

# CONFRONTING GLOBAL CHALLENGES TO LIBERAL VALUES

IT IS NOT TOO LATE YET, BUT...

Richard Higgott



# **CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY**

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RICHARD HIGGOTT



BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE

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## Abstract

Liberal values—often called “universal” values or “western” values—are increasingly contested both inside and outside Europe and North America. This leads to at least four questions: (i) What are these values? (ii) How might they be defended from **challenges**—from both the illiberal left and the illiberal right—within the various polities in which they are thought to prevail? (iii) Can they be sustained against the mounting **challenges** in the wider global context of the fractious and increasingly competitive international relations of the current era? Specifically, is an accommodation possible between liberal values and the objections and contrasting values advanced towards them by other international actors; including, *inter alia*, the self-styled “civilisational states” such as China, India and Turkey? (iv) If we are going to see a peaceful and constructive reform of world order in the coming decades of the 21st century, what place will there be for liberal values in any new order? Indeed, what are the prospects of a reformed international order in which core of western, liberal values are sustained? This paper will attempt to provide answers—or, more precisely at least, a guide to how we might attempt to provide answers—to these questions. The assumption underpinning the paper’s analysis is that very future of liberalism as a core driver of international order now hangs in the balance. It is no longer axiomatic that liberal values will prevail over, or even co-exist with, ideological competitors.

## Introduction

Values often attributed to Europe—and frequently referred to interchangeably, if not always precisely as “universal” values, “liberal” values or “Western” values (hereafter WEL values<sup>1</sup>)—are increasingly contested both inside and outside Europe. This leads to at least five questions: (i) Are there values that are exclusively WEL values and if so, what are they? (ii) Assuming we can identify core WEL values, what are the challenges faced in both defending them within the various polities in which they are thought to prevail (especially Europe and North America) and sustaining them in the wider global context of the international relations of the current era? (iii) Is an accommodation possible between what we think of as WEL values, the objections raised to them, and the contrasting values advanced, by other international actors? (iv) Finally, if we are going to see a peaceful and constructive reform of world order in the coming decades of the 21st century, what place will there be for WEL values in that new order? In short, what are the prospects of a reformed international order in which a core of Western, liberal, European values can be usefully sustained?

These are questions of both theory and practice. They originate in and beyond the history and philosophy of European civilisations and they find their voice in the practice of states as both national and international actors. Indeed,

they are live issues casting significant policy shadows in the contemporary era. But this is not new. For centuries, millennia even, they have cast long shadows over the European experience both within and beyond its borders. Some of these so-called values have been around in one form or another from the time of the Greco-Roman world. But for a period, dating back, somewhat imprecisely, to the Enlightenment and the Peace of Westphalia, they have had a preponderant influence on Europe’s relations with the rest of the world. For much of the last 400 or so years they have evolved further and remained largely assumed and unchallenged until the onset of the 21st century, from which time their preponderant influence has become increasingly contested. Hence the paper’s global, rather than national, focus is an attempt to suggest what the impact of these values have been over time in an international context in which their bona fides are increasingly contested.

The paper is in three parts. Part one outlines, in fairly standard fashion, the core of WEL values as they exist in the modern day and what they have meant for world order. Part one also looks at some of the theoretical challenges that are raised against these values in what some see as post-Western or post liberal views of international order, and of which the principal ideational, as opposed to material, challenge is a rejection of universalism. Part two considers

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1 Throughout this paper, unless contextually specified, I will use European, Western and Liberal interchangeably

this question in a more globally applied way by looking at a couple of the principal challengers to these values—notably what Coker and others have called “civilisational states”—such as China, India, Russia and Turkey<sup>2</sup>. Part three and the conclusion examine the relationship between values and world order. The discussion is inevitably speculative, exploring some suggestions for the prospects of a manageable and stable reform of world order and what values might underwrite such an order.

## 1. European, liberal, Western, values and their critics: A quick introduction

European values and principles have evolved over time. They are contested concepts especially in the degree to which the international application of such values and principles might be, or indeed should be, spread. As political philosophy European/Western/liberal values probably face greater challenges than at any time in their history. WEL values (much to the horror of any bona fide political philosopher I am sure) can be stripped down to their core elements and their international implications. In this regard, in a classical enlightenment approach, articulated for example in the writings of Emmanuel Kant, liberalism’s core

component is a belief in individual human freedom and self-determination which over time has seen the development of democracy and the rule of law as the best way to guarantee these freedoms.<sup>3</sup>

Developing in the 17th and 18th centuries and as a response to Europe’s wars of religion, classical liberalism can be seen as a way to (i) protect human dignity and (ii) to offer an “... institutional solution to the problem of governing over diversity”<sup>4</sup>. Both of classical liberalism’s principal activities reflected a progressive shift over time as their principal proponents sought to universalise them and their accompanying rights to individual choice, free speech, freedom of religious association and the right to own property. Liberalism also became the philosophical beacon in the development of democracy as a political system. For many years thought of as an indissoluble, the link between liberalism and democracy has only recently been broken—quintessentially in Orban’s Hungary and Modi’s India.

In the context of WEL values, the idea of ‘the West’ has always been a confusing, and at times contradictory concept. It is in many ways a geographic indicator, reflecting the trans-Atlantic world and outposts such as Australia and New Zealand. But in other ways it is a normative concept inextricably linked to

2 Christopher Coker, *The Rise of the Civilisational State*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019

3 Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, edited by Ted Humphrey. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers, (1795/1983) 107-143 passim.

4 For a good discussion of the origins of liberalism see Frances Fukayama, “Liberalism and its Discontents”, *American Purpose*, October 2020, <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/liberalism-and-its-discontent/>

different strands of liberalism as a set of ideas and values. For a traditional liberal, its origins are to be found in the “Enlightenment” and especially its turn towards science and reason, the theory of individualism and practices of democracy, human rights, and 20th century advocacy of an “open and rule-based economic and political international order” enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations, Bretton Woods, and multilateralism. A more conservative liberal view of the West would privilege traditional attitudes to family life and national identity, a robust free-market capitalism and the Judeo-Christian religion. By contrast critics of the concept of the West focus on its legacies—of empire, colonialism, inequality, racism—and the hegemonic nature of a US-led “liberal” international order.

But, as with the concept of the West, the idea of a liberal international order is far from self-explanatory. Theorists parrot the idea of an open and rule-based order but tend to gloss over the question of what it means to be open and what are the rules. One particular ambiguity is around the sense that the liberal international order is “liberal.” Does this refer to political liberalism (in opposition to authoritarianism)? Or economic liberalism (in opposition to economic nationalism or mercantilism)? Or liberalism in the sense that international relations theorists use it (in opposition to realism and other theories of international relations)? The relationship between the three understandings of

liberalism is not unproblematic. For sure their histories are closely related, but they are not as contemporaneously seamless as they might have been in the eyes of the rulers of Victorian Britain and its empire; especially in the post-Cold War era of neoliberal “hyper-globalization” which has increasingly been seen, on both the left and the right, to be undermining liberal democracy. The “neo”, as opposed to classical, form of economic liberalism the West has pursued and promoted during the last thirty years has undermined political liberalism. Neoliberal capitalism, no longer held to be a universalising ideal, has opened space for national populism of a mostly right-wing variety that rejects liberalism’s universalism; instead preferring to confer rights only on preferred groupings usually defined by a combination of culture, language, and identity.

