

# WARS, STATES, AND LIBERAL VALUES: RESHAPING THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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## ■ Introduction

■ Since the end of the Great War, the basic organizing principles of the international system have been those formulated by the American president Woodrow Wilson, the “archetype of the inclusive liberal in international relations” (Lascu-ettes 2020: 133). As an answer to the conditions of the moment (Lascu-ettes 2020: 132–163), the Wilsonian normative project aimed at building a peaceful world. The scope of the self-determination principle is ensuring the legitimacy of peaceful nation-states. They could thus work to avoid war and, if necessary, to jointly punish the warmonger in protecting the collective security. Though the age of extremisms, World War 2 and the bipolar confrontation challenged this liberal order at certain times, the decolonization process reinforced it, while the perils of nuclear confrontation made the idea of interstate war even more repulsive. Briefly put, the fundamental principles formulated one century ago are still the normative basis of the international realm, even if constantly adapted to a changing world.

Considering both its constancy and the dynamic inside the contemporary international order, the goal of the present paper is to investigate it, namely the impact of the current Russo-Ukrainian war. The paper thus first tries to offer some major analytical elements when discussing the changes of the international order from the end of the Cold War, when the Wilsonian perspective had a powerful general recognition. The impact of the globalization processes has revealed the progressive impact of the non-traditional threats, accompanied normatively by a cosmopolitan

approach, of Kantian inspiration. Therefore, the Ukrainian war indicates a new assertion of the Wilsonian conception, bearing an important globalist component.

### The essential elements of the international order

In a famous definition, Hedley Bull says that international order is “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society” (Bull 2002: 8). The study of such arrangements being one of the main preoccupations of Bull’s English School this approach is a natural starting point for this paper. As my intention is to question the present tendencies, rather than test a peculiar epistemological point of view, I will parsimoniously use some major tenets of the English School and, as I will argue, constructivism.

The English School places itself between realism and liberalism, between selfishness and goodwill (Jackson–Sørensen 2013: 133), so both the significance of the power distribution and the role of the ideas are relevant when discussing international order. In the following pages, I will consider it as dynamic. Bull does not address how the international order is changing, Flockhart even saying that “his analysis become *de facto* static”, due to the stability of the institutions (Flockhart 2022: 27). However, as any student of sovereignty or war can notice, these ideas are continuously reshaped. I therefore borrow the ‘change’ argument from a constructivist perspective, option justified as the links between the English School and constructivism were often noticed (Reus-Smit 2002; Flockhart 2022). Finnemore’s study concerning interventions is an eloquent constructivist discussion in this sense (Finnemore 2003).

Even if the globalization processes amend sovereignty, states preserve the responsibility to manage the security issues. The relations between great powers – dealt with through mechanisms such as balance of power, the politics of spheres of influence, or concert (Bull 2002: 200) – affect the general order, inside which international security is handled. The closer they are to common action, the more important the normative dimension becomes. If a balance is indifferent to norms, operating inside any international system, a concert needs them when defining the common Good to be jointly pursued. A concert (and a workable system of spheres of influence) can only be built inside what Bull calls an international society – a group of states, conscious of common interests and common values [...] conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another” (Bull 2002: 13).

Briefly put, I consider that three major elements describe an international order at a given moment. The power distribution is important when defining the structure of the system, the big ideas are relevant for understanding the interactions among states, while the major events, processes and phenomena reveal its dynamic.

This paper is written in March 2023, when major events are still ongoing, leaving no other option than to consider an interpretative stance, consistent with both

the English School and constructivism. The lack of important reliable information imposes a precautionary attitude, so that the inquiry may aspire at most to indicate as plausible certain directions for the foreseeable future. Bull himself would probably endorse such an attitude, as he stated, in the debate with the behaviourists, that 'Thinking is also research' (Holbraad 1990: 193).

