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Reflections on *After Victory*

G. John Ikenberry

Abstract

After Victory appeared in the spring of 2001, in what now seems like a different era. The book looks at the great postwar moments – 1815, 1919, 1945, and the end of the Cold War – when the 'old order' is swept away and newly powerful states shape a 'new order'. In this essay, I offer reflections on *After Victory*'s arguments about the character and evolution of international order in the modern era, American hegemonic order in the 20th century, and the logic of institutions and strategic restraint. I explore the theoretical debates that it engaged and triggered. The essay looks at how the book's arguments stand up to the face of more recent developments – the Bush administration's Iraq War, the rise of China, the American 'empire debate', and the Trump administration's radical assault on the post-1945 liberal international order.

Keywords

hegemony, institutions, liberal internationalism, power transition, strategic restraint, theories of order

Introduction

After Victory was published in the spring of 2001, during what now seems like a different era. The idea for the book emerged in the first years after the end of the Cold War. This 'postwar moment' seemed to share characteristics with great postwar junctures of the past, including 1815, 1919, and 1945. In *After Victory*, I wanted to look both backward and forward, to probe these moments when the 'old order' was swept away and newly powerful states shaped a 'new order'. These power transitions find states – the victors and the vanquished – standing on the rubble of war, negotiating the basic (new) rules and principles of world politics. Major wars are like massive earthquakes that open up gaping cracks, exposing deep substructures of power and interests. To study postwar moments is to put on the boots of a geopolitical archeologist and climb down into newly exposed layers of geopolitical strata.

The book was intended as an intervention into theory and debate about international order. The study of the history and theory of international order is scattered across the scholarly landscape. Work in this area focuses on the core underlying 'problem' of order (see Bull, 2012; Gilpin, 1981; Hurrell, 2007; Lake, 2009). How is order created and maintained in a world of sovereign states? Who commands and who benefits? What are the

Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA and Global Eminence Scholar, Kyung Hee University (South Korea).

Corresponding author:
G. John Ikenberry, Princeton University, 116 Bendheim Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.
Email: gji3@princeton.edu

rules and institutions that make up the governance structure? State power, anarchy, insecurity are never far from centre stage. But the focus is on how states create rules and arrangements for ongoing relations of competition and cooperation. World politics is not simply states operating in anarchy – it is an active political order with rules, institutions, and accumulated understandings and expectations.

My original interest in debates about international order began in the mid-1980s, after I joined the faculty at Princeton University. Robert Gilpin (1981) and Paul Kennedy (1987) were then debating hegemonic order and American decline. My interest was not in decline but in how orders get created. I found myself asking: how can a legitimate, durable order be established despite highly asymmetrical power relations? Or, in the Weberian formulation, how is coercive power turned into legitimate domination?

The book that shadowed my work was Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics*. For Gilpin, international order – its emergence, stability, and decline – tracks tightly with the distribution of power and rise and fall of major states. It was a structural realist theory that was impossible to ignore.[1] I was drawn to its simple theoretical framing and cyclical world-historical narrative. But I was not satisfied with it. Indeed, writing *After Victory* was in part an exercise is explaining to myself why I was dissatisfied. Gilpin's hegemonic realist account of order did seem more convincing than its great realist theoretical rival: Waltz's (1979) balance of power realism. For Gilpin, international order was not just an equilibrium condition or the crystallisation of the distribution of power. Major states built order. It existed in the organising principles, authority relations, functional roles, shared expectations, and settled practices through which states do business. But Gilpin offered no theory for how power was turned into authority nor a substantive explanation for variation in the logic and character of order across cycles of rise and decline.

The other reference point was the great variety of theories of liberal internationalism and democratic peace. In the late-1990s, I taught a course with Daniel Deudney at the University of Pennsylvania called 'The Logic of the West'. It was an intellectual journey through the various literatures loosely grouped under the heading of liberal international theory, with terms and concepts such as functionalism, regional integration theory, industrial society theory, modernisation theory, complex interdependence, multilateralism, security community, democratic peace, and neo-liberal institutionalism. All of these concepts and theories were inspired by what scholars saw as distinctive features of relations between the Western advanced industrial democracies (see Doyle, 1997; Owen, 1997). The postwar West was not a region that could easily be explained by realism and the problems of anarchy. It was more hierarchical than an anarchic state system, but its relations were also more consensual and cooperative. Liberal theories offered explanations, but they were often couched in terms of complex processes and mechanisms of interdependence that did not speak directly to theories of order. For me, hegemonic realism seemed to identify the great problems of order, and liberal internationalism seemed to offer insights into how modern societies respond to them.

