlined in section 2.2, existing theoretical frameworks tend to inscribe power relations into their definitions of international order. Indeed, for certain strands of realism, such as structural realism, international order is essentially *nothing other* than the temporary stability in the global distribution of power. But even for other strands of realism, power is, if not the sole feature, at least a defining element of international order.

Removing power from the definition of international order thus marks a rather radical break from most existing approaches to theorising international order.[68] Articles 1 and 2 discuss this issue in detail, tracing the relationship

[68] A few recent works, however, have moved in this direction. Most explicitly, Kai He et al. "[highlight] the distinction between international order and the interstate distribution of power. States' policies seeking to alter the latter do not necessarily mean an assault on the international order." Kai He et al., 'Rethinking Revisionism in World Politics', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 2 (June 2021): 159–186; Nexon et al make a similar

between power and international order in different strands of IR theory. Nevertheless, as explained in article 1, there have been some preliminary steps in the literature towards theorising international order independently of the distribution of power. In article 1, I also argue that Ikenberry's conceptualisation has evolved over time in this regard. His earlier work tends reflects the Gilpinian view of seeing US hegemony as a defining feature of the Liberal International Order, whereas in more recent years, his work has increasingly sought to create some distance between the two. For Ikenberry, this conceptual move serves the purpose of showing how the 'liberal internationalism' may 'survive', despite the relative decline of US hegemony.[69]

## 2.5 International Order as a Dynamic Political Construct

Once the global distribution of power has been fully removed from the definition of international order, it becomes possible to view international order as a phenomenon unto itself, instead of something that is 'owned' or controlled by any one state. International order, thus conceived, is a political construct, one that is constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated by the actors within its reach. To be sure, states are by no means equal in their ability to shape the international order. But even during the most unequal periods – where a single state enjoys a preponderance of global power – the hegemon is not able to unilaterally impose order as it pleases. It must secure at least the tacit acceptance of other states in the system if the rules and norms of the order are to have any chance of surviving. In fact, the idea that the US was a 'liberal hegemon' that rules through 'consent'

(although not exactly the same) kind of conceptual move in: Alexander Cooley, Daniel Nexon, and Steven Ward, 'Revising Order or Challenging the Balance of Military Power? An Alternative Typology of Revisionist and Status-Quo States', *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 04 (October 2019): 689–708; See also: Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Steve Chan, 'Challenging the Liberal Order: The US Hegemon as a Revisionist Power', *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September 2021): 1335–1352.

[69] Ikenberry, 'The End of Liberal International Order?'; Ikenberry, 'Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive'.

drives this point home. Consent, by definition, is never extracted unilaterally, but implies at the very least a passive form of negotiated settlement.

Marcos Tourinho makes a similar argument, where he challenges Ikenberry's "constitutional moments" theory of international order formation.

> The literature correctly identifies a recurrent bargain between great powers and others: great powers are tied to (and constrained by) a shared normative system in exchange for the institutionalization and legalization of power political inequalities. This is not, however, a unilateral hegemonic move (that is, strategic restraint). It is a contested process in which weaker parties resisted hegemonic orders practically, legally, or diplomatically to increase the costs of such policies. Great powers engaged that resistance with concessions because they could not create a new, stable global order alone.[70]

The US-led liberal order, then, is not an 'American order' but an international order – albeit one within which the US stood first among equals, and had an outsized ability to mould the order according to its interests. Today, however, that ability is waning, while the ability of other, competing, great powers is increasing. In fact, the ability of the US to unilaterally shape the liberal order should not be overestimated, even during its heyday. Challenging the mainstream assumption that we live in a liberal order based on "disproportional Anglo-American influences", Tourinho argues that international order has always been "co-constitutive", in the sense that it emerged through a "global political process" in which weaker states in the global South played an important role.[71]

While Tourinho's article is mainly concerned with setting the record straight in terms of how the existing international order emerged in the postwar decades, this dissertation is concerned with assessing contemporary developments of international order and looking at the possibilities ahead. Tourinho does not discuss the conceptual relationship between power and international order explicitly, but he does describe the ways in which states in the global South used various sources of power to shape the liberal order.

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[70] Marcos Tourinho, 'The Co-Constitution of Order', *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 260.

[71] Tourinho, 259, 277; On this point, see also: Stuenkel, Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order, 1–6.

Furthermore, his suggestion that we "interpret the making of international order as a global political process" corresponds well with the argument advanced in this dissertation that international order is best construed as a 'dynamic political construct' that is under constant negotiation and re-negotiation by all actors within its reach.[72]

It is worth emphasizing that divorcing power from the conceptualisation of international order does not signify a lesser importance of power in theories of international order. In fact, quite the contrary: It allows us to unpack the ways in which states use their power to shape, preserve, change, or challenge different aspects of international order. Power, in other words, is posited as an external variable, one that states possess in various quantities, and use to shape the rules and norms of the prevailing order, or even to build new institutions and regimes to anchor those rules.

Removing power from the conception of international order can also help us do away with unhelpful assumptions about the interests and preferences of incumbent great powers and their rising power challengers, when it comes to shaping international order. When international order is conflated with the power and preferences of a hegemonic power, such as the US, there is an inbuilt assumption that the prevailing order – in this case the Liberal International Order – serves the interests of the United States. This assumption is understandable, since the most powerful state would presumably use that power to shape the order in a way that benefits it.[73] Indeed, hegemonic order theories usually argue that a hegemonic state constructs international order after great wars when their relative power is at its peak in order to "lock in" its interests and privileges "beyond the zenith of its power."[74] For the same reason, existing approaches have tended to assume that rising great powers have an interest in 'revising' or even overturning the prevailing order, since they, presumably, have different interests than the

[72] Tourinho, 'The Co-Constitution of Order', 277.

[73] Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics.

[74] Ikenberry, *After Victory*, 54; On this 'lock in' effect, see also: Lake, 'Dominance and Subordination in World Politics: Authority, Liberalism, and Stability in the Modern International Order', 64.

incumbent hegemon, and want to create/shape the order to better benefit themselves.[75]

Such assumptions, however, are overly simplistic.[76] Firstly, they wrongly assume that state interests remain the same over time. Consider the United States, for example. For the sake of the argument, let us assume that the US had a completely free hand in designing the liberal order in the aftermath of World War II (Tourinho's intervention notwithstanding) and did so entirely according to its own interests. In such a scenario, the interests of the US and the liberal order would be one and the same at the outset. But a lot has happened in the intervening seven to eight decades. The whole structure of the world economy has changed, and so has the place of the United States within it. The rules and norms of the liberal order might have perfectly served the US in the immediate postwar period, but this may have changed over time. Indeed, the growing discontent within the US and other parts of the Western world with the economic consequences of globalization, demonstrate that the rules and norms of the liberal order as not as straightforwardly beneficial to the West as they used to be.

At the same time, the assumption that rising powers automatically have an interest in revising the existing order are similarly mistaken. The benefits (or costs) that accrue from different international orders are not a zero-sum game. Although the liberal order was created under the leadership of the US and its allies, its key components have been instrumental in bringing growth and prosperity to rising powers around the global South in recent decades. Far from wanting to overturn

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[75] This line of reasoning is well captured by Rapkin and Thompson: "States at the top of the system's hierarchy take advantage of their elite status and establish rules, institutions and privileges that primarily benefit themselves. Ascending states thus encounter a structure of benefits already established by an earlier cohort of elites." Rapkin and Thompson, 'Power Transition, Challenge and the (Re)Emergence of China', 317; See also: Stacie E. Goddard, 'Embedded Revisionism: Networks, Institutions, and Challenges to World Order', *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (2018): 765.

[76] As Kahler notes, "many actors may seek changes in the existing order and its rules: an automatic equation of incumbent powers with the status quo and rising powers with challengers should be avoided." Kahler, 'Rising Powers and Global Governance', 712; Kahler, 'Who Is Liberal Now? Rising Powers and Global Norms'; See also: Cooley, Nexon, and Ward, 'Revising Order or Challenging the Balance of Military Power?', 689–690; Chan, 'Challenging the Liberal Order'.

the existing order, the rising powers have shown an interest in maintaining key elements of it.[77]

Construing international order as a dynamic political construct thus helps us create a more nuanced account of the evolution of international order over time, and the 'global political process' that goes into shaping it. It helps us see that international orders are complex international arrangements, whose different elements may or may not benefit different states at different points in time. Each state tries to push and pull the arrangements in the direction of its interests, and they draw on different amounts of power when doing so. But despite power disparities, no state in is full control. And while there is an important element of path dependency at play, the prevailing arrangements are best seen as a constantly evolving political settlement.

Articles 1 and 2 argue these points in more detail. Indeed, the main purpose of article 2 is not only to argue this point theoretically, but also to employ this theoretical approach to the regional order in East Asia today. In that article, I argue that despite the relative retreat of US hegemony in the region – and the intensification of geopolitical competition between the US and China – the liberal order as such is in relatively good shape. It continues to enjoy widespread support throughout the region, albeit with some evolution in its institutional architecture.

## 2.6 The Subject of International Order – The Global Structure of Relations

Conceptualising international order as a 'dynamic political construct' provides us with the first piece of the theoretical framework sketched out in section 2.1 (the top piece in the base-superstructure model). While this conceptual move is worthwhile in and of itself, as demonstrated in article 2, it also plays a necessary role in developing a relational theory of international order, which is the main purpose of article 1.

[77] Kahler, 'Who Is Liberal Now? Rising Powers and Global Norms'; Ikenberry, 'Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive'; Amitav Acharya, 'After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order', *Ethics and International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017).

Simply put, the article argues that theories and debates about international order can be enriched by closer attention to what it is that is being ordered – i.e. the 'subject' of international order. In the article, I claim that it is relations between states, rather than the states themselves, that are subject to the ordering rules and norms of international order. The rules, norms and agreements that constitute international order primarily have a bearing on how states interact with each other, rather than on what they do in and of themselves (e.g. domestically). Indeed, as laid out in the article, such a relational approach is hardly controversial, but is already implicit, and sometimes quite explicit, in existing accounts of international order. Let's revisit Ikenberry's conception of international order:

> International order is manifest in the settled rules and arrangements between states that define and guide their *interaction*. War and upheaval between states—that is, disorder—is turned into order when stable rules and arrangements are established by agreement, imposition, or otherwise. Order exists in the patterned *relations* between states. States operate according to a set of organizational principles that define roles and the *terms of their interaction*.[78]

As can be seen here, Ikenberry posits "interaction" or "relations" as the subject of international ordering "rules and arrangements". What is missing from the literature, however, is a serious engagement with the implications of this. If relations are the subject of international order, then the 'overall subject' of international order is the totality of meaningful relations in the international system at any given time. This totality, in turn, can be construed as a 'global structure of relations'.