Assumptions that the twenty-first century would be fashioned in the image of advancing democracy and a liberal economic order might have prevailed at end of the Cold War. But in reality, what seemed hegemonic common sense has turned out to be a passing fad. Liberalism has passed from being seen as heroic project with superior problem-solving capabilities under conditions of diversity and pluralism to an increasingly mistrusted form of cosmopolitan elitism. Liberal cosmopolitanism’s assertion of universalist duties beyond borders and claims to the moral significance of the individual is massively contested and seen rather as Western states

advancing their own particularist brand of non-universal moralism.<sup>5</sup> In the twenty-first century the link between liberalism and democracy is weakening. Governments can exhibit liberalism without being democratic.

The contours of the internationalisation of the liberal order of the second half of the twentieth century were built on substantial economic, legal, and political underpinnings; especially a progressive opening of, and quasi institutionalisation of, the global economy via the Bretton Woods system (International Monetary Fund and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development – World Bank) in the domain of finance and in the domain of trade (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade – World Trade Organization), the development of legal rules and norms and a political desire to avoid endless and repetitive conflict that accompanied the evolution of democracy in the major powers (the US and Europe).<sup>6</sup> To this end the liberal international order was also thought of as synonymous with a ‘post Westphalian order’ that privileges, in theory if not always in practice, the sovereignty of states’ embodiment in the post-World War Two UN charter above all else.

The notion of the sovereign equality of states as theory, although not always in practice, and the development of the accompanying rhetoric of liberal order (underwritten by generally

self-binding US hegemony) went beyond the initial Westphalian core to progressively incorporate principles of democracy and collective security reflected in the post-World War Two US-led alliance structure and the relatively (never absolute) free movement of goods, capital, and people and cooperation in collective action problem-solving organised via multilateral institutions. These were no small achievements. With the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union these assumptions were declared victorious, clearing the way for the globalisation of a US-led liberal, or rather neoliberal, market-based economic order and a liberal triumphalist politico-cultural order in which communism and nationalism were thought to be spent forces. This view was captured in Francis Fukuyama’s powerful, if subsequently unfortunate, expression the End of History.

Fukuyama’s vision proved to be short lived. Notwithstanding liberalism’s long intellectual and political history, and especially with the benefit of hindsight, liberal internationalism (the primacy of WEL values) is now recognised as always having been historically contingent. The late twentieth century’s idealised view of global liberal order always begged a number of questions. It was in effect only ever an American world order (AWO) with add-ons and spillovers.<sup>7</sup> Simply by identifying the components at the

5 For a discussion see Luis Cabrera, “On cosmopolitan humility and the arrogance of states”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 23 (2) 2020: 163-187.

6 Of the voluminous literature see, for example, the work of John Ikenberry, especially his most recent book, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crisis of Global Order* (2020).

7 See Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2017, Cambridge, Polity Press.

core of WEL values in the final quarter of the twentieth century we can see the degree to which they are coming unravelled in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. WEL values are under attack, nationalism is again—indeed has been for over a decade now—on the rise and democracy under challenge, including in the heartland of the United States. What is now commonly referred to as the crisis of liberalism is the same as saying the crisis of WEL values. So why have they come under increasing challenge? There are a number of reasons. For brevity, the next section addresses them in largely truncated form.

## **The Growing Challenge to WEL values**

Challenges to modern day WEL values are to be found in the realms of economics, politics, and culture. These challenges are, at least, fivefold. First, they come from across the ideological spectrum. Indeed, both the left and the right, especially in a country like the US, occupy similar positions in their objections to liberal values which they see as losing their appeal and strength in an increasingly crowded world of ideas and values. Through a combination of in-group solidarity and out-group hatred, especially on the hard fringes of both the left and right, many of liberalism's core tenets, especially a universalist attitude to individual rights and constitutional democracy, are under attack. For both sets of antagonists—often operating with a populist, tribal intensity—

the core unit is the group, not the individual. Classical liberals find this highly partisan, zero-sum behaviour difficult to comprehend and combat. Only slowly are they coming to terms with the fact that it is simply inadequate trying to defend their intellectual position on the merits of the argument alone. Rational, and indeed civilised, persuasion is failing to carry the day, especially in the increasingly conspiratorial age fostered by social media.

Second, challenges are found at all levels of society from critiques of liberal pedagogy in the school system through issues of equality and opportunity (race, class, and gender) within societies. On the right particularly, liberalism is charged with paying insufficient attention to the ideas of identity, community, and national values. Victor Orban's attack on liberalism is the quintessential example here. But hostility is also to be found on the left where liberal notions of equality and human dignity before the law are, at best mistrusted and at worse resisted. For example, racism and anti-LGBQTA and anti-indigenous biases have not been eradicated by a universalist liberal discourse of inclusion. Indeed, the more universal and liberal the discourse on equality has become, the greater has been the mobilisation of sub-group interests against it.

Third, thinking globally, the idea of a liberal world order and the practice of international relations was always seen by many to be the international extension of liberal Western 'white privilege' concerned as much with

imperial hierarchies and racial control as it was with values of human rights and democracy. In their origins and initial intent, as opposed to their later universalist validation, the liberal values practised in international relations never represented “... the voices, experiences, knowledge claims, and contributions of the vast majority of the societies and states in the world, and often marginalises those outside the core countries of the West”.<sup>8</sup> Put starkly, liberal values were “white values”. While this position, bolstered by the scholarship on international relations, remains substantially unchallenged, a level of global political awareness has matured and the links between liberalism and imperial and colonial expansion have become a significant factor contributing to the growing resistance to the idea of the universal nature of many WEL values. While their core elements were anything but universal in the colonial era, Europeans for much of the postcolonial era have conveniently forgotten this. After the initial euphoria of independence, decolonisation did not so much put an end to resentment of newly independent states as exacerbate it. Historical legacies were further reinforced in the post-colonial era by various US-led military interventions—especially in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq—justified in the name of universal liberal values and ends

but also by the first-generation postcolonial policies of the former powers towards their former colonial territories.

Fourth, for much of the post-Cold War era international liberalism suffered from a narrow rationalist economic working definition. While rejecting the classical liberalism of Adam Smith, neoliberalism was only too happy to invoke his name. But this was largely cosmetic. Imbued with Hayekian zeal and that of other economists from the Austrian and Chicago Schools of economic thought, neoliberalism advanced a mono-dimensional market-driven fundamentalism in the globalisation of the international economy.<sup>9</sup> Forsaking all else, the virtue and efficiency of the market became the essential condition of neoliberalism. Government intervention in, and regulation of, the economy was seen as an anathema. By any definition this globalist urge was insufficiently attuned to—indeed deliberately dismissive of—injustice from material and socioeconomic inequality through to issues of cultural, gender, and racial (non)recognition that might be its by-products. That inequality might be increasing was seen as secondary to the fact that aggregate welfare was also rising.