In what follows, I revisit the argument of *After Victory* and reflect on the various debates of which it was a part or provoked. The book offered a way of looking at the long-term shifts and evolution of international order across power transitions and great power wars of the modern era. How has this argument stood up? It also offered a theory and portrait of American order building and what has come to be known as 'liberal hegemony'. The George W. Bush administration's Iraq War and even more so the Donald Trump administration's apparent rejection of liberal internationalism seem to challenge the basic logic of strategic restraint and liberal hegemonic order. The rise of China raises yet more

questions. We can look at various components of the argument – strategic restraint, institutional binding, hegemonic bargains, democratic competence, learning – and situate their place in ongoing debates.

The argument

The book begins by observing that, first, international order has come and gone, risen and fallen across historical eras. Powerful states have built order, only to see it unravel and break down. Indeed, scholars often mark the great eras of world politics in terms of the building and breakdown of order. Second, these great moments of order building come after major wars – 1648, 1713, 1815, 1919, 1945, and 1989. Peace conferences and settlement agreements follow, putting in place institutions and arrangements for postwar order. Third, the actual character of international order has varied across eras and order building moments. Variations have been manifest along multiple dimensions: geographic scope, organisational logic, rules and institutions, hierarchy and leadership, and the manner in and degree to which coercion and consent undergird the resulting order.

Because international orders differ in character from one era and geographic area to another, it is possible to compare them. Some international orders have been more coherent, long-lasting, and consent-based than others. Some have been organised and run from the centre and others less so. Some have been imperial and others more liberal. The durability of orders has also varied. Some international orders – such as the post-1815 order – lasted for nearly a century, while the post-1919 order never fully took shape. More than past international orders, the American-led order built after World War II has been globally expansive, organised around layers of institutions and alliance partnerships. And, it has endured across bipolar and unipolar settings into the current era.

The theoretical focus of the book is the order building logic of the leading state or states as it is manifest in postwar settlements. Great power war destroyed the old order. Winners and losers emerged. The distribution of power shifted, often dramatically. How do states that win major wars go about building order? My image is of a state that has just received a windfall of 'power assets'. How do states spend and invest these assets? How do they engineer order out of disorder and power disparities? My answer is that the type of order that emerges hinges on the availability of mechanisms to institutionalise and restrain power. If institutions cannot be put in place to entrench and restrain power – to establish commitments and path dependent institutional relationships – the order will move in one of two directions: towards a balance of power or imperial dominance. In these instances, power is not restrained and order is established either by a balance of power or an imbalance of power – that is, by anarchy or empire. But if restraint and commitment can be established in institutionalised relationships, a door is opened, and more complex and cooperative orders are possible. Strategic restraint is the 'passport' to these other worlds of order.

The empirical claim for this argument focuses on American order building after World War II. I argue that – at least among the North Americans, Europeans, and Japanese – binding institutional agreements among the established democracies resulted in an order with constitutional characteristics, facilitated by a layer cake of global and regional alliances and multilateral agreements. My theoretical punchline is that Western liberal democracies found ways to use institutions to establish restraint and commitment, and, in doing so, created an order that went beyond the balance of power and imperial logics. Democracies are unusually capable of signalling restraint and engaging in cooperation,

doing so through various types of institution. The presence of democracy and institutions allowed these Western states to dampen the manifestations of two forces that typically emerge to shape international order – anarchy and empire. Of course, anarchy and empire never totally disappeared, and one of the debates *After Victory* provoked is the question: how much dampening of anarchy and empire really occurred? My answer is that it varied across regions and realms, but that it did so sufficiently to give the overall postwar Western order a liberal hegemonic character. It is a hierarchical order with liberal characteristics.