This is important, because it means that the subject of international order is far from ubiquitous or self-evident, but is in fact highly changeable over time. As explained in article 2, in the current international system of 193 states, the potential number of bilateral relationships is more than eighteen thousand. Many of these 'potential relationships' will be negligible or not exist at all. And those that do exist may disappear while other relationships are started from scratch.

[78] Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order, 12–13 [emphasis added].

Those relationships that do exist at any given time, together constitute the global structure of relations – i.e. the subject of international order.

The relevance of this observation is found in the contemporary transformation of the global structure of relations. As explained in article 2, the global structure of relations that came into being during colonial times took the form of a core-periphery structure. In purely relational terms, this means that a few powerful states occupied central positions in the relational structure (the 'core'), and had extensive relations with each other, as well as smaller and weaker states in the system (the 'periphery'). The peripheral states, meanwhile, had limited relations with each other and where instead exclusively tied to their respective metropole (i.e. one of the 'core' states). This structure was forcefully put in place during colonial times to facilitate the North's exploitation of the global South. This core-periphery shaped relational structure, however, did not disappear immediately with decolonisation. In the decades that followed, this structure remained largely intact through inertia.

Around the turn of the millennium, however, this structure had started to change. As more countries in the global South succeeded economically, they started to make themselves felt in their immediate neighbourhoods, spurring a flurry of regional initiatives in the developing world.[79] More importantly, rising powers such as China and India, and to a lesser extend Brazil, started to weave a globe spanning web of relations, setting deep footprints throughout different parts of the global South.

The new structure can be characterised as a 'decentred' structure. Instead of their foreign relations being 'monopolised' by one or a few Western great powers, most countries in the global South now have a larger number of meaningful relationships, as well as more relations with their neighbouring countries. The global structure of relations is becoming less centralised than in

[79] Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 79–105; Amitav Acharya, 'Regionalism in the Evolving World Order: Power, Leadership, and the Provision of Public Goods', in *21st Century Cooperation: Regional Public Goods, Global Governance, and Sustainable Development*, ed. Antoni Estevadeordal and Louis Wolf Goodman (New York: Routledge, 2017), 39–54; Miles Kahler, 'Regional Challenges to Global Governance', *Global Policy* 8, no. 1 (February 2017): 98; See also Barry Buzan, 'The Inaugural Kenneth N. Waltz Annual Lecture - A World Order Without Superpowers: Decentred Globalism', *International Relations* 25, no. 1 (March 2011): 3–25.

the past. A larger number of great powers occupy pivotal positions, and smaller states thus have a more diffuse set of important relationships to draw on.

The following figure from article 3 illustrates the difference; it shows an ideal typical model of a core-periphery structure on the one hand, and a more decentred structure on the other.[80] On the left side, we have a core-periphery structure. It has four 'core' states, each of whom monopolises relations with a number of peripheral entities, while also maintaining relations with the other core states. On the right side, we see the very same group of states, but here the relational structure has developed into a more 'decentred' structure. Many of the previously peripheral entities now have relationships with more than one of the previous 'core' states, as well as with other smaller states around them. The previous core states still occupy a more pivotal position than the smaller ones, but their previous monopoly positions are gone.

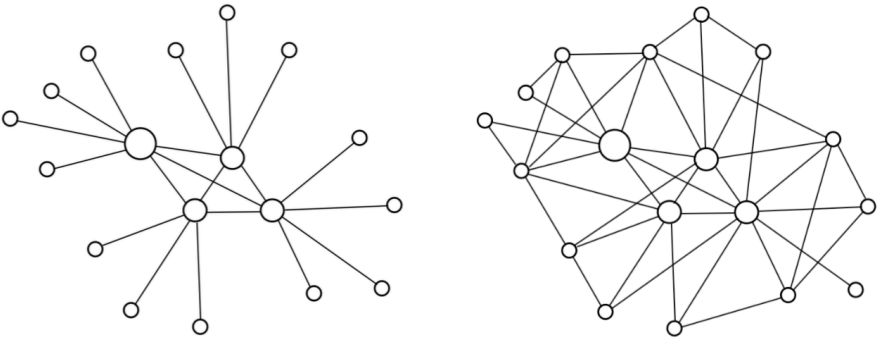

*Figure 2: Simplified models of a core-periphery structure of interaction (left) and a decentred structure of interaction (right)*

In these figures, the constellation of actors is kept exactly the same. If we think of this as the international system at two different points in time, it shows that

[80] The core-periphery structure presented here is loosely based on Galtung's "feudal center-periphery structure". Johan Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', *Journal of Peace Research* 8, no. 2 (June 1971): 81–117; See also: Carl Nordlund, 'Power-Relational Core–Periphery Structures: Peripheral Dependency and Core Dominance in Binary and Valued Networks', *Network Science* 6, no. 3 (September 2018): 348–369.

the global structure of relations can be transformed, *even if the international system is made up of exactly the same countries.*

The Liberal International Order was constructed in the aftermath of World War II. It was created at a time when the global structure of relations still maintained its core-periphery features. The rules and norms of the liberal order, in other words, brought order to a core-periphery shaped structure of global relationships, which would remain in place throughout much of the twentieth century. Today, however, the global structure of relations is evolving rapidly into a more decentred structure. This is part of the reason for why the status of the liberal order today seems less secure. It is not just that some of its rules and agreements are being contested. Another, less noted, development, is the fact that the global structure of relations – the subject of international order itself – is rapidly growing beyond the reach of the old liberal order.

When international order is viewed this way, it opens up a whole new set of questions about contemporary developments of international order. Instead of just asking the usual question of whether rising powers are 'revisionist' or 'status quo' oriented vis-à-vis the existing liberal order, this perspective shows that the contemporary struggle about the rules and norms of international order is taking place in a larger and more complex web of global relations, which continues to expand. These observations beg a few fundamental questions about the contemporary evolution of international order.

Firstly, if the subject of international order is 'expanding' through the creation of new sets of relationships between parts of the global South, are these new relationships automatically subject to the forces of the old liberal order? Or does the novelty of their existence suggest a sort of blank slate, where the ordering forces are indeterminate until some ordering principles emerge? If the latter is the case, as article 1 argues, then the status quo vs revisionism framework proves to be an inadequate analytical tool, since there is no existing order to challenge or conform to in the first place. Instead, the rising powers and their partners around the global South would best be understood as engaging in international order building on the geopolitical frontiers – bringing order to a set of relationships that are only now coming into being.

Secondly, does the decentred nature of the emerging structure of relations open the possibility of a fragmentation of international order?[81] Could there be competing centres of power, around which different international (or regional)[82] orders emerge?[83] In light of China's deteriorating relationship with the West, as well as Russia's current war on Ukraine, some scholars argue that we might be headed for a fracturing of international order, similar to the fragmentation during the Cold War.

In article 1, I argue that this is unlikely to be the case. Viewed from a relational perspective, today's global structure of relations is too densely interwoven. Even in the unlikely event that great powers like the United States and China loosen their mutual ties, or cut them altogether, they are both still tied into the same web of relations through all the countries that stand between them. For the re-emergence of a Cold War style bloc formation to occur, there would have to a separation of ties, not only between the great powers, but also between the myriad of small and medium sized countries that currently have deep ties with both sides.[84] And as discussed in more detail in article 3, these countries do emphatically *not* want to be forced to 'choose sides' and cut their relations to the other camp.[85] Bringing about such 'enforced choice' on smaller and medium sized

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[81] On the possibility of regionalisation leading to the fragmentation of global governance, see Kahler, 'Global Governance'.

[82] Buzan and Lawson argue that a "more diffuse distribution of power and the absence of superpowers suggest that the third material feature of decentred globalism will be a world with several great powers operating in a more regionalized international order." Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 277.

[83] Flockhart, 'The Coming Multi-Order World'; Flockhart and Korosteleva, 'War in Ukraine'.

[84] For a different view, suggesting the possible emergence of separate but 'overlapping' international orders, see John M Owen, 'Two Emerging International Orders? China and the United States', *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September 2021): 1415–1431; See also Flockhart, 'The Coming Multi-Order World'.

[85] Jonathan Stromseth, 'Don't Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of US-China Rivalry', *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, October 2019, 34; See also: Fareed Zakaria, 'The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn't Panic about Its Latest Challenger', *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 1 (January 2020): 66; See Seng Tan, 'Consigned to Hedge: South-East Asia and America's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy', *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 2020): 131–148.

states already encountered obstacles during the Cold War. Today, it will almost certainly not succeed at all.

What remains then is a deeply interwoven, but increasingly decentred, structure of global relations. Such a structure is without precedent in modern times, making the contemporary developments of international order different from that of earlier eras. In fact, the novelty of the emerging structure of global relations does not only pertain to questions of international order; it also changes the dynamics of great power competition more broadly. This, at least, is the argument of article 3.

## 2.7 Great Power Competition in a Decentred World

Article 3 argues that the structure of global relations has an important effect on the dynamics of great power competition. More specifically, it maintains that the contemporary emergence of a decentred structure of global relations induces different dynamics of great power competition compared to earlier eras when the core-periphery structure was still in place. Its novelty consists of advancing an argument based on relational theorising, part of which builds on indirect insights from dependency theory. The article advances two broad arguments about the influence of the global structure of relations on great power competition, both of which suggest that there are better prospects for a peaceful power transition in the contemporary system than those of earlier eras.

The first argument builds directly on the arguments in article 1, about the global structure of relations being the subject of international order. As this structure grows denser and more decentred, there is more ground that international order needs to cover (as argued previously). I recast this relational 'ground to cover' as the 'geopolitical arena' in which great power competition unfolds. As the contemporary structure of global relations grows larger and more complex, great power competition thus takes place in an expanding geopolitical arena. This means that rising powers have more 'room for manoeuvre' and more different options at their disposal than rising powers of earlier eras. This argument thus closely mirrors that of article 1: The subject of international order is expanding, opening up new and ungoverned frontiers. Rising powers can focus

their international order building there. They can grow their influence at the edges of the geopolitical arena as it keeps expanding, and thereby minimise friction with incumbent great powers on their home turf.

This does not mean that there will be no friction. Relative power in the international system overall remains a zero-sum game by definition. And great powers will continue to compete and try to maximise their power and standing relative to other great powers. But it matters how that competition takes place, where and how power is grown and cultivated, and under what circumstances power withers away. As the geopolitical arena grows larger – through a thickening of the web of relations – rising and declining great powers are more likely to find space for each other's trajectories, and thus avoid collision. In a larger geopolitical arena, great powers should be better able to accommodate each other instead of descending into conflict.