### **The 1990s: from Wilsonianism to cosmopolitanism in a multilateral era**

Huntington coined the term 'uni-multipolar system' for describing the power distribution in the post-Cold War era (Huntington 1999). The term itself is suggestive, simultaneously pointing to the status of the 'lonely superpower' enjoyed by the United States, and the presence of other major actors in the system. The liberal values, in American terms, offered the legitimizing background for the international order corresponding to this particular power-distribution. Wilson's legacy seemed then to come to fruition, and two examples suffice in this regard. The collective security principle was used to protect Kuwaiti independence from Iraq's aggression, while the self-determination principle was the basis for German reunification.

The Wilsonian conception of managing international security has the idea of peace between states at its core, legitimized by nations inside their borders. If the premise is not fulfilled, then this statist conception of security is useless in managing internal disputes. Therefore, the 1990's saw an enlarged version of international security. The humanitarian conception of the era, supported by what was called 'the Clinton doctrine', was destined to defend human rights all over the world even by force (Wittkopf et al. 2008: 68–69). The perspective was not exclusively American. In 1994, the UN Development Program coined the term 'human security' for emphasizing the necessity of centering the international security on the basic needs of individuals, simply because they are humans (UNDP 1994).

The enlargement of international security needed a compatible normative basis, so the Kantian rationale slightly replaced the Wilsonian one during the period. Both perspectives have peace as the core value, the former based on individual morality and rationality, rather than states. Together, the individuals form the largest political community possible, so the recognition of the universality of human rights is the dominant normative dimension of the globalization processes. The world not being conceived as divided into exclusive sovereign polities, a certain cosmopolitan turn took place inside the liberal order of general peace among states. The Kantian approach was possible under Wilsonian conditions.

A visionary scholar like Bull defined the individuals' 'world order' in the '70s (Bull 2002: 19–21). Other approaches, such as Linklater's, support the need of regarding humanity as a reference point (Linklater 1998). The changing and mutually influencing nature of normativity and political processes is widely commented.

Kaldor's 'new wars' concept not only recognizes globalization as a fundamental cause for non-Clausewitzian conflicts, but also for the spread of transnational attitudes in managing them, contributing to the development of the civil society inside the war-torn state as a condition for peace (Kaldor 2012). Putting the logic behind humanitarian operations in Bull's terms, the international society should work for the benefit of the world order.

Obviously, some states' behavior did not fit the normative stance supported mainly by the liberal West. The conflict between the states' particularistic logic and the cosmopolitan universalism became apparent in the very humanitarian interventions, which eventually opposed Yugoslavia's sovereignty to human rights principle during NATO's bombing campaign in 1999 (Wittkopf et al. 2008: 85–88). *The Responsibility to Protect (R2P)* resolution, adopted at the 2005 World Summit, tries to solve this dilemma. The doctrine, while recognizing states' responsibilities to protect their citizens, stipulates that the international community is entitled to interfere if one of them is unable or unwilling to secure its population (UNGA 2005). The above dynamic regards the systemic order and should not be considered unique or evenly spread, but only a tendency supported by liberal societies. The dismantlement of the USSR put Russia, its main heir, in the situation of redefining the political community it represents and its international attitude. Russia assumed a role of managing what it considered to be its natural sphere of influence in a manner that I defined somewhere else as a Power-Oriented Post Imperial Order (POPIO), built to the benefit of the former metropolis - opposed to a Norm-Oriented PIO, oriented to the advantage of the former dominated society (Ungureanu 2011). By declaring a right of protecting the Russian-speaking communities abroad or unilaterally assuming a peacekeeping role in post-Soviet area, Russia used the rationale of the general order in a particular manner, closer to the old-style imperialist, unilateral policies than to the cosmopolitan multilateral ones.

### The 2000s crises: reassertion of statehood

The terrorist attacks in 2001 mark the moment when the states tried to control the most unintended consequences of globalization. At least some of these 'non-traditional threats' (Terriff et al. 1999) were to be addressed with states' traditional means.