But as we now well know, the inegalitarian outcomes of economic globalisation have

<sup>8</sup> See Amitav Acharya *Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies.* *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (4) 2014: 647–659 and R. Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015

<sup>9</sup> See inter alia, Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, London, Routledge, 1944; Eugen Maia Schulak and Herbert Unterkoffler, *The Austrian School of Economics, A History*, Vienna, Von Mises Institute, 2018 and Johan Van Overveldt, *The Chicago School*, Chicago, Agate, 2007 and especially Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

been a major contributor to liberalism's growing crisis. Classical liberalism failed to put sufficient distance between itself and Hayekian neoliberal globalisation. While neoliberalism indeed generated aggregate enhanced economic wealth it also had severe negative distributional consequences. It was the antithesis of much earlier liberal thought on not only the centrality of freedom to self-determination but also the need to provide for the wider sustainability of society writ large. In shorthand, classical political liberalism, with its commitment to the concept of equality under the rule of law for the weak as well as the strong, vacated the playing field to predatory Hayekian neoliberal economic globalisation which rejected the classical societally supportive compensatory welfare components of open economic liberalism captured in John Ruggie's justly celebrated phrase of 'embedded liberalism'—a system which, in shorthand terms, practiced Smith abroad but Keynes at home.<sup>10</sup>

Fifth, liberalism's international contradictions have come into sharp relief since the end of the Cold War and perhaps especially since the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008. Meritocratic universalist ideals have been found to be not only wanting but also, at the extreme, containing their own (post) colonial dynamics. The implicit premise that liberalism's core principles, initially articulated only within states, were universalist gained

wider salience throughout the post-World War Two era and especially in the early decades of the post-Cold War. Universalism was thought to extend beyond the relationships of states and their citizens. Such assumptions have, however, become increasingly contentious in the twenty-first century. Assumptions of universalism of liberal principles have run up against the boundaries of political community and ultimately the principle of sovereignty.

Objections to universalism are now perhaps the biggest criticism of liberalism offered by both national and international objectors alike. The assumption within liberal societies of the universal right of individuals to be equal and autonomous sits in sharp contrast to the dramatic and growing material inequality and dependence of the marginalised citizenry alienated from liberal power structures; especially in the Anglo-American heartland where, as a consequence, varieties of populism, nationalism, and group identity have gained appeal. While objections may be genuinely articulated by traditionally marginalised and disempowered sections of the communities of the advanced Western world, these objections are also used for instrumental reasons by other, often less scrupulous, actors keen to see the dismantling of the institutions (cultural and political) of liberalism. For many, what we now refer to as woke culture is a response to a longstanding individualist liberal ideology. For others it is a chance to undermine the protected

<sup>10</sup> John G. Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order". *International Organization*, 36 (2): 1983 379–415.

hierarchy of liberalism that it was seen to serve, but which champions of liberalism, somewhat mysteriously, often appear reluctant to defend.

At the international level, liberalism was (and is) challenged—somewhat confusingly given its universalist assumptions of the primacy of individualism—by what the distinguished realist scholar of international relations, John Mearsheimer, calls the ‘great delusion of liberal dreams’ which he sees as at odds with the stronger politico-ideological forces and international realities of nationalism and realism.<sup>11</sup> This reflects a contradiction where liberalism is now confronted in the ubiquitous oppositional languages of both anti-globalism and nationalism and the rise of the great powers not traditionally thought of as being part of ‘the West’ such as China and India, or now Erdoğan’s Turkey—a country much less keen nowadays to be thought of as Western.

To be sure liberalism is in part responsible for the critique mounted against it. For much of the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century it demonstrated an insouciance towards these mounting critiques. Liberalism’s failure to recognise dissatisfaction with it as both economic theory and as a practical political theory of democracy assisted the evolution of contemporary populism, nationalism, and by extension, authoritarianism. Particularly, liberalism failed to provide a sufficiently

robust defence, in both theory and practice, of its own values such as individual freedom, democracy, and the equality of all before the law. It is as if it forgot that liberal democracy remains a powerful political and economic force with more wins than losses in the battle against authoritarianism. Even to this day for authoritarians, liberalism—its own failings notwithstanding—is not a passé abstraction but a potent alternative value system with practical ramifications that needs to be resisted in the interest of regime maintenance. Hence the dangers inherent in liberalism’s failure to defend itself from challenges within and challengers beyond its own borders.

While the critique of a liberal international order emanates from both left and right it is the populist nationalist agenda that has carried the day. It has succeeded, not without some foundation, in identifying neoliberal globalisation (the left’s depiction)—or what it pejoratively referred to on the political right as globalism—as the principal vehicle for the material benefit of international global cosmopolitan elites at the expense of the growing immiseration, or at the very least stagnation, of the traditional industrial middle classes of the developed world, especially in the US. This immiseration is to be contrasted with the billion or so people lifted out of poverty by globalisation in the developing world, especially in states like China, some of the regional states of Southeast Asia, and to a

<sup>11</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Relations*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2019

lesser extent India.

Equally importantly, classical liberalism failed to acknowledge that universal values could exist without having to be defined solely as Western values. There has been little or no recognition that some communities can, and do, subscribe to values such as freedom and democracy without accepting the liberal credo. Nor does liberalism easily acknowledge that some states for their own reasons—with China being the most obvious case in point—might subscribe to some of the cooperative multilateral practices of the post-Second World War liberal international era without subscribing to the central tenets of either pure market liberalism (as opposed to state capitalism) or political liberalism (democracy).

## 2. Exogenous Challenges to WEL values: China, Russia and the “Non-West”<sup>12</sup>

*“Liberalism is obsolete.”* —Vladimir Putin, 2019<sup>13</sup>

The previous section examined the intellectual challenges to WEL values. This section asks, what about international challengers? As we depart the era of liberal hegemony, the distinction between a system built on states and a system that includes states who also see themselves as civilisations grows sharper. The essence of the distinction is how we treat

human values and beliefs and, importantly, the practices built on those beliefs. Part of the problem is the confused relationship between values, norms, and culture and how to make a distinction between values and norms on the one hand and the impact of cultural difference on how states practise their values on the other.

The very notion of a civilisation, by implication, rejects the universalism implicit in WEL values such as freedom, toleration, individualism, secularism, pluralism, democracy, and equality that have underpinned the Western understanding of world order, at least for the 70 years after the Second World War. For the civilisation states there are no universal political truths, only civilisational truths. Usually based on a selection of ‘particularist’ readings of history, race, identity and culture, these truths permit certain countries and regions, notably China, India, Russia, Turkey, and Southeast Asia to use alternative sets of lenses through which to look at the problem of world order and to inject a degree of variation into a conversation which for so long saw them largely silenced by what we might call the hegemony of WEL thinking. This point is illustrated by the following discussion of China and three brief observations on Russia, Turkey, and India.

China is clearly a global power. The question is, does it want to be the global power? Can its legitimate interests be accommodated without

<sup>12</sup> This section draws in part on Higgott, *States, Civilisations and the Reset of World Order*, op. cit., chapter 3.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has Become Obsolete”, *The Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>

exacerbating, to the point of open conflict, the response of the US? In some ways the point is moot. Even if China does not currently manage its economy as well and as successfully as it did in the previous three decades, given its population size, it is still moving rapidly towards becoming the world's largest economy in market terms (as distinct from Purchasing Power Parity terms). Output per head at half of that of the US would mean its economy will still be larger than that of the US and the EU combined by 2050.