Secondly, the article argues that contemporary great powers have fewer incentives to aggressively compete for allies and spheres of influence than great powers of earlier eras. This is because the change from a core-periphery structure to a more decentred structure has changed the 'bargaining positions' between great powers on the one hand, and smaller and medium sized states on the other. This is where the insights from dependency theory come in. In the long-standing core-periphery structure of global relations, great powers enjoyed relatively exclusive access to the other states (or, indeed, colonies) within their respective spheres of influence. This tilted the bargaining positions decisively in favour of the great powers, allowing them to reap a disproportionate share of benefits from their relationships with smaller and medium sized states. One can think of these benefits as a form of monopoly rents. These benefits, in turn, translated into a strong incentive to establish, maintain and protect their network of such relationships, often in fierce competition with great power rivals.

Today, by contrast, the contemporary emergence of a more decentred structure of global relations has cut into these 'monopoly rents' by evening out the relative bargaining positions between great powers and smaller states. The old 'dependence' dynamics that subordinated weaker states to their great power patrons is withering away as the global structure of relations grows denser. This, consequently, reduces the incentives of great powers to aggressively compete with other great powers for such relations. In fact, in the current international system,

the ability of great powers to enforce any type of 'exclusivity' on smaller states is greatly reduced, as well as being strongly resisted by those states. As the web of global relations continues to grow denser, smaller and medium sized states will have more options at their disposal, and thus find it easier to avoid becoming entrapped in an unequal relationship with their great power patron. Unless the great powers manage to reverse this dynamic, and cut up the web into more exclusive network clusters, there is good reason to believe that great powers will have less and less appetite for aggressive competition with each other and consequently better prospects for peaceful relations going forward.

## 2.8 Minions in Paradise – International Order Building by Smaller States

This is a dissertation about international order and great power competition. But, as should be clear at this point, it is a dissertation that looks for insights and answers beyond the usual suspects. I argue that important developments go unnoticed when we focus exclusively on the great powers themselves and the relations between them. Instead, I've argued that a key to understanding the contemporary power transition compared to previous ones, is to situate rising and declining great powers within the wider web of relations that ties them to smaller and medium sized states in the system, and the form that this structure takes. Smaller and medium sized states, in other words, play a central role in the argumentation. While none of the three articles is devoted primarily to smaller and medium sized states as such, they nevertheless play an important – if sometimes implicit – role in all of the articles.

As a simple binary of ideal types, we can imagine world politics as either a 'rules-based system' (one where relations between states are governed by rules and norms that are embodied by international institutions, and where states enjoy sovereign equality) or a system of crude realpolitik (one where the strong 'do as they please', with no regard for anything but their own immediate interests, trampling on smaller states in the process). These two ideal types, of course, correspond to the simplest and purest expressions of liberal idealism and realism in the realm of IR theory.

The worldview conjured in this dissertation fits neither of these ideal types, but instead falls somewhere in between. It is a world where states are not made equal, and aggressively pursue their own interests under conditions of uncertainty and anarchy. But it is also a worldview that insists that the rules and norms of the prevailing international order are more than empty words. In a complex and deeply integrated world economy of almost 200 states, there is too much to be gained from cooperation to forego it altogether. And on a day to day basis, states – big and small – must adhere to the rules and norms of the system in order for other states to be willing to cooperate with them in the first place. Although great powers may be strong enough to break the rules with impunity, it is not in their long-term interest to do so at every turn, lest they lose all credibility as international partners. Great powers may sometimes break the rules, but they not do so without hesitation or consequences. They must do so sparely and choose those occasions wisely.

Importantly, the degree to which international orders are characterised by 'rules-based' relations or crude realpolitik is not fixed, but can vary across time and space.[86] For smaller and medium sized states, this variation is of utmost importance. Smaller states have a strong interest in pushing the pendulum towards a liberal, rules-based order. As a result of their smaller populations and economies, smaller states are more much more dependent on international cooperation and trade in order to thrive.[87] They are also, for obvious reasons, more vulnerable to coercion or outright conquest when rules-based relations give way to brute power politics.

For the great powers, the question is more complicated. On the one hand, a world devoid of rules and characterised by pure realpolitik allows great powers to trample on the weak and prevail. The temptation of prevailing through strength, and the accompanying frustration with rules and regimes, has never been

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[86] Kyle M. Lascurettes and Michael Poznansky, 'International Order in Theory and Practice', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, by Kyle M. Lascurettes and Michael Poznansky (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[87] On the economic side of smallness, see Peter J. Katzenstein, *Corporatism and Change: Austria, Switzerland, and the Politics of Industry*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Cornell University Press, 1984); Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe* (Cornell University Press, 1985); On the societal aspect of smallness, see B. Thorhallsson, S. Steinsson, and T. Kristinsson, in *The Small State in International Relations*, 2018.

far from the surface in US foreign policy.[88] This is part of what drives Trump's hostility to the liberal order.[89] And, indeed, sometimes great powers violate the rules and norms and force smaller states into submission. But in the long run such behaviour undermines their credibility as international partners. Short-term gains from crude pillage may be tempting, but the leaders of great powers also understand that such gains can be outweighed by the longer term benefits of positive sum cooperation.

Importantly, the danger of trampling on the interests of smaller states is considerably greater when those states have a credible option of exiting the relationship and drawing closer to rival great powers instead. This is why the transformation from a core-periphery structure to a more decentred structure is such an important development for smaller and weaker states. If a great power reveals itself to be untrustworthy and shows contempt for the rules and norms of the international order, smaller and medium sized states may opt to lessen their relations with them and preferentially tie themselves to other great powers. By voting with their feet, smaller and medium sized states thus create incentives for great powers to adhere to the rules of the system.

Of course the idea that smaller states may 'defect' to a rival great power is not new. Such dynamics existed during colonial times, as well as during the Cold War.[90] And this may give them some degree of leverage. But this leverage is not fixed. The *feasibility* of defecting – and the potential rewards to be reaped from it – differs greatly depending on the overall relational structure. A colony that successfully manoeuvres itself into the embrace of another empire, may discover the rewards to be meagre; it is still a peripheral colony, albeit in the realm of another empire.

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[88] The US administration of George W. Bush, for example, seriously undermined the rules-based order through its unilateralism, especially through the invasion of Iraq and the excesses of 'War on Terror'. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, xii.

[89] Stokes, 'Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order', 137.

[90] For the 'positional power' of peripheries under empire, see: Sindre Gade Viksand, 'Contentious Colonies: The Positional Power of Imperial Peripheries', *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 5 (December 2020): 632–651.

Indeed, the greatest rewards are arguably derived, not from 'defecting', but from carving out a middle ground and dealing with outside powers on an eclectic basis depending on the circumstances. And this is precisely what we see happening today, as states around the global South cultivate deep relationships with competing great powers, and vehemently refuse to choose sides.[91] Their ability to do so is facilitated by the contemporary emergence of multiple great powers, that are competing in a dense and decentred structure of global relations.

Through these dynamics, smaller and medium sized states play an important – but underappreciated – role in maintaining the liberal order, by pushing the pendulum towards rule-based behaviour. This line of reasoning appears in article 2, which argued that the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) played an important role in maintaining the rules-based liberal order in East Asia. The article claims that the rules-based, multilateral, and open regional order is of vital interest to small and medium sized states in the region, going beyond their loyalty to any one particular great power. By weaving a dense web of regimes and institutions, centred on ASEAN itself, the member states sought to embed the great powers in the region – China, Japan and US – into multilateral settings, and thereby channel their influence along rules-based avenues. Rather than seeing small states as passive participants in international orders created by great powers, this perspective shows how smaller states proactively use their agency to influence (or indeed strengthen) international order, in order to construct a favourable external environment for themselves. Great powers may be the makers and breakers of international orders, but smaller states are the glue that keep them together.

[91] Stromseth, 'Don't Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of US-China Rivalry'.

# 3 Methodology

The bulk of this dissertation is theoretical and conceptual rather than empirical. Nevertheless, article 2 utilises network analysis to trace international trade patterns in East Asia over the last four decades. Furthermore, the relational theorising advanced in this dissertation implies the need of mapping out the global structure of relations over time. The arguments of articles 1 and 3 rest on the assumption that the global structure of relations is changing, although the evidence for this is drawn from secondary literature. Together, this raises a number of methodological questions, which are addressed in this chapter.

Section 3.1 discusses relationalism as an approach in IR, and some of its ontological and epistemological considerations. I explain how my approach fits into the varied field of relational theorising in IR, and how my approach addresses the agent-structure problematic. Section 3.2 briefly discusses globalization as a relational process and its relation to this project. Section 3.3 looks more closely at network analysis as a methodological tool for relational work in IR. Section 3.4 looks at 'bargaining positions' (a key concept in article 3) and explains how, from a relational perspective, they can be viewed as emergent properties of relational structures. Section 3.5 and 3.6 address some methodological considerations relevant to mapping out the global structure of relations over time. Here I explain how descriptive network analysis was used in article 2 to trace the development of international trade patterns in East Asia over the last four decades, and the limitations of this method.

### 3.1 Relationalism

Relational theorising has slowly been making its way into the mainstream of the IR discipline. Building on Emirbayer's "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology", Jackson and Nexon fired the opening shot of the current wave of relational theorising in IR with a 1999 article in the European Journal of International Relations.[92] Relationalism is a broad church. At its most basic, it denotes an approach to social inquiry that puts relations (as opposed to actors/units) at the centre of analysis. From there on, it splinters into different subcategories that carry variously strong ontological and epistemological commitments.

In its strongest form, relationalism is a deep ontological commitment, that posits relations as ontologically prior to – and constitutive of – both actors and the structures in which they're embedded. This position is a radical departure from traditional social theory, which tends to give primacy to individual actors/units. Emirbayer terms this traditional approach "substantialism", which is based on "the notion that it is *substances* of various kinds (things, beings, essences) that constitute the fundamental units of all inquiry."[93] In substantialist approaches, individuals actors/units are thus construed as ontologically prior to the relations that they engage in. Strong forms of relationalism, by contrast, turns this around, maintaining that "configurations of ties give rise to what we normally refer to as entities."[94]

In its weaker form, however, relationalism may simply reflect an empirical disposition. In this context, relations are seen as worthy of empirical enquiry, without such enquiry necessarily carrying the aforementioned ontological commitments. Indeed, many studies in social sciences are empirically concerned

[92] Mustafa Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology', *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (September 1997): 281–317; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (September 1999): 291–332.

[93] Emirbayer, 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology', 282–283.

[94] Jackson and Nexon, 'Relations Before States', 292.

with relations, although they work from a largely 'substantialist' ontological position.[95]

In my approach, I chart something of an agnostic middle ground, refusing to submit to either purely 'substantialist' or 'relationalist' ontologies. I agree with the relational critique of substantialism: social entities should not be assumed as ontological priors. Social actors – such as states in my research – do not emerge in isolation, but must be understood within the larger relational structures in which they are embedded. This, indeed, is what motivates my use of a relational approach. But at the same time, I see no compelling reason to veer to the other extreme in terms of ontological commitments, and elevate relations to ontological primacy.