The book takes this argument and looks back at the 1815 and 1918 settlements, finding glimmerings of constitutional logic, and looks forward to 1989 and again sees evidence of institutional binding and power restraint. Taking the long view, the claim is that over the last two centuries, it is possible to see growth in the sophistication and centrality of institutions as tools used by great powers – particularly democracies – for restraining and managing power and shaping international order.

What precisely is the claim about institutional bargains and binding? It is not obvious that powerful states would want to bind and restrain themselves through institutional agreements. There are two possible objections. One is that institutions do not have 'restraint' capacity', so why would a rational state even make efforts to build institutions? The other objection is that, precisely because institutions do have restraint capacity, a state would seek to avoid limiting its policy autonomy. My argument is that institutions do seem to have some properties that allow states – particularly liberal democracies – to use them as tools to signal restraint and commitment. If they do have these properties, leading states should have incentives to use institutions to 'extend' and 'limit' their power.

It may seem paradoxical, but institutions can be useful in both ways at the same time. First, they can be used by the leading state to entrench – and thereby extend – power into the future by 'locking in' other states into desired policy orientations. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), for example, amplifies American economic influence and extends it forward into the future. Second, institutions can limit the arbitrary and indiscriminate exercise of hegemonic power. They can help a state establish credible restraints and commitments on its power, which facilitates cooperation and gives the order more legitimacy. Other states are more likely to do business with you – that is, bandwagon with you rather than balance against you – if you can credibly establish that you will follow agreed rules and norms.

Thus, there are ingredients for a postwar institutional bargain. The leading state agrees to assert itself within an institutional order – which restricts its ability to engage in any indiscriminate exercise of power – in exchange for locking in the acquiescence and compliant participation of weaker states. Each gets something for its agreement to embed its relations with others within institutions, putting restrictions on its autonomy. The institutions take on a sort of 'soft' constitutional function. The leading state has two reasons for agreeing to operate within an institutional order. First, institutions create more willing support for the order by secondary states, thus reducing enforcement costs for the hegemonic state. 'American power is made more acceptable to other states because it is institutionalized' (Ikenberry, 2001: 271). Second, institutions create a 'stream of advantages' that can last beyond the state power that created them. They allow the leading state to invest in its future well-being.

Weaker states also get something from the bargain. First, they get a leading state that is more benign and cooperative than it would be without institutions. The institutions may not completely pin Gulliver down. But they help shape and constrain how hegemonic

power is manifest. Second, the institutions provide lesser states with 'voice opportunities'. The institutions provide a playing field and channels of access to bargain with the lead state.

This logic might make sense to both the powerful and the weak. The powerful state has a surplus of power, so it has incentives to invest some of that surplus in future gains. The institutions provide the vehicle to extend the 'returns to power' into the future. Secondary states have incentives to accept this bargain because they want their own returns to power to come sooner rather than later. They need to rebuild, so they have a larger discount rate. In locking themselves into institutions, they get protections and rights of access. In future, they might be able to modify the institutional bargain to reflect changed power realities.

Looking back on this argument, two additional observations have struck me as interesting. First, disparities of power seem to provide incentives – rather than simply constraints – on institutional bargains. It is precisely because states involved in the postwar settlement are unequal, that they have heightened incentives for a deal. The leading state wants to use them to lock other states into the order, reduce enforcement costs, and invest in the future. Weaker states want rules and institutions as protections against the leading state becoming a despotic hegemon. Second, for a powerful state, offering restrictions on its power can be a source of power. This dimension of power is a neglected one. But it is a clever way to use power, particularly when the leading state aims to create a legitimate postwar order. Exercising power through restraint lessens the anger and resentment that tends to follow from the direct use of coercive power.

Strategic restraint and American hegemony

Debates about *After Victory* focus mostly on its theoretical and empirical claims about institutions and strategic restraint. Can institutions actually shape and inhibit the way hegemonic power is exercised? Does the American postwar experience provide convincing evidence of this phenomenon (see Schweller, 2001)? The 'strong version' of the book's argument is conveyed by the term constitutional, used to depict the foundational character of the postwar institutional settlement. I am using constitutional in two senses. First, the settlement is constitutional in that it is a founding moment. It is an act that brings a new political order to life; a moment when the rules of the game are laid down. Second, it is constitutional in the stronger sense that the foundational rules and institutions operate in complex ways to shape and limit how power is exercised. This pathway leads to strategic restraint.