Moreover, we might ask why China would aim to dismantle a world order which has served it well economically. China has no need to bring about the downfall of the current order rather than simply remould it to now better reflect its own political interests. In this regard, more important than the dynamics of China's economic material development and well-being is the linked issue of its desire to find space for its own values as a civilisational state in world order.<sup>14</sup> This is an element in the equation for China now every bit as significant as material well-being.

China's has for many decades seen its values as an important engine to initiate, lead, and balance its economic development and political

influence as it shakes off the semi-feudal and semi-colonial structures from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>15</sup> A misguided assumption often made by Western analysts is that economic and political relations with China can somehow be treated as distinct or separate domains of interaction. This is not the case, as Australia for one has found out to its cost and Europe is now also finding out in the wake of the collapse of the investment agreement.<sup>16</sup>

China has and does resist the universality of the European Kantian Enlightenment and subsequent Weberian beliefs in an upward trajectory of human progress to be found in a combination of rational, politico-bureaucratic, economic, and technological progress. By contrast, from a Chinese perspective—captured in the all-under-heaven theory—cultural values are the essential drivers behind humanity's progress. Ren's personal, social, and cosmological traits constitute the essence of Chinese values. Over forty years ago, the Confucian scholar, Weiming Tu—in a powerful critique of what he saw as the Enlightenment's aggressively individualistic, anthropocentric, rational instrumentalism—suggested that Confucian core values could offer an equally

<sup>14</sup> On the idea of China as a civilizational state see Weiwei Zhang, *China Wave: The Rise of a Civilizational State*. Singapore: World Scientific., 2012.

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion in Jaihong Chen, "A Chinese Perspective on the Reform of World Order", in *Dialogue of Civilisations, Civilisations, States and World Order: Where are We Heading?* 2019 <https://doc-research.org/2019/09/civilisations-states-and-world-order>

<sup>16</sup> For a plausible and persuasive critique of this myth of political and economic separation see Rana Mitter and Elspeth Johnson, "What the West Gets Wrong About China: Three Fundamental Misconceptions", *The Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 2021, <https://bg.hbr.org/2021/05/what-the-west-gets-wrong-about-china#>.

persuasive alternative to Western modernism.<sup>17</sup> Western values such as liberty, rationality, the rule of law, human rights, and the dignity of the individual, he says, were categorically not purely 'universal' values, just as righteousness, sympathy, civility, responsibility, reciprocity, public-spiritedness, social solidarity, and communality are not merely simply particular to 'Asian' values. This juxtaposition is seen in modern Chinese thinking as a false binary.

This is a serious philosophical response to European values. That it might not find favour "in the West" and that it might be, indeed is, used by China in the politico-ideological contest in the international arena, are two different matters. Chinese philosophy and modern political practice resist the superiority of Western values implicit in this juxtaposition in favour of a view that has emerged since the end of the Cold War that argues that different cultures can develop their own path to modernity via a common destiny with accompanying economic models, as opposed to presuming a single and universally dominant development model of the kind found in Western, Weberian, rationalist based, modernisation and development thinking of the 1960-1980s.<sup>18</sup> These Chinese views are not trivial and are casting increasingly longer shadows over the discussion of world order. This position is reflected in the current Chinese

proposal to build a community of common destiny, introduced by Xi Jinping 2012 which morphed in 2013 into his view of international order as a "Shared Community for Mankind".

The cultural origins of Xi's proposals emanate from an ancient 'all-under-heaven' (tianxia) world theory that advocates investigating human issues in a holistic manner. This approach is in turn built on two longstanding Chinese theoretical approaches for the regulation of human society: (i) a moral approach beginning with Confucius's emphasis on humanity's ethical subjectivity, extending from the individual through to society; and (ii) an approach with its roots in Daoism and emphasising a cosmopolitan form of objectivity found in social ethics and individual morality. The Chinese ideal type concepts of Ren and the all-under-heaven theory are intended to take us beyond simple material existence and contribute to a discourse of community of common destiny.

Support for a 'community of common destiny' or 'community of a shared future' is found in many of Xi Jinping's recent speeches including to the 2020 75th UNGA and the January 2022 Davos meeting, at which Xi Jinping advocated "common values" for humanity, and the need to "build a community with a shared future for mankind".<sup>19</sup> This now-common refrain

17 Weiming, Tu, *Humanity and Self Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought*. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979

18 For a discussion see Richard Higgott, *Political Development Theory*, London Routledge, 1983.

19 <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/xi-jinping-says-countries-need-to-discard-cold-war-mentality-speaks-against-confrontation-hegemony-and-bullying-2713758>

represents a Chinese riposte to recent populist/nationalist trends and Xi Jinping's positive attitude towards globalisation and, if he is taken at his word in his 2021 Davos address, an interest in multilateralism. The practical aim of the idea of 'shared community' for China is to enhance its voice in the conversation over the nature of the international system. It aspires to usher in the 'era of the global community' as 'Globalisation 2.0' in which globalisation's bullish, essentially Hayekian neoliberal economic form and its transactional political characteristics are watered down by a global community approach that is more empathetic to things non-Western—again, in theory at least.

The claims made for tianxia are not inconsequential. One of its principal boosters, Zhao Tingyang, wants to offer it as "... a concept for a world system: a commonwealth shared by all nations, of all civilizations and for all peoples". Tianxia is not offered as a promise of a perfect world, nor the universalisation of Chinese values. Rather, it is seen by Zhao as:

*a vision of a world politically remade to optimize the chance of enduring stability and security for all. Philosophically speaking, it suggests an ontological solution to the political problem of the clash of civilizations, as the American political scientist Samuel Huntington put it.<sup>20</sup>*

Its product differentiation from hegemonic liberal thinking is that it resists the individualist,

utility-maximising rationality of Western economic thought. Rather, it focuses, again rhetorically at least, on collective prosperity that should replace the hegemony of liberal internationalism as the dominant discourse of globalisation. Clearly, the ideas of 'all under heaven/tianxia' and global community, pitched at such an abstract and general level, are very difficult to take exception to. Their three broad components—(i) global inclusion and belonging; (ii) a generalised optimality; and (iii) a bounded or relational rationality rather than the Pareto optimality that dominates Western thinking—are attractive, and one suspects will grow in global attraction if the liberal model continues in its failure to address its own problems. Whether it does or not is an applied policy question as much as a philosophical one. The answer will be determined by the extent to which the concepts of tianxia and a 'community of common destiny' can ever become meaningfully operable.

The difficulty of operationalising these concepts should not be underestimated. In some ways they are post-modern ideas not only in their rejection of universal values but in their vagueness. But, if nothing else, they are giving pause to the all-too-easily and frequently assumed superiority of Western liberal views. Writing in 2020, that old ideological warrior Regis Debray argued Westerners should no longer see themselves as '... [o]mnipotent judges and arbiters of the universal good, but

20 Zhao, Tingyang, A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All Under Heaven (Tian-Xia), Sage Online, n.d..

rather as among many options for humanity. One is not superior to others. This is a lesson of humility and lucidity—we in the West are indeed no longer the centre of the universe”.<sup>21</sup> Similar views are increasingly echoed by numerous Asian intellectuals.<sup>22</sup>

Classical liberal theory led to the initially classical liberal economic model, which in turn gave way to the more aggressive neoliberal ideology and economic paradigm. This paradigm of late has been found increasingly wanting. From a Chinese perspective, an intercivilisational dialogue towards a community of common destiny offers an alternative and/or an additional theoretical framework. However, it needs a platform to be realised. In Chinese philosophy putting cultural ideals into practice is seen to be the fundamental task of humanity.