It seems to me that a strong relational ontology, which views actors as nothing but amalgamations of processes, is ultimately a dead end. It implies that whatever phenomenon we are looking at ultimately evaporates as soon as we zoom far enough in. It leaves us with a universe composed of nothing but 'relational flows', while at the same time denying the existence of anything that could flow. In other words, it is ultimately a proposition that is equally improbable as the substantialist premise, which views the universe as composed entirely of ontologically prior substances.

What I propose instead is an ontological position that views agents/units and relations as co-constitutive, and thus denies either of them ontological primacy over the other. Contrary to Emirbayer, Jackson and Nexon, I see no need to construe substantialism and relationalism as a binary of mutually exclusive ontological commitments. There is, in my view, simply no need to choose.[96] Social relations give rise, in important respects, to the agents that engage in them.

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[95] Whether such work is deserving of the label 'relationalism' is debatable. I include it here, however, since the ontological commitments of empirically focused work on relations are not always clear.

[96] Jackson and Nexon, by contrast, solve the same dilemma through an eclectic approach. They argue that "descriptions of an object as a 'substance' and descriptions of an object as a 'bundle of processes and relations' are complementary, in that neither exhaust the object itself." They furthermore note that "few political scientist are purely substantialists or relationalists, rather, they incorporate substantialist and relationalist assumptions to varying degrees." Nevertheless, their approach still suggests that substantialism and relationalism are mutually exclusive positions, albeit ones that should be adopted eclectically depending on the matter at hand. Jackson and Nexon, 'Relations Before States', 292.

But actors, in turn, constitute relational structures in important respects, by using their agency to build, maintain, and break social ties.

My approach of viewing actors and relations as 'co-constitutive' hews closely to Anthony Giddens's structuration approach, which attempts to solve the agent-structure problem by viewing them as 'mutually constitutive'. In Giddens's approach, structure is viewed as an unfolding process, where structure is constantly recreated (or amended) over time through the acts of agents within it.[97] Those actors themselves, however, are at the same time conditioned and enabled by the structure.[98]

The structuration approach corresponds roughly to my approach to the agent-structure problematic, in my case the relationship between states and the relational structures in which they are embedded. States are constrained and enabled by the global structure of relations; important properties like their bargaining power are emergent properties that emerge from the global structure of relations as a whole (more on that below). At the same time, states are not just derivatives of these structures, but have agency which they can use (sometimes successfully) to build or break relational ties in order to overcome the weaknesses inherent in their relational position, and thus influence the evolution of the structure.

It is worth noting that Jackson and Nexon take issue with the Giddensian structuration approach. They claim that "by deploying terms like 'co-constitution' and 'co-determination', structuration theorists tend to reinforce the *essential* separateness of agents and structures", especially when the process is viewed as a dialectic between agents and structures that unfolds over time.[99] This, they point out (building on Bartelson), effectively reifies the notion that agents have distinct 'essences' and thus undermines the original co-constitutive thesis.[100]

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[97] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 25.

[98] Jackson and Nexon, 'Relations Before States', 295.

[99] Jackson and Nexon, 295.

[100] Jackson and Nexon, 295; Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 45.

While I agree that this is strictly speaking true in an ontological sense, I would also argue that it is ultimately a moot point. The only way out of this conundrum is to insist that everything in the universe is co-constitutive of everything else. Which, again, I think is strictly speaking true as an ontological statement. But this also implies that virtually any attempt to create knowledge is to some degree in violation of the ontological premise of approaching the world holistically. The only way to create knowledge that is true to such an ontological premise, is to comprehensively grasp everything in the universe and the structure of relations that connects it in our minds simultaneously. Needless to say, this is impossible. So instead, our mortal minds are forced down less perfect avenues, breaking the world around us into agents and things, processes and relational structures. As soon as we do that, however, we've broken our ontological vows of viewing the world holistically, and entered the realm of imperfect epistemologies.

To sum up, the structuration approach might not be a fully airtight position in terms of its ontological commitments, but then again nothing is. I see it as the closest thing we can get to an epistemological position that is sensitive to the co-constitutive nature of substances and relational structures, while also allowing us ways to discuss and delineate them. I thus view it as a fruitful epistemological template for approaching the mutual entanglements of agents and the relational structures in which they're embedded – in my case, states and the relational structures that constitute world politics.

## 3.2 The Relations of Globalization

This dissertation is concerned with the transformation of the structure of global relations and its implications for international order. This structure, I argue, is rapidly becoming denser and more decentred. In terms of its empirical point of departure, this dissertation thus has overlaps with the study of 'globalization', which has spawned an extensive literature across the social sciences in recent decades.

The term globalization has been variously defined, but generally refers to the intensification of cross-border relations, driven by the erosion of national

borders as impediments to economic and social relations, and the subsequent emergence of a "shared social space" on a global scale.[101] Scholte, for example, speaks of the "ongoing large-scale growth of transplanetary – and often also supraterritorial – connectivity" and "reductions of barriers to such transworld social contacts."[102] Held et al, meanwhile, describe globalization as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life".[103] The rise and spread of modern communication technologies such as the internet play an important role in this literature by enabling these processes.[104]

The study of globalization is thus directly concerned with global relational processes. The ongoing transformation of the global structure of relations, which I am concerned with, could thus be described as an aspect of globalization. Given its preoccupation with relational processes, the study of globalization would therefore seem well suited to the use of relational methodologies. As Lewis and Chatzopoulou point out, however, the ubiquity of the term 'network' in this (and other) literatures does not necessarily signify the use of relational methodologies such as network analysis.[105] Indeed, as De Lombaerde et al point out, network analysis has so far been under-utilised in the study of globalization.[106] Instead, many of the existing globalization indicators measure globalization at the country- and/or global level.[107] Globalization is thus measured by the relative 'openness'

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[101] David Held et al., eds., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 1.

[102] Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 59, 84.

[103] Held et al., Global Transformations, 2.

[104] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2. ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

[105] Jenny M. Lewis and Sevasti Chatzopoulou, 'Analysing Networks', in *Research Methods in European Union Studies*, ed. Kennet Lynggaard, Ian Manners, and Karl Löfgren (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 168–169.

[106] Philippe De Lombaerde et al., 'Using Network Analysis to Study Globalization, Regionalization, and Multi-Polarity—Introduction to Special Section', *Network Science* 6, no. 4 (December 2018): 495–497.

[107] For country level measures of globalization, see e.g. Lukas Figge and Pim Martens, 'Globalisation Continues: The Maastricht Globalisation Index Revisited and Updated', *Globalizations* 11, no. 6 (November 2014): 875–893; See also: Savina Gygli et al., 'The KOF

of individual countries (measured either by their legal frameworks or the actual magnitude of their transborder flows), or by the overall magnitude of global transborder flows.[108] Although these measures capture the magnitude of relational flows, they do not inform us about the *structure* of global relations through which these flows are channelled.[109] As De Lombaerde et al point out, such an approach does "not necessarily inform about the distribution and reach of international relationships (IRs) of a country", for example "whether the international integration of a country is global or instead, regional."[110]

These indicators, in other words, render globalization into a unit-level (or global-level) attribute, rather than modelling it directly as a relational process. To put it in the language from the previous section, these measures approach globalization from a 'substantialist' perspective rather than a relational one. As De Lombaerde et al point out, network analysis is well suited to address these shortcomings by "[shedding] more light on the distribution and reach of [international relationships] in the global system."[111]

For the purposes of this dissertation, adding this relational perspective is crucial. Globalization, as measured by volume of transborder flows, can increase, although the structure of relations remains unchanged. This is to some extent

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Globalisation Index – Revisited', *The Review of International Organizations* 14, no. 3 (September 2019): 543–574. The revised KOF Globalisation Index, however, "[accounts] for network effects to some extent, by including variables measuring trading partner diversity and treaty partner diversity in the economic and political dimension, respectively."

[108] Caselli offers a critical evaluation of country-level measurements of globalization. It is worth nothing, however, that the alternatives he offers are different 'unit-level' measurements such as individuals, cities, and the globe itself, rather than a direct measure of relational structures. Marco Caselli, 'Nation States, Cities, and People: Alternative Ways to Measure Globalization', *SAGE Open* 3, no. 4 (January 2013).

[109] For an early critique of country-level measures of globalization that highlight some of the spatial and relational dimensions, see: Philippe De Lombaerde and P Lelio Iapadre, 'The World Is Not Flat: Implications for the Construction of Globalisation Indicators', *World Economics* 9, no. 4 (2008): 159–180.

[110] De Lombaerde et al., 'Using Network Analysis to Study Globalization, Regionalization, and Multi-Polarity—Introduction to Special Section', 495–497.

[111] De Lombaerde et al., 497. For studies that directly deal with globalization (as well as regionalization and multi-polarity) using network analysis, see other articles from the same special section in Network Science.

what happened in the second half of the 20th century: The volume of cross-border flows increased, whereas the structure of relations along which these flows took place largely retained their core-periphery contours. Today, by contrast, the structure of global relations is transforming into a denser and more decentred structure. This, however, is happening as the long-running growth of globalization (by volume) is possibly slowing down.

This dissertation thus shares important overlaps with the globalization literature, but is primarily concerned with the relational aspect of that process. It is also more state-centric than much of the globalization literature.

### 3.3 Network Analysis in Relational IR

Relational theorising in this dissertation is approached through the heuristics (and to some extent descriptive methods) of network analysis. In article 2, network analysis is used to map out the development of the international trade structure in East Asia in the last four decades. Articles 1 and 3, by contrast, employ 'ideal type' structures and concepts from network analysis to substantiate arguments on a theoretical level.

Network analysis is a tool for describing and analysing relational structures. Instead of focusing on the individual attributes of agents (in this case states), it puts the relational structure between them at the centre of analysis. In an overview article on the use of network analysis in IR, Hafner-Burton et al. highlight the difference in how structure is understood in network analysis compared to other approaches, such as neorealism.

> The neorealist concept of structure, based on the distribution of material capabilities across units, has typically dominated international relations. A network approach, by contrast, defines structures as emergent properties of

> persistent patterns of relations among agents that can define, enable, and constrain those agents.[112]

It is worth underlining that this approach does not imply that unit level attributes, for example economic size or military might, are unimportant. It does mean, however, that structure is something more than the aggregate of the structure's units and their attributes. The web of relations that connects units into a relational structure gives rise to emergent properties that are more than the sum of its parts.[113]

In the context of international relations, this means that international structure cannot be reduced to the states that make up the international system and their individual attributes. It is the web of relations that ties those states together that constitutes international structure, giving rise to emergent properties that 'define, enable and constrain' states in their behaviour and thus have important consequences for international outcomes. Indeed, as emphasised in article 1, the very same constellation of states can have a different structure of relations between them at different points in time, even if their individual attributes remain unchanged. Such changes are highlighted by relational approaches such as network analysis, but would remain invisible by approaches such as neorealism that move directly from unit-level to system-level while side-stepping the relational level.[114]

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[112] Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler, and Alexander H. Montgomery, 'Network Analysis for International Relations', *International Organization* 63, no. 3 (July 2009): 561.