In Bull's rationale, the Global War on Terror is consistent with the idea of international society, as states protect their first goal of maintaining exclusive memberships (Bull 2002: 16). They commonly defend the very feature of their statehood, the monopoly on legitimate violence, refusing other actors any claim in this area. In 2008's global financial crisis, the great economic powers took the responsibility to commonly rule over the general conditions, forming G20. Three things are interesting to note about G20. Firstly, all major economies, no matter the nature of their domestic regime (unlike G7), take part in it. Secondly, all participants declare their

trust in the liberal principle of free trade. Finally, the sovereignty norm is relaxed, as the EU is part of the arrangement (G20 2008). The early 2000s' saw several manifestations of the concert of power, generally enjoying the support of the rest of the international community, as in the case of the Libyan intervention, made on R2P logic (UNSC 2011). However, for the Syrian war, begun in 2011, the great powers have not reached a common position.

There is not only one direction in the tendencies inside the international order. In 2003, the US-led intervention in Iraq was legitimized by liberal-based arguments, such as punishing a rough state or freeing people from a dictatorship. In this manifestation of "Wilsonianism with teeth" (Mearsheimer 2005: 1), unipolarity (considered as such, even if it was actually a multilateral intervention) allowed peculiar ideological convictions to provoke the generally agreed norms of intervention. The intervention marked the nadir of America's popularity in all post-Cold War era. The US failed to obtain a UN authorization, its allies were divided into opponents and supporters of the intervention (Gordon–Shapiro 2004), and tens of million protested against the war all over the world (Verhulst 2010). The normative and political imbroglio lasted, at least nominally, until August 2003, when the UN Security Council, welcoming the formation of an Iraqi Governing Council, also established an Assistance Mission (UNSC 2003).

If the American interventions of the era had a liberal foundation, the Russian challenges to the international order make sense in the POPIO rationale. In 2008, it intervened in Georgia in a 'peace enforcement' labelled military operation and unilaterally recognized the secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2014, it went even further in provoking the currently accepted general norms, by annexing Crimea. J. Kerry, the US Secretary of State, called it "an incredible act of aggression", as Russia behaved "in a 19<sup>th</sup> century fashion" (VOA News 2014). The crisis marked a reassertion of sovereignty as the basic norm for international order, while, in political terms, it signaled that even a great power can be subject to international (or, actually, Western) sanctions, aimed to punishing its behavior (Åslund 2019). It was a major crack among the great powers in the post-Cold War era, heralding the end of the concert.

Following this direction announced by the great powers actions, an increasingly statist conception on security became apparent in the crises of the second part of the 2010s. The management of the non-traditional threats confirmed the significance of statehood. During the 2015 refugee crisis, some EU states reaffirmed the role of borders. In the management of the pandemic, the first crisis that affected virtually simultaneously and with equal force all societies, governments all over the world appealed to extraordinary measures. The 'state of exception' justified measures beyond the regular institutional framework.

The pandemic had a powerful impact on societies, states and the globalization processes. Until now, in more than 760 million cases, almost 7 million lost their lives (WHO 2023). In 2020, the value of the global trade was about 9% (USD 2.5 trillion) lower than in 2019 (UNCTAD 2022a: 6). The international security landscape

suddenly changed, due to the general anxiety – ISIS instructed its adepts to avoid travelling to affected areas (Harper 2020) – and states’ policies.

In this context, the great powers tried to end the long-term interventions justified by the fight against terrorism. After two decades, the American-led coalition left Afghanistan. The initial reason for the intervention (to ensure that this country is not a safe harbor for terrorist groups) was supposedly reached. However, the very fact that the Taliban, the group defeated in 2001, returned to power in a matter of hours in 2021 signals a certain failure in other respects. In 2022, France ended its intervention in Mali in a similar manner.

The Western great powers apparently abandoned the use of violent means in fighting terrorism abroad during the pandemic, and, partially and symbolically, even withdrawing from Third World countries. In turn, they dedicated their energies not only to combating the pandemic and its effects, but also to offering help in this regard. For OECD, an increase of 4.4% in official foreign aid to developing countries from 2020 to 2021 is explained mostly through the help provided for fighting the pandemic (OECD 2022).

Briefly put, the pandemic had the effect of making the states more prone to asserting their control over societies, while abandoning external military involvement. At the same time, this ubiquitous threat made the states contemplate their duty to cooperate in order to cope with this unprecedented danger.