Implicit in Chinese thinking is that the root cause of the imbalance between civilisations is modern liberal theory’s constrained view of human rationality and freedom which is to be contrasted with its more expansive civilisational approach reflecting a higher level of humanism in the pursuit of life and its meaning. By extension, a dialogue of civilisations implies a more expansive discussion not only in economic and political spheres but also in the sphere of human culture. The Chinese would argue that, in contrast to WEL values, their value

system pursues developments in balance, be it between freedom and responsibility, rights and obligations, or individuality and community. To identify these ideas doesn’t mean they have been perfectly realised or that they only belong to China. Instead, they are seen as unfinished ideals that call for common effort from the whole of humanity. To transform instrumental rationality into a full blown rationality, they say, will help balance human civilisation such that hearts and minds finally meet.

But we should note that under no circumstances does the Chinese idea of shared community not imply shared or pooled sovereignty. As Bill Hayton notes in *The Invention of China*, China’s vision of a world order is one in which countries stand on their own and make their own way in an international system as individuals.<sup>23</sup> This is clearly a vision in which big countries matter more than small or middle-size ones. It fits neatly with the idea of a regional, or even global, hierarchy in which Beijing sits at the top. It is a hierarchy open to all, so long as each know their place in it. Hayton’s reading reflects a US view of China’s endeavour to articulate a world view that counters a liberal view of international order. US analysts see the gap between China’s rhetoric and practice as simply too great to take the discourse seriously. They see the project as nothing but an attempt to replace a pax Americana with a pax Sinica.

21 Regis Debray and Tingyang Zhao (2020) “All Under Heaven: Does the Ancient Chinese Philosophy of Tianxia Offer a Vision for the Future of Globalisation?” Noema, 2020, [www.noemamag.com/tianxia-all-under-heaven/](http://www.noemamag.com/tianxia-all-under-heaven/)

22 Kishore Mahbubani, *The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy: Has China Won?* New York: Public Affairs.

23 William Hayton, *The Invention of China*, New Haven: Yale University Press., 2020.

Does this view underestimate the growing influence of Chinese thinking in other quarters? This Anglosphere view (we can throw in the UK and Australia with the USA) is not shared by all states, some of whom can expect to play a greater part in the discussion about the role of values in the reform of international order. For many, including many continental European states, the jury will remain out on China's views and the verdict will be determined by the success or otherwise of China's behaviour/diplomacy over the next few years. That depends, of course, on just how deftly and sympathetically China can insinuate its ideas into the global conversation and the degree to which China's behaviour and practice will be seen to reflect its rhetorical commitment to *tianxia*—rather than what many see as the increasingly predatory practices of China evinced by both the words of Xi Jinping and the nature of its decidedly not soft “Wolf Warrior” style diplomacy.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, China's leadership views China as a civilisation, rather than simply a state. This view is rooted in several millennia of Chinese history. But it also has contemporary urges that underpin its attitudes and approaches to the question of international order and its place in it. Always implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, Chinese views are juxtaposed against what we might see as the standard

reading of a US-led liberal order. At its core, China argues for a global order inhabited by a plurality of culturally diverse states operating on the basis of sovereign equality, but where sovereign equality is in part code for the multilateral institutions in that order not being under US hegemonic control. China has a limited view of global governance conducive to the maximisation of its interests in collective decision-making on the one hand, but freedom of movement allowing it to operate differently in different policy sectors on the other and uncluttered by any European (essentially Cartesian) legal formal ideas or notions of sovereignty pooling.<sup>25</sup>

China is not alone in wanting to see the emergence of a different way of explaining what we might call the culture-values dynamic in international relations. Briefly here we can see similar strands of resistance to WEL values in the recent history, political thought, and modern-day practice of other states such as Russia, India, Turkey and the states of Southeast Asia.

Many Russian thinkers articulate cultural-historical theories of society different from WEL. Borrowing from Kipling's *Ballad of East and West* (“east is east, west is west and never the twain shall meet”) and Dostoevsky (“In Europe we are Tartars and in Asia we are Europeans”), Russia has historically occupied

<sup>24</sup> See Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, Oxford: OUP 2021.

<sup>25</sup> For an elaboration of how China sees the evolving global order see Huiyao Wang “Multilateralism: The future path to reform global governance”, in *Dialogue of Civilisations*, 2020, Can Multilateral Cooperation be Saved? [https://doc-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Rhodes-report\\_Download-file2.pdf](https://doc-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Rhodes-report_Download-file2.pdf).

an inter-civilisational location between the Judeo-Christian west, China to the east, and the Muslim south. This was the case in the pre-Soviet Union era and is again so in the post-Soviet era. In a 'back to the future' moment post-Soviet Russian civilisational identity seems to have turned on itself. Social identity once again lies, in Kiplingesque terms, somewhere between Atlanticism and Eurasianism. The 'us-them' dichotomy has re-emerged as an essential component of what we might call Russia's civilisational ideological architecture and value system as it struggles to maintain its identity. As such, resentful and moody—and lacking the sophistication of China's well-thought out position—it has set its faced against accommodation with an international order based on a WEL value system.<sup>26</sup> In practical policy terms Russia currently exhibits a much stronger "spoiler" approach towards the institutions of the international order than does China.

In a manner not dissimilar to modern Russia, Turkey has historically located itself somewhere along the civilisation-cultural-value chain between East and West until the 1920s-30s Mustafa Kemal Atatürk imbued it with European values and established the secular Turkish Republic that embraced all religions and ethnicities. Both cultural identity and geopolitical locations as a Muslim, albeit

secular, state made it inevitable that Turkey saw itself as a bridge between European and Muslim countries. Like Russia, the new Turkey, unsurprisingly, exhibited an inter-civilisational ambiguity in its attitude towards Europe. Frequent cultural misunderstanding between Turkey and the EU notwithstanding, the last several decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century saw it aspire to membership of the European Union only to abandon its application as Europe's Turco-scepticism grew, especially after the failed military coup and Recep Erdoğan's draconian responses to it in 2016.<sup>27</sup>

Since 2016, we have seen a sharp turn in Turkish attitudes; away from its traditional Western liberal values and towards much more nationalistic ones with attendant implications for how it sees itself as an international actor. Islam has become the fundamental source of its values and identity. Ottoman, Turkish, or Circassian identities have become subordinate identities. This shift of values underpins the role President Erdoğan sees for himself and Turkey as a "Eurasian leader" in the contest with Western liberalism. While Eurasianism is not an entirely new view in Turkish thinking it has—along with a growing anti-Westernism—gathered a considerable momentum of late. Eurasia is now seen to offer a more receptive response to Turkish values than

26 On Russia see Kira Preobrazhenskaya, "Russia", in *Civilisations, States and World Order: Where are We Heading?* <https://doc-research.org/2019/09/civilisations-states-and-world-order>: 2019: 67–72.

27 On Turkey see Selin Senocak, "Turkey", *Dialogue of Civilisations Research Institute, Civilisations, States and World Order: Where are We Heading?* 2019, <https://doc-research.org/2019/09/civilisations-states-and-world-order>, 2019: 73-77

Europe. Indeed, influential Turkish opinion around President Erdoğan believes Western civilisation, embodied in the rhetoric of the European Union, is suffering an existential crisis of its value system.