[113] As Winecoff puts it: "Because the system is not just the sum of its parts, it should be studied holistically—not just the units but also the connections between them—and modern network science provides an advanced conceptual, analytical, and methodological toolkit for doing so." William Kindred Winecoff, "'The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony," Revisited: Structural Power as a Complex Network Phenomenon', *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1_suppl (September 2020): 214.

[114] It is worth noting that Waltz's neorealism does view international structure as something more than the sum of its units. It does so, however, by portraying system-level dynamics as emergent properties that arise directly from the distribution of capabilities between units in an anarchic system. It thus side-steps the relational level completely, and therefore remains unable to account for changes in the global structure of relations. On this point, see also discusssion in Jönsson and Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, 13.

## 3.4 Bargaining Positions as Emergent Properties of the Global Structure of Relations

Starting in the colonial period, the global structure of relations took the form of a core-periphery structure. By expanding outward, colonising and subjugating distant societies, states in the global North came to occupy a core position in the global web or relations, tying peripheral societies into a singular system with themselves at its centre. Today, by contrast, the growth of South-South relations, as well as processes of regional integration, are transforming this structure into a denser but also more 'decentred' web of relations. This transformation is important, I argue, because it changes the relative bargaining positions of states in the international system.

As laid out in more detail in article 3, states in the global South have long occupied a subordinate position in the international system, both in economic and political terms. Having emerged during the colonial period, these inequities persisted in the decades following decolonisation. Importantly, however, these inequities, and their persistence in the postcolonial period, cannot be reduced to unit-level characteristics, such as the inherent political and economic weaknesses of states in the South. Equally important are the unequal bargaining positions that arise from a core-periphery shaped structure of global relations. Emerging from decades or even centuries of colonisation, upon independence states in the global South found themselves relating to the outside world – economically and politically – through a narrow window to their former colonisers. States in the North, by contrast, had a much wider set of international relationships to draw on (both to other states in the North and often to multiple peripheries). This core-periphery shaped structure of relations meant that the postcolonial states were much more 'dependent' on their relationships with states in the core than vice versa – a situation that tilted the bargaining position decisively in favour of the states in the core.

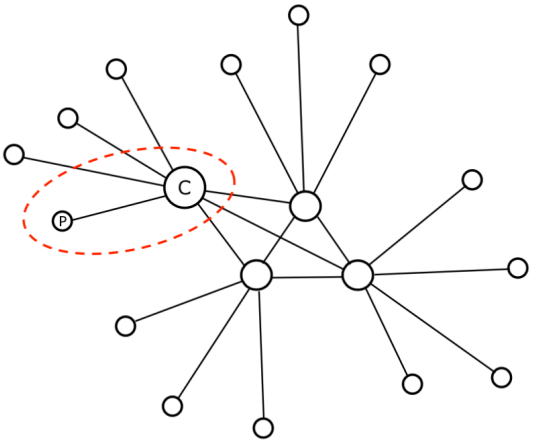


*Figure 3: Ideal type model of bargaining positions in a core-periphery structure*

Figure 3 presents a simple ideal type illustration of core-periphery relations.[115] The relationship between C and P is likely to be characterised by an unequal bargaining position, because C has multiple relationships to draw on, whereas P does not. The benefits in that relationship, whether they are economic or otherwise, are consequently likely to be slanted in favour of C.

It is important to emphasize that these dynamics cannot be deduced from either the unit-level attributes of the states in question, nor the from contents of their bilateral relationship. The unequal bargaining positions can only be gleaned by situating both states within the wider relational structure of the international system.[116] In the language of network analysis, these unequal bargaining positions are thus an emergent property that arises from the structure as a whole.

One does not need contemporary network analysis to appreciate these dynamics in principle. These processes have long been highlighted by certain

[115] The core-periphery structure presented here is loosely based on Galtung's 'feudal center-periphery structure'. Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism'; For a formal definition of core-periphery structures in network terms, see: Stephen P Borgatti and Martin G Everett, 'Models of Core/Periphery Structures', *Social Networks* 21, no. 4 (October 2000): 375–395; See however Nordlund, 'Power-Relational Core–Periphery Structures'.

[116] On this point, see: Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery, 'Network Analysis for International Relations', 572.

strands of dependency theory as well as other critical strands of IR theory.[117] Johan Galtung, for example, highlights the unequal bargaining positions that arise from a core-periphery structure in his "structural theory of imperialism".[118] Network analysis, however, provides a useful tool to map out and visualise these dynamics, as well as measuring and tracing the development of such structures over time.[119]

The structural power that derives from an actor's position within a relational network has long been a key focus of network analysis. One way to approach structural power is to measure an actor's 'centrality' in a network.[120] As Hafner-Burton et al. point out, this approach has been used to some extent in IR scholarship.[121] However, centrality is often an insufficient measure in and of itself. The relative centrality (or peripherality) of those one wishes to wield leverage over matters as well. As Bonacich argues, "in bargaining situations, it is advantageous to be connected to those who have few options; power comes from being connected to those who are powerless."[122] This description fits well with the dynamics of a core-periphery structure of relations. Great powers in the core enjoy a high degree of centrality in the overall network, as well as being connected to peripheral units with few alternative options.[123] The power that core states have

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[117] See an overview of core-periphery usage in dependency theory and world-systems analysis in Nordlund, 'Power-Relational Core–Periphery Structures', 350–353.

[118] Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism'.

[119] Nexon and Wright, for example, draw on Galtung's original formulation to build a network account of imperial relations. Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, 'What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate', *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (May 2007): 253.

[120] Network analysis offers several different centrality measures, which capture different aspects of an actor's centrality in a network. For an overview, see John Scott, *Social Network Analysis*, 3rd edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013).

[121] Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery, 'Network Analysis for International Relations', 570–571.

[122] Phillip Bonacich, 'Power and Centrality: A Family of Measures', *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 5 (March 1987): 1171.

[123] As Nexon and Wright point out, the key feature of this structure is not just the centrality of states in the core, but the absence of ties between states in the periphery. Nexon and Wright, 'What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate', 258; For Motyl (like Galtung), this structure

long wielded over peripheral ones is thus, in important respects, derived from dynamics that arise from the overall the relational structure.

It is therefore unsurprising that peripheral units have often sought to alleviate their dependence on their respective core states by establishing other relationships and thereby diversify their options. The Bandung Conference and the Third World movement that followed in its wake was in important respects an attempt to do that. This is discussed in more detail in article 3. Such changes, however, can take a long time to materialise. Deep rooted economic and political relationships have a certain element of path dependency that cannot be replaced overnight.[124] Attempts to alter the structure, furthermore, can be hampered by the obstruction of great powers that benefit from the existing structure, as well as a lack of feasible options in the international system. As Hafner-Burton et al point out,

> [n]odes that possess bargaining power will attempt to reduce the risk of exit, either through enhancing their appeal to network partners or by using coercion. Returning to the conventional imperial, hub-and-spoke network, for example, exit was constrained by coercion and by the absence of political "space" that was not colonized (exit from one empire risked capture by another).[125]

Decolonisation opened up a space of increased autonomy for the newly independent countries to choose their external relationships. However, as discussed in article 3, the Cold War nevertheless contained an important dynamic of great power exclusivity. States were under enormous pressure to 'choose sides' in the unfolding Cold War rivalry, facing the wrath of the great powers if they attempted to play both sides. As I argue in article 3, the Non-Aligned Movement can in important respects be seen as a deliberate attempt by states in the global

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is a defining feature of imperial relations: Alexander J. Motyl, *Imperial Ends: The Decay, Collapse, and Revival of Empires* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 15–17.

[124] As Goddard puts it: "Network ties, once formed, are sticky." Goddard, 'Embedded Revisionism', 768.

[125] Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery, 'Network Analysis for International Relations', 573.

South to overcome these dynamics and carve out a more autonomous relational space.

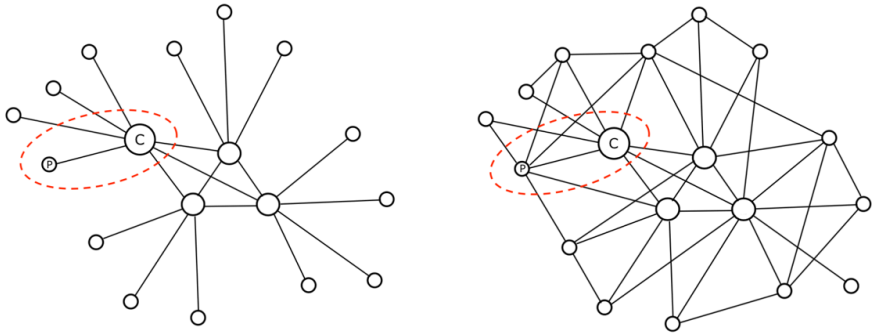


*Figure 4: Ideal type models of bargaining positions in a core-periphery structure (left) and a decentred structure (right).*

In the last two decades, however, the global structure of relations has rapidly grown denser and more decentred. The above figure provides an ideal type illustration of how this change affects the bargaining position from the previous figure. As we can see here, P now has a wider set of relationships to draw on, thereby improving its bargaining position in its relationship with C.

Note that these two graphs are completely identical, apart from the relational structure that connects the units. This is to emphasise that structural change can take place even though the constellation of actors and their unit level attributes remain the same. The change in the nature of the relationship between C and P can only be appreciated by mapping out the overall relational structure and how it changes over time. This transformation thus remains invisible in approaches that focus only on unit level attributes, or reduce structure to 'polarity' or the distribution of capabilities such as neorealism

Viewing this through the lens of network analysis reveals an important feature of the relationship between great powers and smaller and/or weaker states. The move from a core-periphery structure to a decentred structure reduces the structural power of great powers in general, while increasing the structural power of smaller and medium sized states. This, of course, is the reason that I argue in article 3 that great powers are experiencing a 'decreasing return' to their spheres of influence.

## 3.5 Mapping Out the 'Global Structure of Relations'

In this dissertation, I draw mainly on secondary literature to substantiate the claim that the global structure of relations is undergoing a transformation. An exception to this is article 2, where I trace the international trade structure in East Asia from 1981 to 2017, using the tools of network analysis. Because of the usual word constraints of journal articles, the methodology was only briefly laid out in the article itself. This section therefore explains some of the methodological issues and considerations that are involved in operationalising network data in general. In doing so, I also explain the methodology employed in article 2 in more detail, motivate the methodological choices, and discuss their limitations.