## **2022: The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Wilsonian re-turn**

The Russian war on Ukraine suddenly challenged the cosmopolitan optics on the world, more or less assumed by the states, as the peace among states was broken. I suggest that the aggression reinforced the general reorientation to the statist conception of the international order, without abandoning the global dimension. The following discussion is made on three tiers, watching first the Russian rationales, then the answers offered by the international community, and finally addressing the attention given to non-traditional threats.

### **The Russian justifications**

In the days prior to war, Russia unilaterally made some steps in order to ensure a certain legalistic framework. It recognized the two ‘people’s republics’ of Donetsk and Luhansk, then concluded assistance treaties with them, and after that invoked the right to self-defense in order to protect them against an alleged Ukrainian aggression. A speech given by Russia’s president, V. Putin, on February 24, the very day when the intervention began, offers the legal arguments and some other reasons for it, such as preventing a genocide or protecting the compatriots (Putin 2022a). Even if none of Russia’s explanations seems to fulfill the pro-

visions of the international law (Värk 2022), it should be noted that Russia made efforts of appearing to respect the Wilsonian order. Even the expression ‘special military operation’ used to describe the invasion is eloquent in this regard – in a pacific world, war is illegal.

Anyway, Russia justified the war in various ways. In the already mentioned speech, V. Putin referred to NATO’s expansion eastward as “a policy of containing Russia [...]. For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation”, and he mentioned that “we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine”. These two narratives are connected, as “Focused on their own goals, the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine” (Putin 2022a). D. Medvedev, former president and prime minister, current deputy chairman of the Security Council, added that “Russia is fighting a sacred battle against Satan” (Reuters 2022). There were no more details in this particular direction, but Putin declared, one year after the start of the war, that “Millions of people in the West realise that they are being led to a spiritual disaster” (Putin 2023).

All three philosophies of war distinguished by Rapoport – the political, eschatological and cataclysmic (Rapoport 1968) – are used in the Russian narrative. The first two are identifiable in the mentioned speeches, while the nuclear argument would cover the third. Putin stated, in a clear allusion to this possibility, that “In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff” (Putin 2022b). However, in an effort to calm the spirits, the presidential spokesman D. Peskov said that “emotions must not prevail” (TASSa 2022). The ambiguity of the issue continues as Russia decided to suspend its participation in the New START treaty on February 22, 2023. While explaining this measure as caused by the support offered by the Western nuclear powers to Ukraine, Russia also stated that it “will continue to adhere to the quantitative restrictions enshrined in New START” (TASS 2023a).

The simultaneous use of different philosophies obviously explains a certain inconsistency in Russia’s war objectives, visible on the battlefield. It also suggests three major interconnected, hierarchically organized rationales for challenging the international order. The most important one is the denouncement of unipolarity, which asks for a re-affirmation of Russia’s power. The release from the supposedly unfair consequences of the end of the Cold War and dismantlement of the USSR would demand the denial of Ukraine’s sovereignty. The second reason, the denazification (and “fight against Satan”) aims at ensuring the moral status of resisting the Westernization. These two goals are pointing to a mythical ‘golden age’ of Russia’s position and freedom of action. As an instrument to achieve them, the nuclear rattling is “not a bluff” – Russia is determined to pursue these objectives and any attempt to stop it implies risking Armageddon...

## The international community's replies

Russia's aggression pushed the international community to protect its fundamental norms. As no common action is possible under the UN Charter due to Russia's veto power in the Security Council, only the possibility of a moral condemnation remained. On March 1, the General Assembly affirmed "its commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine", condemned in "the strongest terms the aggression" and asked Russia to "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine" (UNGA 2022a). On October 12, the same forum declared that the referenda staged by Russia in four Ukrainian regions are 'illegal', thus dismissing its claims of territorial aggrandizement (UNGA 2022b).