So, can states really create and place themselves in institutional settings that give the order a constitutional character in this second sense? Chapter 3 of *After Victory* grapples with this question. In the strong version of my argument, I claim that this laying of a foundation can happen. The argument draws on theories about 'increasing returns' to institutions and the slow process by which states get progressively more embedded in them. The idea is that states – that is, liberal democracies – find themselves increasingly intertwined, making it more difficult and costly to break out of the order. There are mutually reinforcing dynamics at work. One is a rationalist, cost–benefit dynamic, where the costs of 'breakout' go up over time as interdependence grows. The other is a sociological dynamic, where a proliferation of constituencies – within and outside of the state – create coalitions that reduce the ability of leaders to engage in breakout. These dynamics create path dependency.[2]

I used these arguments to make sense of the durability of the postwar American-led order after the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry, 1989 [1990]). During the Cold War, American institutional cooperation and strategic restraint were arguably overdetermined.[3] Realists could explain it in terms of Cold War balancing, and liberals had their various explanations. The 1990s, however, led to divergent predictions, with realists arguing that the American-led order would suffer from the disappearance of an external threat. But, to the contrary, the end of the Cold War led to the expansion and deepening of this order. Asymmetries of power grew between the United States and its Cold War partners, but their relations remained stable. Moreover, states outside the Western order – most notably China and Russia – did not respond with overt balancing behaviour.

In the next decade, however, the Bush administration seemed to confound the theory advanced in *After Victory*. After September 2001, Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney brought officials into the administration – neo-conservatives and multilateral sceptics such as John Bolton – who questioned the value of institutions and bargains at the heart of the postwar order. A 'new unilateralism' flourished and Bush launched a 'coalition of the willing' war in Iraq. Unlike previous presidencies, the Bush administration seemed to see the postwar system more as an encumbrance than a system that facilitated and legitimated the projection of American power. These institutions were seen as weapons of the weak rather than tools of the powerful (see Daalder and Lindsay, 2003; Hoffmann and Bozo, 2004; Kagan, 2004). The decision of the Bush administration not to accept the offer of its European allies to invoke North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Article V after the September 11 attacks was emblematic of an American departure from the postwar institutional bargains.

What the Bush years revealed to me, at least initially, was how weak the institutional constraints were on American foreign policy. The United States seemed willing and able to step out of the postwar system institutions when it wanted to: that was the message of the Iraq War. So I began to make distinctions between the strong and weak versions of my argument. The strong version was that the United States had embedded itself in a system that truly tied it down, preventing or constraining unilateral departures. The weak version seemed more plausible: that the United States could break with long-standing institutions and norms, but it would pay a price. There would be legitimacy and lost cooperation costs. In fact, the second Bush administration could be read as a time when it attempted to bring the United States back into line (see Ikenberry, 2004).

There were other ways of framing the Bush administration's behaviour. Some have noted that the United States has always had a strong streak of unilateralism, reinforced by a long tradition of American exceptionalism. The United States has tended to join multilateral institutions that it could dominate. In this view, Bush and the Iraq War are less of a break with the past.[4] Others have noted that the unipolar moment made the United States less sensitive to future losses of power. In fact, some Bush officials thought that American dominance could be made self-perpetuating. Partnerships and international legitimacy were thus less valuable.[5]

The surprising election of Donald Trump has generated even more profound questions about the viability of the postwar order. Trade, alliances, the United Nations (UN), multilateral cooperation, and democracy and human rights – in all these areas, Trump has threatened to reverse long-standing American positions. Trump is the first postwar American president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism. At one level, Trump questions the 'deals' that underlie America's postwar relations with allies. In trade, he has questioned the non-zero-sum character of regional and multilateral agreements.