In network analysis, relations between agents can take different forms. Most importantly, relations are classified according to whether they are 'directed' or 'undirected' ties on the one hand, and whether they are 'valued' or 'dichotomous' on the other. An 'undirected tie' means that the relation between agent A and agent B is, by definition, assumed to be the same as the relation between agent B and agent A. If, for example, the relation consists of working in the same place, then there is either a tie between two agents or there is not. However, a 'directed tie' means that there can (potentially) be a meaningful difference in how agent A relates to agent B compared to how B relates to A. International trade data, as the ones I analyse in this article, provide a good example of directed ties: Country A can export to country B without country B necessarily exporting back to country A.

A distinction is also made between valued ties and dichotomous ties. Valued ties take a measurable magnitude (ties can have different values), whereas dichotomous ties are either present or absent. If a relation consists, for example, of two countries being or not being adjacent to each other, then the tie is either there or not and is, therefore, dichotomous. However, international trade data, again, provides an example of ties that are valued. The existence of an international trade tie between a pair of countries does not mean that it is equal to that of another pair of countries. The strength of the tie can take different values depending on the amount of trade.

International trade data, such as the data used in article 2, thus consists of ties between country pairs that are directed and valued. However, the question of whether to use valued or dichotomous ties is not only determined by the nature of the data in question, but is also a matter of methodological choice. In international trade, for example, there is usually at least *some* trade between almost all possible country pairs. The visual representation of these ties, therefore, will be of limited value for seeing changes in trade structures over time.[126] Furthermore, a valued network approach to international trade would use the absolute monetary value of trade relations as a tie and therefore give significantly more weight to large economies than smaller ones.[127] In some cases this might be appropriate and desirable, as it captures the full richness of the data. However, it runs contrary to the aims and purposes of article 1, where I wish to grant equal weight to the states in the region in the analysis.

In article 2, I therefore decided to transform the data into dichotomous ties. Simply put, I posit that a tie exists when country A exports equal to or more than 10% of its overall exports to country B in a given year. By doing so, I give equal weight to all countries under investigation. The reason for doing this is that, as mentioned before, the aim of study is to identify 'important trade partners' for countries in the region and to analyse how the structure of those relations changes over time. And since the economies of the countries in the region are of varying sizes, the absolute monetary value of an 'important trade relationship' will look very different for, say, Laos than it would for Thailand or Indonesia. By breaking their overall exports into percentages and using 10% as a cut-off point, this approach allows me to identify important trade partners in a way that is comparable between countries in the region.[128] In article 2, the aim was thus to produce a descriptive account of the evolution of the regional economic order in East Asia. To do so, I used the method described above to create network graphs

[126] Although this, in principle, could be altered in the visualisation while keeping the valued data intact in statistical analysis.

[127] An alternative would be to recalculate the absolute values as percentages of either GDP or overall exports.

[128] The choice of 10% as the cut-off point is necessarily a somewhat arbitrary decision. The parameters that define what constitutes an 'important trade partner' could be put at a different value.

of the region's international trade structure at five different points in time – 1981, 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2017 – based on the main export destinations for states in the region.

This method is facilitated by the availability of relatively complete international trade data stretching back to around 1980. But it also has important limitations. I use it as a proxy for gauging the development of the region's economic relations over time. International trade, however, only reflects one aspect of such relations. For a more comprehensive overview, one might want to include other variables such as foreign direct investment and development financing. The relative increase in the weight of international trade in services in recent years is a further limitation, since the DOTS data that I use consists solely of merchandise trade. Furthermore, the use of cut-off points to create dichotomous values also necessarily involves some level of arbitrariness, and brings about a simplified overview of developments, and thus runs the risk of overlooking some of the nuances.

Furthermore, the more recent emergence of complex value chains that transcend national boundaries has added a new dimension to international trade. This means that a much larger part of international trade now consists of intermediary inputs instead of just finished products.[129] While these value chains are not a problem per se (they are part of the empirical developments I want to describe), these changes do need to be kept in mind when we interpret the development of international trade structures over time.

Lastly, it is worth noting that international trade research has traditionally made use of the gravity model of international trade, originally introduced by Jan Tinbergen.[130] This approach models international trade flows as a function of the distance between any pair of countries as well as their economic size.[131] As such,

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[129] World Bank, *Trading for Development in the Age of Global Value Chains*, World Development Report 2020 (Washington, D.C: The World Bank Group, 2020), 2.

[130] Jan Tinbergen, Shaping the World Economy: Suggestions for an International Economic Policy (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1962).

[131] Sometimes gravity models are specified with additional variables, such as common language or contiguity, depending on context and research question. For an overview of the logic behind the gravity model, see: Paul R. Krugman, Maurice Obstfeld, and Marc J. Melitz, *International Economics: Theory and Policy*, 11th edition (Harlow: Pearson, 2018), 38–51.

it provides a baseline along which actual dyadic flows can be compared, in order to assess the impact of particular variables of interest, for example membership of military alliances or the impact of trade agreements, and has thus served an important role in International Political Economy research.[132] As Mansfield puts it, the gravity model "has become a workhorse in empirical studies of the political and economic determinants of bilateral trade flows."[133] In recent years, however, a critique has emerged of the gravity model methodology. By modelling dyadic flows as individual data points in a regression model, the critics point out, the gravity model erroneously assumes dyadic trade relationships are independent observations and thus ignores network effects.[134] As a response to that, efforts have been made to model international trade using network methods, while at the same time incorporating distance into the model.[135]

In any case, a detailed treatment of these issues falls outside the scope of this dissertation, since my aim here is not to test individual variables as determinants of dyadic trade flows, but merely to map out the overall structure of such flows, and the transformation of that structure over time. The gravity model approach provides a valuable tool to probe the determinants of global trade flows and why they change over time. In my work, by contrast, I take these structural transformations as my empirical point of departure and explore what they entail for the evolution of international order.

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[132] Gowa and Mansfield, for example, use the gravity model to assess the effect of military alliances on bilateral trade flows. Joanne Gowa and Edward D. Mansfield, 'Power Politics and International Trade', *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (1993): 408–420.

[133] Edward D. Mansfield, 'Quantitative Approaches to the International Political Economy', in *Models, Numbers, and Cases: Methods for Studying International Relations*, ed. Detlef F. Sprinz and Yael Wolinsky-Nahmias (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 159.

[134] Michael D. Ward, John S. Ahlquist, and Arturas Rozenas, 'Gravity's Rainbow: A Dynamic Latent Space Model for the World Trade Network', *Network Science* 1, no. 1 (April 2013): 95–118.

[135] Ward, Ahlquist, and Rozenas; See also: Angela Abbate et al., 'Distance-Varying Assortativity and Clustering of the International Trade Network', *Network Science* 6, no. 4 (December 2018): 517–544.

### 3.6 Meaningful Relations – Some Methodological Reflections

In order to trace the development of the global structure of relations over time, we need to define and empirically map out relations between the relevant actors (in our case states). This, however, poses several methodological challenges. Firstly, we need to decide what kind of 'relation' is being measured – whether it is economic, political, or social. The same set of actors might have a somewhat different network of relations between them depending on the sphere of activity being measured. Secondly, we need to define the threshold of what constitutes a 'meaningful relation'. When it comes to measures of interstate relations (e.g. international trade figures), there is usually at least *some* degree of measurable relations between all country dyads (e.g. at least some trade). In order to discern overall patters and their development over time, it is therefore necessary to trace how the amounts change over time.

In the example above from article 2, I used data on international trade as a proxy to map out economic relationships in East Asia over the last four decades. One could, of course, use other measures as well, depending on data availability. In addition to international trade, IR scholars have made use of data on diplomatic recognition, [136] common membership of international organisations, [137] membership of military alliances,[138] free trade agreements,[139] and air traffic,[140] to

[136] Brandon J Kinne, 'Dependent Diplomacy: Signaling, Strategy, and Prestige in the Diplomatic Network', *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 2014): 247–259; See also: Marina G Duque, 'Recognizing International Status: A Relational Approach', *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (September 2018): 577–592.

[137] Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Alexander H. Montgomery, 'Power Positions: International Organizations, Social Networks, and Conflict', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 1 (2006): 3–27.

[138] Skyler J. Cranmer, Bruce A. Desmarais, and Elizabeth J. Menninga, 'Complex Dependencies in the Alliance Network', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 29, no. 3 (July 2012): 279–313.

[139] Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Alexander H. Montgomery, 'War, Trade, and Distrust: Why Trade Agreements Don't Always Keep the Peace', *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 29, no. 3 (July 2012): 257–278.

[140] Philip B.K. Potter, 'Globalization, Interdependence, and Major Power Accommodation', in *Accommodating Rising Powers: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. T. V. Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 65–66.

name a few examples.[141] International trade is particularly useful, though, because of the availability of data, as well as its dynamic nature. As Hafner-Burton et al point out, international organisations seldom close down or lose members. Network data based on shared membership of international organisations may thus be measuring "congealed ties" that offer a "static view of world politics" at the time of their creation, rather than reflecting the changing dynamics relationships over time.[142] International trade, by contrast, is a type of tie that is continuously recreated by millions of individual decisions, and thus offers a dynamic picture of how the relationship structure changes from year to year.

There are thus different ways of operationalising network ties in IR research. Indeed, different types of data as well as different methodological decisions will be appropriate depending on the types of questions being addressed, as well as the theoretical framework being employed. However, to return to the argument in article 1, if we take seriously the premise that *relations* are the subject of international order, there is no getting around the issue of thinking concretely about the structure of relations that is being 'ordered'. While there is no unproblematic way of measuring such structures empirically, imperfect attempts will almost certainly wield better results than erroneously assuming that all states in the system have a similarly meaningful relationship with all other states in the system.

This brings us back to the thorny question of what constitutes a 'meaningful relationship' in world politics.[143] In most cases, any attempt at a binary definition of this concept will inevitably be rather arbitrary. Indeed, as discussed in article 1, the definition of 'meaningful' need not be binary at all. If the tie in question is measured at an ordinal or interval level (e.g. international trade), it can be thought of as existing along a continuum and, thus, constitute a correspondingly small or large part of the global structure of relations. As argued in article 1, however, the precise answers to these questions should be left to the

[141] Goddard, by contrast, uses a composite approach, combining quantitative data with a qualitative assessment of historical data to map out relations between great powers. Goddard, 'Embedded Revisionism'.

[142] Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery, 'Network Analysis for International Relations', 579.