The two resolutions obtained virtually the same results (141 in favor, 5 against, 35 abstentions and 12 absents, and 143, 5, 35, 10, respectively). Belarus, North Korea, Nicaragua, and Syria opposed, alongside Russia, states which nowadays can be regarded either hugely indebted to Russia, or sharing its views regarding the desirability of the present international order. The abstaining and absent states are countries from the Third World, including some former post-Soviet republics and three of BRICS members (India, China, and South Africa, while Brazil voted in favor in both cases). These three 'alternative giants', theoretically the most interested in a multipolar world, the basic Russian narrative, preferred to refrain from voting. China's position in particular deserves some comments.

China is, one can say, caught between two different imperatives. A traditional leader of the Third World, it consistently protected the sovereignty norm, to which these countries are particularly sensitive. More importantly, it needs this argument to push its Taiwanese claims, so China cannot ignore its fundamental role as guardian of statehood and territorial integrity. Politically, a good relation with Russia is, nevertheless, of major importance, mainly due to the common opposition to the American/ Western hegemony. On February 4 2022, the leaders of Russia and PRC declared that "Friendship between the two states has no limits" (TASS 2022b). In 2023, PRC issued an official position proclaiming, at §1, the necessity of "Respecting the sovereignty [...] of all countries". The declaration does not necessarily represent a support for Ukraine, as Russia claimed annexation of Ukrainian regions, but more a reassertion of its long-standing position on this issue. It plainly discourages Russia's ambiguous nuclear position by stating "The threat or use of nuclear weapons should be opposed" (§8). The signs of the friendship are best identified in §2, "The security of a country should not be pursued at the expense of others", a reference to the justification of war, and §10, "Stopping unilateral sanctions" imposed by the West on Russia (MFAPRC 2023).

Most countries condemned the aggression and the so-called referenda, aimed at legitimizing the annexation. The 'collective West' (term used by Putin himself – Putin 2022a), under a strong American leadership, coordinated the widespread moral condemnation. If for the general attitude of the international community

a Wilsonian perspective of protecting peace suffice, this proactive stance asks for a more profound liberal perspective, such as the Kantian 'democratic peace' discussed by Doyle (Doyle 1983). However, the details are important, and this explanation seems to have some flaws, not all democracies embracing the same position. The assertive attitude of the 'collective West' makes more sense when considering this group a 'security community', as defined by Adler and Barnett in a constructivist perspective, since it assumes the common identity of its members (Adler & Barnett 1998). Nevertheless, these normative and sociological epistemic references may actually reinforce each other, as proved by Risse-Kapen (Risse-Kapen 1996).

If the Western interpretation looks dominant in the moral component of the present international order, it is obvious that Russia is losing in terms of power distribution. Its claimed exclusive sphere of influence seems to be in a state of disarray. Out of several examples, two seem clearer in this respect: Armenia refused to host CSTO military drills (ArmenPress 2023), while in Central Asia, China stepped in to support Kazakh sovereignty (MFAPRC 2022). Strategically, if Finland and Sweden will join NATO, as foreseen, Russia will share more than 1300 kilometers of border with its nemesis and, even worse, watch how the Baltic Sea comes under the control of the Alliance. A war intended to stop NATO's enlargement and strengthen Russia has in reality the opposite effects.

Russia seemed to worsen its situation by starting the war. It produced an unconvincing narrative and showed poor military performance, while its strategic position suddenly deteriorated. Russia looks, due to its structural conditions, ill prepared to face dramatic changes. Its economy is now under the blow of the sanctions. Politically, this conservative, populist, and personalistic autocracy (Fish 2017:61) appears to face some new difficulties, as shown by the rise of the non-state military actors. Avoiding further speculation, all these signs may point to a rather grim future for Russia and its international posture.

### Addressing global challenges during the inter-state war

In this collapsed concert of power, the question of the global problems remains. "Today you have a huge number of countries in Africa, Asia, Central America, Latin America, the Caribbean, Pacific who feel that our issues are being put on the side and the entire oxygen is being sucked up by the Ukraine conflict", affirmed S. Jaisankar, the External Affairs Minister of India (Print 2023). I suggest here that, even if it is obvious that the war in Ukraine is nowadays, at least for the global North, the first point on the agenda, the transnational challenges have a certain weight in reshaping the international order. These areas ask, I suggest, for a reassertion of the cosmopolitan approach, in various proportions.