India, like China, mobilises the country's traditional principles and civilisational achievements to advance its position as a contemporary global power. One of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constant themes, as part of his ruthless championing of Hindu nationalism of the last few years, has been to remind the world that India is not only one of the world's oldest civilisations—with its origins dating back at least to the 3rd millennium BC—and with a continuous and most sophisticated culture with what it sees as its own universal values. But, in terms of historical character and values, Amitav Acharya has interestingly argued that "... [t]he Indian world order, like that of Greece, Rome and China, was fundamentally eclectic, combining rationalism—spiritualism, realism—idealism, republicanism—monarchy and anarchic and hierarchic orders".<sup>28</sup>

WEL might be strengthened if greater recognition was given to the fact that some of its core elements—both positive and negative—owe a greater debt, via borrowing and expropriation, to the classical non-Western civilisations than is often recognised, and certainly acknowledged by Europeans and Americans. If we accept this then we should

also acknowledge that Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilisations are not ignorant of, nor immune to, values that Western democracies describe as liberal and universal—notably in their own elements of humane and representative justice and openness. The question we should be asking is what can be done to shape them into a common discourse that finds a wider, if not necessarily full, acceptance within and across the competing cultures? Core elements of liberal world order—especially acceptable levels of economic openness and universal commitments to collective action problem solving, negotiated through multilateral institutional processes and practices—must and will remain central to any new order. But for that to happen a way must be found to accommodate new demands for participation with non-universal civilisational/cultural norms advanced by the other rising actors.

### 3. Values and Practice in the Search for Global Order

In the search for global order there is always a tension between the pursuit of material economic and politico-security goals on the one hand and moral and cultural-normative values on the other. Political security issues are traditionally thought to be the principal factors. For some this would see the manner of the recent US exit from Afghanistan as confirmation of the long-anticipated end to

<sup>28</sup> Amitav Acharya, "India", in *Dialogue of Civilisations, Civilisations, States and World Order: Where are We Heading?* <https://doc-research.org/2019/09/civilisations-states-and-world-order>: 2019: 78–83.

the American-led liberal order. In the short run this may indeed be the case. But in the longer term, shared values and ideas can also shape the interests and practices of states as much as material forces. It is the idea of 'shared meaning' in the norms, values, and principles that makes action in international relations understandable, noting that norms, values and principles can never be perfectly defined or universally agreed.

If we accept this argument in theory, then what this means in practice is finding space for Chinese and other views in the deliberations on world order. For much of the post-Second World War era, liberal states implicitly—and often explicitly—imposed a liberal values-based conditionality on their relationships with both the old and new postcolonial world. Alternative values, based on Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, or other belief systems stressing societal obligations, had invariably been assumed to be non-universalist by the major Western powers, and thus secondary for the purposes of creating a Western understanding of world order.

If we are to bring about a practical reform of world order this asymmetric relationship between Western and non-Western value systems has to be addressed. Specifically, we need to identify how a Western rights-based order might satisfactorily deal with non-Western notions of moral obligation, and conversely, how Asian values, which privilege such obligations, might address issues of

rights—notably individual political and human rights—of a liberal variety. This is a fundamental task; indeed, a major challenge for humanity in the foreseeable future. Are there fundamental and irresolvable differences of values or is the difference merely an age-old issue of power politics and contest in international relations that could, with will and skill, be negotiated?

If values are defined as principles or standards of behaviour, then by extension, they represent judgments about what is important in life. This implies the existence of right and wrong. It also implies the existence of choice between them. Choosing right over wrong and good over bad are moral and ethical acts. As such, they contrast with what we understand by modern, post-Westphalian, international relations as the practice of statecraft, where the essence of statecraft is making choices, usually driven by interest-based realist thinking. If things are to change, then the issue of values, often seen as a philosophical question rather than a core element of statecraft, should have major long term political implications. Absent some kind of collective consensus, if only a minimalist resolution of the issue—in all probability a working compromise is perhaps the best we can hope for—we cannot hope to address in any satisfactory way those pressing global (as opposed to national) issues such as security, sustainability, and health.

If we acknowledge collective self-perceptions, enduring habits, precepts, and customary ways of doing business, derived from the history and

culture of a particular people, this offers us a clearer way of understanding the policy actions of countries with long civilisational traditions such as China and India. National character, history, and tradition remain important in their foreign policy choices. The roots of their foreign policies and interests in international order are to be found in the very organic fibre of their societies. China's oft-touted 'century of national humiliation' infuses the national project over the long term and to the present day, even in the face of questions of immediate shorter-term material gain or loss. Nowhere is this better seen than in its increasingly contested relationship with the USA. In terms of national character, China sees this contest in the longer term while the US is on the lookout for a shorter-term resolution.

At the risk of over-simplification, and as a heuristic device only, we can see Chinese (and Indian) international relations and diplomacy functioning within a framework drawn from their own unique philosophical, historical, and cultural traditions, while Western international relations and diplomacy can be said to operate within a framework provided by a mix of Greek philosophy, the Roman classics, the New Testament, and later Renaissance thinking. In this context, a major task for the future is saving WEL values from their friends as much as their enemies. To do this we need to prevent the conversation from becoming an existential civilisational contest between West and East. This will be easier said than done. Part two

identified what has become an increasingly aggressive Chinese approach to the dialogue between states and civilisations. But the USA too has upped the temperature considerably.

One set of values, norms, or rules is unlikely to prevail over others. We cannot assume other global actors will eventually embrace the values of one major power voluntarily at the expense of the other or, failing that, see the major powers successfully impose them on weaker states. Any attempt at order-building that seeks to (re)establish a hegemony of one dominant set of values is as likely to exacerbate existing ideological and value-based divisions as mitigate them. The liberal order may have a future but not in its current form. Elements of it—certain norms and rules—will survive because they are basically sensible and useful. But whether we like it or not, any reformed international order is going to need to accommodate illiberal, as well as liberal countries favouring, a reassertion, rhetorically at least, to Westphalian assumptions of sovereignty. All the signs are that China wants to force some adjustments to the existing order but without fundamentally changing the international system.