[143] Motyl, *Imperial Ends*, 17.

theoretical and methodological discretion of different researchers. The main point is that regardless of the type of international order that is being theorised (economic order, security order cultural order), there always exists a structure of relations that is subject to that order – and thus an implicit need to map it out.

# 4 Conclusions

The larger part of this dissertation is concerned with building a theoretical and conceptual framework with which to understand international orders. In the first half of the conclusions, I offer a meta-theoretical reflection on my process of building such a framework. I explain how I view the role of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in the social sciences, and their relationship to empirical world which they seek to explain.

In the second half of the conclusions, I draw together the main arguments of the dissertation and take a look at current geopolitical developments. Although I make no predictions about the future, I seek to show how the theoretical framework offered here can help to understand the evolution of international order in the turbulent geopolitical waters ahead.

## 4.1 In Defence of Grand Narratives

One of the main contributions of this dissertation is a theoretical and conceptual framework of international order, based on a relational perspective. Its purpose is to help us understand the implications of today's rising powers on the prevailing international order. In this section I explain what I mean by a 'theoretical and conceptual framework'. I also explain the process that went into building it, what it is for, and what its limitations are.

I view theoretical and conceptual frameworks as cognitive maps through which we understand the world. They bring order to an otherwise infinitely complex empirical reality. They are essentially simplifying devices; they break the world into things with labels (conceptualisation) and delineate relationships

between them (theory). In fact, I would go so far as to argue that there is no such thing as knowledge or thought that is not on some level embedded within such frameworks. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks in the social sciences are thus not something unique to our work in academia, but an extension of how our human minds make sense of the world around us more generally. In the social sciences, however, we have particularly strong reasons to critically evaluate the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that we employ, and constantly try to improve them.

In this dissertation, I speak of a 'theoretical and conceptual framework' (instead of just 'theoretical framework') because a particular conceptualisation of international order is key to my argumentation. Indeed, it is worth emphasising that theories and concepts are closely related; concepts are the building blocks of theory. Yet, these are not two completely independent undertakings. The way things are conceptualised often carries implications for the kinds of theories that can be built with them and vice versa. And when it comes to conceptualising something as large and abstract as 'international order', it becomes difficult to draw any clear line between theory and conceptualisation at all.

Conceptualisations are never wrong as such. If you define a concept in a particular way, and use it consistently, there is no basis on which to 'disprove' that definition. Conceptualisations are thus (quite literally) correct by definition. What we can say, however, is that different conceptualisations can be more or less useful in making sense of the world around us. Some conceptualisations obscure rather than clarify the realities they purport to explain. Moreover, different conceptualisations may be more or less useful depending on the issue at hand, or depending on the time and place. Once useful concepts may cease to be useful (or even become obstacles to understanding) once the empirical reality they describe changes.

None of this is to say that there is always one particular conceptualisation that is superior to all other options. In abstract academic debates, concepts will always be a matter of debate. Indeed, despite the danger of confusion, there is value in conceptual plurality. As discussed in the introduction, for example, there is a substantial difference in which international order is defined in the English School canon compared to the Liberal International Order literature on which I

build. Neither definition can claim to be more correct than the other, and each can – in different ways – lead us down fruitful avenues of research.

Theory, by contrast, can be proven wrong in the sense that the relationships the theory delineates can be disproven by empirical observation. When this happens, it calls into question not only the relationships that the theory predicts, but often also the adequacy of the concepts in that framework. Indeed, theory is often salvaged (or at least patched up) by a re-conceptualisation of key terms, rather than a reconfiguration of the relationships between them. An adjustment of the definition of key concepts can make the framework fit back with the empirical developments being observed. The point, again, is that the theorising and conceptualising is often deeply intertwined.

In this dissertation I advance a theoretical and conceptual framework of international order, which builds on a critical engagement with the existing literature on international order. The process of producing this framework is an iterative one, where the theoretical and conceptual framework stands in a dialectical relationship with the empirical reality it tries to explain. The process unfolds as follows.

I start with an existing theoretical framework (in my case, Ikenberry's framework of the Liberal International Order and related works) and use it to analyse an empirical development (in my case, the rise of new powers in world politics). In doing so, I encounter problems with the original framework. The problems are of different kinds. Firstly, the original framework carries assumptions that are not borne out by the empirical developments: The US, the hegemon itself, started to undermine the liberal order. This is a theoretical shortcoming. Secondly, it collapses what are better seen as two separate phenomena into one concept: It conceptualises international order in a way that conflates the liberal order with US hegemony. As a result of that, it obscures important nuances in the interests and strategies of rising powers. This is a conceptual shortcoming. Thirdly, the original framework has nothing to say about an important contemporary development: the proliferation of South-South relationships and the subsequent transformation of the global structure of relations. This is a shortcoming in the scope of the framework. My aim is to improve the framework in order to resolve these shortcomings.

The first and second problems are resolved by the same conceptual move. By divorcing the liberal order from US hegemony, I remove the unhelpful (and incorrect) assumption that the interests of the US and the liberal order are always one and the same. This way, US ambivalence towards the liberal order ceases to be a mystery. Instead, I conceptualise international order as a contested supranational political construct that is beyond the control of any one state. This conceptual adjustment also removes unnecessary assumptions of rising powers being revisionists, suggesting that they can, in fact, be relatively content with key aspects of the prevailing international order. It allows us to separate rising powers' geopolitical ambitions vis-à-vis the US from their international ordering preferences. This part of my contribution is thus mainly conceptual. Such a conceptualisation of international order, I believe, gives us better ways of analysing the ongoing power transition.

However, to resolve the third problem – the transformation of the global structure of relations – requires an expansion of the scope of the framework. I achieve this expansion by reconfiguring the theoretical framework from a relational perspective. I do this via a base-superstructure model, where the global structure of relations is posited as the subject of international order. This part of the theorisation process is thus not an act of conceptual adjustment, but one of theoretical innovation, where I draw on relational approaches in IR theory and merge them into my theoretical and conceptual framework of international order. Rather than being an adjustment of the original framework, this move adds a whole new dimension to the framework, making it sensitive to changes in the structure of global relations.

To sum up, I thus view theorising as an iterative process, where theory and empirics stand in a never ending dialectical relationship with each other. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks (in some form or other) tell us where to look for empirics. It gives us concepts with which we organise our observations and suggests relationships between them. Upon examination, however, those empirics often reveal cracks in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks we started off with. This, in turn, forces us to revise our theoretical frameworks or discard them in favour of new ones. Those new frameworks then again inform our next round of empirical enquiry. And so on and so on. All work in the social sciences finds itself somewhere in this never ending cycle. One may hope that this

process leads us ever closer to some sort of stable synthesis. And sometimes it does. But then again the social world is seldom stable for long. It continues to change, sending us right back to square one.

As should be clear by now, this dissertation is primarily preoccupied with the theoretical and conceptual part of the cycle. Ikenberry and other scholars writing in the same tradition have created a powerful theoretical and conceptual framework to explain the international order that emerged after World War II. The rise of new powers and the tribulations of US hegemony, however, have revealed cracks in the framework. The proliferation of South-South relationships, furthermore, revealed an important development that was not adequately captured by their original framework. These are not fatal flaws. If I thought they were, I would not use these theoretical frameworks as my point of departure. They do, however, call for significant overhaul of the framework. This dissertation is my attempt at such overhaul.

Lastly, what is the point of all this? What use is an improved and updated theoretical framework of international order, and what are its limitations? As laid out above, I view theoretical and conceptual frameworks as cognitive maps with which we organise and interpret empirical developments. As such, they serve the role of helping us understand the world around us.

For further academic work, the theoretical and conceptual framework I propose can thus serve as a point of departure for empirical studies, guiding the collection and subsequent interpretation of data. If international order is construed as a contested supranational political construct – as opposed to being symbiotic with US hegemony – this has important implications for our interpretation of certain actions and strategies of rising powers such as China. Indeed, this is an important aspect of article 2. There I assess the status of the liberal order in East Asia, interpreting empirical developments in the region through this proposed conceptual and theoretical framework. Similarly, employing the relational perspective on international order also has implications for how we interpret the proliferation of institutions and agreements that govern relations amongst rising powers and other areas of the global South.

Any theoretical and conceptual framework is a simplified model of an infinitely complex empirical reality. The more abstract the theory (and the more 'macro' the reality it tries to explain), the larger the simplifications and omissions

inevitably become. The framework I advance in this dissertation is both very abstract, and is directed at macro-historical developments. As such, it contains large simplifications and omissions, which present important limitations in its use.

Like any theoretical framework, this framework is limited by what it was built to explain, which in my case are long-term structural transformations in world politics. Work of this kind identifies and explains changes in long-term structural forces, but does not purport to provide explanations of individual empirical cases, which inevitably involve many more moving parts. Instead, it is better viewed as a background template which informs more detailed empirical and theoretical work.

Some may ask whether such macro-historical work is worth doing at all, given the violence it inevitably inflicts on the details of the historical record. As Zarakol points out, there is increasing ambivalence towards "macro-synthetic" work in IR which is criticised as being reductive and (often) Eurocentric. Her response to this charge is worth quoting at length.

> [T]he desire to move away from all macro history and synthetic work actually runs at times counter to the desire to move social sciences towards more global and less Eurocentric accounts. If we dismantle Eurocentric grand histories that have animated our modern international order without replacing them with anything but micro-oriented work, those macro-historical accounts that we think we have dismantled through our brilliantly devastating critiques of Eurocentrism will simply live on as zombie common-sense versions of themselves, filling in the blanks wherever there are some, and every account has blanks.[144]

Macro-history, grand narratives, grand theory; whatever we call them, they all have a hard time in the social sciences these days. Their shortcomings are everywhere on display. As the wealth of detailed theoretical and empirical work grows by the day, it is easy to point out their simplifications, and tempting to dismiss them as lazy conjecture. As Zarakol argues, however, there is no such thing as dispensing with grand synthesis altogether. They will always live on as implicit background templates into which we organise more detailed

[144] Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 271.

observations. The only option is to continue critically evaluating our grand narratives and do our best to improve them. Our efforts will surely fall short. And that's alright; it's the name of the game. But if we seek to banish them, they just become invisible – making them all the more powerful as a result.

## 4.2 International Order in the World Ahead

At the start of this dissertation, we revisited January 2017, as Donald Trump was settling into the Oval Office, intent on re-negotiating the United States' role in the world, and threatening to "take an axe" to much of the liberal international order in the process.[145] In those heady days, when Angela Merkel and Shinzo Abe were widely seen as the last bastions of defence for the liberal order, they found an unlikely ally in Xi Jinping, who was also not too keen on seeing the prevailing system implode.