The consequences of war spread well beyond the battlefield, so that many non-traditional threats became apparent. Migration, food security and energy are three examples in this respect.

UNCHR estimates, as of February 2023, that there were more than 8 million refugees only in Europe (UNCHR 2023). The drama of these people has profound effects on the societies receiving them. The help provided, by offering shelter and humanitarian aid, proves that the cosmopolitan attitude is actually enforced, not weakened. The transnational civil society mobilized to fight the sufferance of those affected by war, and asked states to take action in this direction. Hence, the Wilsonian orientation did not replace the Kantian one, but became more visible.

The other two mentioned fields need a more nuanced approach. The Black Sea Grain Initiative, signed in July 2022, is a singular example of cooperation between the warring parts, mediated by Türkiye, under the aegis of the UN. It intends to answer the kind of preoccupation expressed by the Third World countries. Not letting all 'oxygen' be aspired by the Ukrainian war means, in this case, averting the risk of famine in the global South, thus addressing a basic human need. The direct interest of Ukraine – to restart the much-needed exports for its strangled economy – was, supposedly, an important factor in placing the issue on the international agenda. A similar Russian desire made the agreement possible (UNCTAD 2022b).

As for energy, discussing it as a security issue in the current war demands both a strategic and an environmental dimension. The green transition and the necessity to frustrate Russia of its leverage on European affairs are simultaneously tackled in the REPowerEU plan, prepared by the European Commission in May 2022 (EC 2022). In February 2023, the EU, G7 and Australia formed a 'Price Cap Coalition' to limit the revenues of the Russian war chest provided by the export of gas and oil (EC 2023). This Coalition is, basically, the security community acting in the energy sector.

## Conclusions

The paper intends to investigate the present dynamics of the international order, using Hedley Bull's influential work as starting point. Emphasizing here the changes of international norms, the liberal values offered the world's common moral basis in the decades following the end of the Cold War. A Wilsonian conception of security, insisting on interstate peace, powerful at the beginning of the period, was slightly replaced by a cosmopolitan one, of Kantian inspiration, as globalization revealed new challenges. In time, a more statist conception on security has begun to resurface. The pandemic was relevant for the significance of nontraditional threats, while its control was a litmus test for statehood.

The Russo-Ukrainian war sent a shockwave in the whole world, as it recalled the spectrum of the interstate war. The Wilsonian direction regained its full significance, with a Kantian nuance given mainly by the attitude of the transnational

civil society. Over all, it seems that that the liberal values remain, for the foreseeable future, the foundation of the international order.

Some recent developments indicate that, one year after the beginning of the war, the belligerents are aware of the moral pressure they have to face. Recently, Russia addressed the nuclear issue in a clearer way, by stating, together with China, that the nuclear war “must never be unleashed” (TASS 2023b), a declaration that should have the role of calming the world. The idea that the present reshaping of the international order offers special attention to global human security is supported by the extension of the grain agreement, in particular designed to address the danger of famine in the Third World (UNSG 2023). As already noticed, the Kantian and Wilsonian liberal perspectives actually intermingle, the current statist direction being only a tendency.

As for the power distribution, it is impossible to discuss now issues like the future polarity of the system. For the moment, it is reasonable to say that Russia seems to be a declining great power. The war has revealed this country’s unexpected weaknesses, and its claimed exclusive sphere of influence is diluting. Without referring here to the material elements of power, one can say that Russia’s moral isolation places it on the fringe of the international society. As D. Medvedev admits, “now, for the first time in at least 150 years, we are alone” (NEXTA 2023). By contrast, the ‘collective West’ is more cohesive than ever, and its interpretations are hard to reject even by less sympathetic countries.

Lastly, I should add that the considerations above should not be deemed as absolute. I only suggest here some tendencies, as observable and interpretable today. As it has been proven so many times, the incredible complexity of the social realm can invalidate any prediction.

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