But the priorities of the erstwhile hegemon (the US) have changed and the (re)emergence of great powers (especially China) is leading to a contest in the international order unprecedented since the height of the Cold War between the US and the former Soviet Union. This contest is reflected not only in the

return of geopolitics to the foreign policies of major powers—including the EU deciding it wants to be a geo-political player<sup>29</sup>—but also of a value based geo-cultural contest that also may turn out to be equally destabilising as any political or economic competition. As we know, much modern-day geo-economics goes beyond initial understandings of economic statecraft through to economic warfare.<sup>30</sup> The Biden Presidency cannot, and will not, undo all of Trump’s nationalist legacy, and year one of his presidency suggests that some Trumpian approaches towards China, and indeed the wider international economic and political orders more widely, are likely to continue. Early in his administration Donald Trump himself saw the relationship becoming a civilisational clash. As he tweeted in 2017, “The West will never be broken. Our values will prevail. Our people will thrive. And our civilisation will triumph”.<sup>31</sup>

Since coming to office, Joe Biden has similarly posited the current struggle between the USA and China essentially as one of values. He has effectively posed it as an existential

contest between the Western political values of democracy and what he sees in an all too simplistic juxtaposition, as non-Western ideals of authoritarianism and autocracy. Much has been staked on the global democracy agenda he is trying to build through his invitation to 108 states to attend the initial December 2021 virtual, Summit for Democracy (not, quite deliberately, a Summit of Democracies, given the dubious pedigrees of quite a few attendees) as a preparation for a face-to-face event in late 2022.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it should be added that Biden’s personal record on the fight for democracy is mixed,<sup>33</sup> and the US is not without its own domestic problems at the moment. As the Economist Intelligence Unit noted in its annual democratic roundup, the USA should be categorised as, at best, a “flawed democracy”.<sup>34</sup> If, as Biden noted “... democracy is the defining challenge of our time”, nowhere is this more so than in the USA. The summit agenda, albeit couched in suitably vague terms, assumed this. Indeed, it is not too strong to say that the last decade has seen a decline in the democratic

29 For a discussion of the extremely confused nature of EU thinking on its role as a “geo-political” actor see Richard Higgott and Simon Reich, “Hedging by Default: EU Strategic Autonomy in a Binary World Order,” <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/reports/hedging-by-default>,

30 See Robert Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2016

31 @realDonaldTrump, July 6, 2017.

32 The Summit for Democracy, US State Department, <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>. For a discussion see Daniel Field and Rose Jackson, “How to Get Biden’s Democracy Summit Right”, The Atlantic Council, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-to-get-bidens-democracy-summit-right/?mkt\\_tok=N-jU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAGAuQDC6i9ZVHin00h34vnuNPrjGT3iKFwO-dfcMPddt4nACsn6fvdhnVRqgGd85NBI484T-4jaOBM30nYPVfL-Oks1rY5QTgHZHrBm0OWI](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-to-get-bidens-democracy-summit-right/?mkt_tok=N-jU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAGAuQDC6i9ZVHin00h34vnuNPrjGT3iKFwO-dfcMPddt4nACsn6fvdhnVRqgGd85NBI484T-4jaOBM30nYPVfL-Oks1rY5QTgHZHrBm0OWI)

33 Yascha Mounck, “The Faltering Fight for Democracy: Biden’s Mixed Record on Democracy Renewal”, Foreign Affairs, December 2021, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-12-07/faltering-fight-democracy?utm\\_medium=newsletters&utm\\_source=fabackstory&utm\\_content=20211212&utm\\_campaign=FA%20Backstory\\_121221\\_The%20Backstory:%20A%20Global%20Democratic%20Revival?&utm\\_term=fa-backstory-2019](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-12-07/faltering-fight-democracy?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fabackstory&utm_content=20211212&utm_campaign=FA%20Backstory_121221_The%20Backstory:%20A%20Global%20Democratic%20Revival?&utm_term=fa-backstory-2019)

34 “Global Democracy has a very bad year”, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year>

urge, in both theory and practice not only in the US but more generally as it has run up against resistance from China and other states.

Opposition to democracy promotion is of course not new. By the end of the 20th century the momentum in Samuel Huntington's democratic "third wave" was petering out and Vladimir Putin was pushing back against it as early as 2006.<sup>35</sup> The question for the US, but not only the US, is thus how to address this challenge in a way that does not simply polarise the current ideological confrontation even farther? Xi Jinping's attempts to create a new form of a post-liberal rules-based international order in which capitalism cohabits with states exhibiting centralised political control sits at one end of a powerful spectrum ranging from Hungarian-style illiberal democracy on the soft end through to full-blown Chinese style authoritarianism at the other, harder end. A continued desire to export democracy was not part of the US agenda for the summit. The rhetorical depth of the US well of enthusiasm for democracy as a universal value is to be contrasted with the shallowness of its interest in actively promoting it democracy as a universal practice.

It is not possible to say what, in substantive terms, will come of the December 2020 Summit. A one-shot game would be a failure as would be

a declaration of high-sounding principles with no prospect of being delivered upon. It would suggest that democracy and by extension other liberal values are undergoing a process of decline as both China and Russia and others have suggested is the case. The Summit and its follow-up ancillary activities could be a losing strategy in the global battle over values in the modern era. We have for too long equated democracy with successful market capitalism. What China has done is demonstrate that development and capitalism are neither automatically symbiotic nor the exclusive preserve of democracy. Democratisation is not the inevitable accompaniment to economic development. As such the rise of China is not just an economic challenge; it is a politico-ideological one in a way that the Soviet Union never was, and modern-day Russia isn't.

What makes this situation doubly difficult for the traditional Western political theory of democracy and the domestic political practice of the USA is that the major challenges to democracy come not only from China but also from within the American political system where the major source of democratic backsliding is the discontent of large sections of the community with the failure of cosmopolitan elites to acknowledge and pay sufficient attention to the deteriorating economic plight of sectors of the broader community in the face

<sup>35</sup> See Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1991 and Thomas Carothers, "The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion", *Foreign Affairs*, March April, 2006, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2006-03-01/backlash-against-democracy-promotion?utm\\_medium=newsletters&utm\\_source=fabackstory&utm\\_content=20211212&utm\\_campaign=FA%20Back-story\\_121221\\_The%20Backstory:%20A%20Global%20Democratic%20Revival?&utm\\_term=fa-backstory-2019](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2006-03-01/backlash-against-democracy-promotion?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fabackstory&utm_content=20211212&utm_campaign=FA%20Back-story_121221_The%20Backstory:%20A%20Global%20Democratic%20Revival?&utm_term=fa-backstory-2019)

of de-industrialisation, international trade, and migrants—views fed by the manipulation of a largely unregulated and increasingly populist social media. It is for this reason that ramping up the China challenge is significant. It is one of the few things around which a modicum of bipartisan political agreement in the USA can be built.

The problem with battles over values is that they polarise along the good–bad spectrum with attendant xenophobic, and indeed racist connotations offering little room for manoeuvre and the prospects for developing a *modus vivendi* of coexistence. By making it a battle over values the USA plays to China’s nationalistic strengths by suggesting that their value system is of comparable global power to that of WEL values in the eyes of those third countries anxiously watching the struggle between them, especially in East Asia. The real weaknesses of Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party and the need for them to consider a different domestic political model—some democratisation or, as seems to be the case, more authoritarianism—is thus not addressed.

For the US to build a global strategy solely, or even primarily, on opposition to authoritarianism could prove counterproductive. Trying to shoehorn other countries into its Democratic Alliance could have the very opposite effect of driving countries closer to China. Indeed, we should ask what the Afghan withdrawal has done to President Biden’s G7 posturing about

a “new world order” and a Club of Democracies built on an “alliance of values” with like-minded countries? The United States is hardly an attractive ideological model of governance at this point in time. A forward leaning strategy of pushing the virtues of liberal democracy, in the absence of putting its own house in order, is not destined to win the hearts and minds of states whose own most basic priorities are to advance the economic well-being of their own people, and which many see as better served by good economic and trade relations with China and the demonstrable effect of the Chinese economic model.