Five years later, the pendulum is swinging back. More than two years into the Covid pandemic, China remains barricaded behind draconian self-imposed pandemic restrictions, and has started to litter the coastline of Taiwan with ballistic missiles. Its use of coercive economic measures to punish smaller states, from Australia to Lithuania, for perceived slights, has further tarnished China's credentials as a champion of rules-based globalization.[146] Russia, meanwhile, is as of writing, seven months into its invasion of Ukraine, inflicting thousands of casualties, and explicitly threatening to wipe the country off the map. As Russia's prospects in the war grow dimmer by the day, Russia's president Vladimir Putin has resorted to thinly veiled threats of nuclear escalation.

In the US, by contrast, a new administration led by Joe Biden has entered the White House, intent on repairing the damage done during the Trump years and promising to resume the country's role as leader of the liberal order.

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[145] Gideon Rachman, 'Donald Trump and the Dangers of America First', *Financial Times*, November 2016, https://on.ft.com/3p0yBjt.

[146] Aya Adachi, Alexander Brown, and Max J. Zenglein, 'Fasten Your Seatbelts: How to Manage China's Economic Coercion', MERICS China Monitor (Mercator Institute for China Studies, August 2022).

Ironically, it has been greatly aided in that endeavour by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has rallied Western countries and other key allies behind US-led sanctions and support for Ukraine. Due to these turbulent times, US allies have been forced to set aside their leftover grievances from the Trump years, and instead focus on more immediate concerns.

The extent of the turnaround, however, should not be exaggerated. While there has been a complete reversal of foreign policy discourse emanating from the White House, in terms of policy substance, there is more continuation from the Trump administration than meets the eye. On international trade, the Biden administration has kept in place most of the protectionist measures put in place by his predecessor, and still refuses to appoint new judges on the World Trade Organization's Appellate Body, effectively paralysing the institution's dispute settlement mechanism.[147] As Cecilia Malmström, the EU's former trade commissioner puts it: "President Biden's trade agenda in all but rhetoric is exactly the same so far as president Trump's. It's still America first."[148]

The size of the coalition against Russia should not be exaggerated either. Most of Europe is firmly behind the US position, and so are key allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, cracks are visible in the Western alliance; NATO members such Turkey and Hungary have proven to be anything but reliable allies during the war. Elsewhere, the response has been even more mixed. In most of the developing world, there is little appetite for getting drawn into geopolitical bloc formation by joining the Western-led sanctions regime. Lecturing by Western leaders about the global South's moral imperative to fall in line is falling on deaf ears. Indeed, many governments in the global South express barely concealed contempt for what they consider Western hypocrisy and double standards when it comes to the rules-based liberal order.[149] They point to the US's own track of foreign invasions, as well as its selective

[147] Sarah Anne Aarup, "'All Talk and No Walk": America Ain't Back at the WTO', *Politico*, November 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/united-states-world-trade-organization-joe-biden/.

[148] Qouted in: Andy Bounds, 'The WTO's Lonely Struggle to Defend Global Trade', *Financial Times*, June 2022, https://on.ft.com/3tt6vjh.

[149] Edward Luce, 'Biden Should Scrap Talk of the "Liberal International Order"', *Financial Times*, April 2022, https://on.ft.com/3vrALeA.

application of rules and norms, not to mention the impunity that US allies like Israel seem to enjoy.

Furthermore, while the war in Ukraine may have patched up the transatlantic alliance, deep rifts remain and might open again. While most Europeans are relieved that the war broke out with Biden rather than Trump occupying the White House, they are keenly aware that they might not be so lucky when the next international crisis occurs. Knowing that the United States is only one election away from upending its global relationships and commitments, leaders within the European Union have accelerated their quest for more strategic autonomy. They are also deeply hesitant to follow the US down a path of spiralling confrontation with China. Compared to the United States, European states have limited security commitments in the Asia-Pacific, whereas some of them – like Germany – have a deep and lucrative economic relationship with China. Unsurprisingly, they are therefore loath to see those economic relations become collateral damage in a US-China rivalry. On this front too, however, the US has been gifted a strategic victory, this time from China, as Xi Jinping continues his quest of burning the bridges that his country has built in the last few decades, undermining the possibility of a more balanced relationship with Europe.

Where the geopolitical pendulum will swing next is difficult to tell. I certainly don't intent to make any predictions. What is clear, however, is that the old 'hegemonic theories of the liberal order' provide an unreliable roadmap for navigating the times ahead. If there is such a thing as the Liberal International Order, it is not defined by the power and preferences of the United States, nor by those of any other country. The liberal order is a fragile political construct; one that is being re-negotiated and re-created at every turn. The liberal order has never been as powerful, consistent, or all-encompassing as its main proponents proclaimed. But nor is it wholly imaginary as its fiercest critics maintain.

There remains, after all, a deep and wide constituency in the international system for an open and liberal economy, as well as accompanying rules-based, multilateral institutions to govern it. Smaller states, in particular, depend on global markets to thrive and sovereign equality to survive. The basic features of the liberal order will endure so long as there are sufficient stakeholders to underpin

it. We should, however, avoid hasty assumptions about who those stakeholders will be, and what preferences they will hold.

As I argue in dissertation, international order is best understood as a contested and dynamic political construct that evolves over time. It guides and shapes the relations between states, who in turn are engaged in continuous efforts to shape the nature of international order to their advantage. By adopting this perspective, we can dispense with the unhelpful tendency to tie the liberal order to the power and preferences of the US and its Western allies. It allows us to see that the interests and preferences of states can change over time, which can lead to friction between the liberal order and its original creators. Furthermore, as the global distribution of power changes, so does the relative ability of states to shape the prevailing order. For the US, in particular, this adjustment is proving difficult. As its power wanes, the US is grudgingly coming to terms with its place in an international order that has grown beyond its control.

The relative continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations on foreign economic policy further reminds us that in order to understand the tensions between the US and the liberal order, we need to look beyond the idiosyncrasies of the Trump administration. This suggests that, instead of being a complete aberration, the Trump presidency was just a uniquely obnoxious manifestation of a much deeper trend: The diverging paths of the liberal order on the one hand, and that of US interests and foreign policy on the other. The roots of that divergence lie in the decline of US hegemony, and its subsequent inability to refashion the liberal order to suit its interests and preferences as they change. It is easy to follow an international order when you have written most of its rules yourself, and can continue tweaking and rewriting them as you go along. But those days are gone. Today, the rules are being written by a much bigger and more diverse set of stakeholders – some of which are decidedly less acquiescent than the US's traditional allies.

Two decades into the new millennium, it is clear that we are undergoing a power transition. It is far less clear, however, what preferences each of the great powers will bring to the table, as a new balance of power takes shape, and with it a more widely distributed ability to shape the prevailing international order. Recent decades have indicated that rising powers like China will want to keep many of the key features of the liberal order intact. Recent trends in US politics,

on the other hand, show that unconditional US support for the liberal order is not to be taken for granted. Such trends and predispositions can change, however, as they have done in the last two years. Nevertheless, such twists and turns should caution us against hasty assumptions about 'revisionist' or 'status quo' preferences of rising and incumbent great powers.

The current power transition has also been accompanied by a transformation of the global structure of relations. With the rise of non-Western powers, there has been an explosion of political and economic relations throughout the global South, making the global structure of relations both denser and more decentred. As I've argued in this dissertation, we need a relational theory of international order to capture these processes, and I've sketched out a theoretical and conceptual framework to this end. This framework consists of a base-superstructure model, where the global structure of relations is conceived as the 'subject', on which the forces of international order exert themselves. As the proliferation of South-South relations is making the global structure of relations both denser and more decentred, it is thus effectively expanding the ground that international order needs to cover.

The use of this framework thus gives us a new way to view the proliferation of new international institutions and agreements led by China and other rising powers. It suggests that these new institutions and agreements are not necessarily an assault on the existing institutional framework of the liberal order, but instead represents international order building on the frontiers of an expanding structure of global relations. The collection of institutions and agreements that comprise the prevailing international order is thus growing larger and more diverse, with a larger set of great powers calling the shots. It remains to be seen whether these new institutions are of similar nature as the existing ones and will fit neatly into the existing liberal order, or whether they ultimately represent an attempt to revise the rules and norms of the liberal order. This is an open question that needs to be approached without a priori assumptions about revisionist or status quo orientations.

The arguments of this dissertation present a number of avenues for further research. As just mentioned, the proliferation of new institutions and agreements led by rising powers represents an important development of international order. How they will they fit into the existing liberal order (and to what extent they

represent a challenge to it) is one of the key questions we need to address going forward. In fact, there is already a growing literature assessing these institutions. The use of the theoretical and conceptual framework presented in this dissertation, however, provides us with particular ways of framing such studies. It suggests the need to evaluate the place of these institutions within the liberal order, conceived independently of the power and preferences of the US, and thereby avoid the common tendency of subsuming this question into the prism of the US-China rivalry.

Secondly, this study calls for a detailed empirical mapping of the global structure of relations over time. While there is empirical work of this kind, which I draw on in the articles, this work mostly consists of more focused studies, which are concerned with individual variables.[150] Drawing on a collection of such empirical work, it would be good to develop some sort of composite dataset of relational ties amongst countries over time. This would bring us closer to operationalising 'meaningful relations' as discussed in section 3.5. Such mapping would also provide the first step towards an empirical test of the some of the theoretical arguments put forth in the thesis, such as whether smaller and weaker states actually enjoy an improved bargaining position as the global structure of relations becomes more decentred (as claimed in article 3).

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, this dissertation calls for studies that take a closer look at the role of smaller and weaker states in the construction, maintenance and evolution of international order. The story of international order is often told as if it revolves solely around hegemonic powers and their great power challengers. Most states in the world, however, are not great powers. And as I've sought to argue in this dissertation, smaller states serve a crucial, but underappreciated, role in the formation and maintenance of international order. The small states studies literature already contains a wealth of studies on small state foreign policy, and how smaller states navigate international institutions and agreements. We need more work, however, that integrates such studies into the literature on international order.

[150] A partial exception to this is found in Barma et al., 'A World Without the West? Empirical Patterns and Theoretical Implications'.

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# Webs of World Order

Power transitions are an inherent feature of world politics and have a decisive effect on the nature of international order. Today, the world is undergoing such a transition. The long-standing dominance of the Western world is giving way to a more diffuse distribution of global power, due to the rise of non-Western powers such as China and India. Although power transitions are not new, they have previously taken place in a core-periphery shaped structure of global relations. A unique feature of the current transition, by contrast, is that it takes place against the backdrop of an increasingly dense and decentred relational structure. This dissertation argues that this transformation of the global structure of relations has important implications for the nature of great power competition and the evolution of international order. In order to explain these implications, the articles in this dissertation advance a relational theory of international order.

**Thorsteinn Kristinsson** has a background in International Relations, Political Science, and Asian Studies at the University of Iceland and Lund University. He has also been a visiting researcher at National Taiwan University.

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