## **Conclusion: More Questions than Answers**

The purpose of this paper is not to write the premature obituary of an international order under-written by liberal values. Nor is it to imply a fatal decline (as opposed to gradual positional decline) of the US as a great power. But the exit from Afghanistan will reinforce the growing tendency to dismiss the continued utility of the notion of “the liberal West” as a meaningful category of trusted partner in international relations. It will also weaken the idea of exporting Western liberal values as a core element of soft power diplomacy and it will almost certainly put paid to the notion of liberal interventionism as a route to democratisation. Any lingering assumption that a liberal order might be reinstated to its original form at some future date has passed. And the idea of

global value-based leadership role for the USA, especially following the manner of its exit from Afghanistan, is moot.

Hence the discussion of ideas and values presented here should not be seen as mere academic abstraction. It casts massive policy shadows over the future world order. The world is dividing once again into opposing camps. And it is doing so along ideological lines in a way not seen since the Cold War. Indeed, some argue that China and the USA, beyond explicit economic and technological competition, have been implicitly involved in a value-driven political contest since the end of the first Cold War as China through a systematic range of activities, and ably assisted by Donald Trump, has nudged along the USA's retreat from its leadership role in world order.<sup>36</sup>

On one side of this emerging, albeit fuzzy, binary sits the US—and its European (often lukewarm) partners—espousing a set of values and ideas to underwrite a community of liberal democracies sure in its belief that only democracy and liberty inspire people. In combination, Western hubris and arrogance about the superiority of its own values and a studied ignorance of the values of others have proved a potent cocktail on which to base foreign policy judgments in the post-Cold War era. Too little credence has been given in recent decades to the idea that others will make sacrifice for belief systems that do not

confirm to core principles of liberalism.

On the other side of the binary divide China articulates grand-sounding ideas of a “harmonious world” and a “community of common destiny for humanity.” These ideas are clearly leavened with a substantial dose of instrumentalism—and in all probability they are too grand to be capable of implementation—but they do have the effect of gradually whittling away at the traditions and discourse of WEL values. The US vision underpins a strategy bent on containing the further growing global influence of China while China's words underpin a strategy of international order compatible with an increasing role for its own economic and (authoritarian) governance models. Both sides of the binary divide want world order to adjust to them, not vice versa. Biden's rhetorical assertion that “America Is Back” may well prove ephemeral when weighed against practice. China of course practices both a stick and carrot approach in its diplomacy. Which—the stick wielded by its wolf warriors or its carrots (money and a discourse on a “common destiny of humanity”)—will prove greater? It remains to be seen which will prove more fruitful for China in winning over supporters to its view of world order.

This paper concludes by asking if a dialogue, or at least a minimum peacefully contested negotiation, between Western and non-Western value systems—in effect between the

<sup>36</sup> For the latest, if somewhat breathless, iteration of China's strategy, see Rush Doshi, *The Long Game, China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

USA and its allies and China, parts of East Asia and to a lesser extent India—is possible. Or, conversely, is an exacerbating conflict between liberal internationalism on the one hand and cultural or civilisational nationalism on the other inevitable? Some prominent analysts, from the Singaporean Kishore Mahbubani to the American Ray Dalio, already assume that China will win the 21st century.<sup>37</sup>

Suggesting here the need for a dialogue is not an endorsement of moral equivalence between the competing values on offer. Indeed, the core of Western liberal values remains strong and should be defended against their detractors. But their supporters have clearly been insufficiently robust in so doing. Liberalism will not survive on an effortless assumption of its superiority alone. Before WEL values can be successfully defended in the global conversation about world order, they need to be reasserted against the critiques that have been, and continue to, gain strength, both within and beyond their own societies—especially, but not exclusively, within the United States and Western and Central Europe on the one hand and Asia on the other.

Liberal values are under attack from both the illiberal right and the illiberal left, both of whom sneer at liberalism for being economically elitist, inequality generating, and increasingly

politically unstable. WEL values need to fight back against the growing intellectual anarchy of the first two decades of the 21st century if illiberal and authoritarian ideas are not to triumph. To do this liberalism needs to forcefully reestablish rational debate and a respect for science and knowledge and harness the scientific and technological expertise that is actually at society's disposal—especially in the domains of artificial intelligence and digitalisation. Liberals have to actively (as opposed to passively) resist the growing populist trend to put partisanship before truth.

Sadly, there is little evidence as yet that advances in communication, especially in the hands of authoritarian governments, will generate a democratic consensus rather than escalate political polarisation. To date the contrary argument would seem to prevail.<sup>38</sup> Nor is there evidence that the twin existential challenges of climate change and global pandemics will generate an enhanced international cooperative urge, let alone a sense of global solidarity. Indeed, responses to COVID-19 suggest the opposite and the jury—evinced by the poor returns from the November 2021 Glasgow COP 26 meeting—remains out on our ability to secure the necessary control of carbon emissions. The voices of knowledge and science are too often drowned out by a populist din intent on dividing

37 Kishore Mahbubani, *The Chinese Challenge*, op. cit., and Ray Dalio, *The Changing World Order: Why Nations Succeed and Fail*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2021.

38 See Kate Coyer and Richard Higgott, *Sovereignty in an Era of Digitalisation*, Berlin, Dialogue of Civilisations, 2020, [https://doc-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sovereignty-in-a-digital-era\\_\\_\\_\\_.pdf](https://doc-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sovereignty-in-a-digital-era____.pdf), pps: 112-123

communities into competing camps. The seriousness of these threats is not reflected in the contemporary liberal view of world order. If illiberal fringes continue to gain ground, liberalism's complacency in the face of these tougher and less forgiving value systems will be its downfall.

This is not the first time that liberalism has been challenged. As Isaiah Berlin noted some 50 years ago, the "liberal predicament"—that is the constant challenges to its value pluralism—is always with us. Liberalism has never lived in an historical vacuum nor even a benign environment. Liberalism requires realism, moderation, probity and, most of all, self-awareness of not only the environment in which it operates but also, and perhaps more importantly, how it is perceived by others if it is to sustain itself. These are qualities that liberalism and its champions have seemingly forgotten, or at least put on the back burner, in the several decades since those hubristic triumphalist days at the end of the Cold War. Neoliberalism especially became too convinced of its own rectitude with all the attendant and now well-understood consequences of its arrogance. The ultimate consequence is that the very future of liberalism now hangs in the balance. It is no longer axiomatic that liberal values will prevail over, or even coexist with, their ideological competitors.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Richard Higgott**

Prof. Dr. Richard Higgott, PhD, FRSA, FAcSS is a Distinguished Professor of Diplomacy at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS) of the Brussels School of Governance (BSOG-VUB) and Visiting Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Siena. Higgott has been National Director of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, President of the Australasian Political Science Association and Vice President of the USA International Studies Association. A former Fulbright Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government, he is an elected Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences. He is also Emeritus Professor of International Political Economy at the University of Warwick where he founded and directed the the UK/ ESRC Centre for Globalisation and Regionalisation. He has been Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Foreign Affairs and Trade at the Australian National University and Professor of Government at the University of Manchester. Between 2006 and 2014 he held senior administrative appointments as Pro Vice Chancellor (Research) at Warwick and as Vice Chancellor of Murdoch University in Western Australia. His latest book, *States, Civilisations and the Reset of World Order*, was published by Routledge in 2021.

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Visitor's address:

Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Mailing address:

Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

[info\\_bsog@vub.be](mailto:info_bsog@vub.be)

[www.brussels-school.be](http://www.brussels-school.be)