Trump has also questioned the terms of America's alliances with Europe and East Asia. At a deeper level, Trump seems to be questioning the entire idea of an American-led order. This revisionism might be of two sorts. One is that he thinks the time has come to liquidate the postwar system of partnerships. This stance would put him in the camp of various 'offshore balancing' and 'retrenchment' grand strategists, such as Barry Posen and Steve Walt. Or Trump might simply not see that such an order – however flawed – even exists. Trump might see 'deals', but not the deeper architecture. In either case, Trump's revisionism presents the spectacle of a hegemonic state that seems actively to be sabotaging the international order that it created.

Paradoxically, the Trump administration may tell us two divergent things about the logic of the postwar system. On one hand, we learn from the Trump treatment that liberal hegemony is weaker and more contingent than the strong version of the theory suggests. The idea of 'increasing returns to institutions' and 'embedded order' looks fanciful. Moreover, the theory does not account for domestic politics. It assumes the most powerful state in the system will have internationalist impulses. But Trump tells us that this assumption may not hold.

In addition, the theory seems to have an overly optimistic view about how liberal democracies operate, emphasising their special capacities to work together to compose their differences and build cooperative relationships. On the other hand, the Trump treatment shows us leaders across the postwar order really did think they were operating within a liberal hegemonic order. They see the US breaking bargains that were understood to be part of the international order. Roles, responsibilities, expectations, and bargains have been illuminated precisely because Trump now seems to be undermining them.

We might draw other lessons from the Trump experience. One is that the old liberal hegemonic order might have been flawed and incomplete, but it did have virtues that now seem clear as we peer into the post-liberal hegemonic abyss. That order put the United States in a position to generate stability. What we see today is that when the United States 'steps out' of its hegemonic role, the result is greater instability, fewer public goods, less cooperation, and weakening of the liberal democratic foundations of global order.[6] On the other hand, Trump might also show that there is resilience in the postwar order. NATO has not unravelled. NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Association) is still in place (at time of writing). Most postwar institutions continue to operate with American participation. Trump pulled the United States out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but its East Asian trade partners are continuing to negotiate the agreement with the hope that America will eventually rejoin. There are far-flung constituencies across the international system that want to hold on to some version of the existing order (see Deudney and Ikenberry, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018).

Binding, bargains, and voice opportunities

One of the core arguments of *After Victory* is about the utility of binding as a security and order building strategy. The notion is that states – liberal democracies, at least – can find alternatives to balancing as a way to cope with asymmetries in power. Rather than balance against a more powerful state, you bind yourself to it and it to you. The idea is to 'love the rival state to death'. You get so close to the powerful state, it becomes difficult for it to mobilise its power to threaten you.[7] The best example of institutional binding might be the European Coal and Steel Community. France sought to protect itself from a resurgent (West) Germany by jointly owning and operating the industries of war: coal and steel.

Germany would be enmeshed in a wider industrial–security complex that would make it difficult for it to return to militarisation and aggression. The question is: how viable is binding as a security strategy within the anarchic world of great power politics?

The realist tradition does not see binding as an alternative to balancing. I was intrigued, for example, with Joseph Grieco's (1997) effort to explain European integration from a realist perspective. The idea was that European states supported economic and monetary integration to monitor and restrain Germany, which was emerging after the Cold War as the largest European power. I have also been influenced by Paul Schroeder's (1975) classic essay on alliances as 'weapons of security and instruments of management'. Schroeder finds that alliances have often been organised more as a way to manage power relations within the security pact than to confront external threats. Alliances are attractive to states for their mutually restraining effects. From the Quadruple Alliance during the Napoleonic Wars to 20th century security pacts, great power alliances have tended to have two functions: to organise cooperation for mutual defence and provide mechanisms for members to keep an eye on each other and, on occasion, influence and restrain each other. In the past decade, a rich literature has emerged on the binding and restraint logic of alliances (see Cha, 2016; Pressman, 2008; Weitsman, 2013).

In *After Victory*, institutional binding – particularly as manifest in postwar security alliances – played a critical role in giving the American-led order its liberal hegemonic character. While economic and political institutions also mattered, security alliances provided the most clearly defined bargains and commitments between the United States and its European and East Asian partners. France and other European states' binding strategy with West Germany was made possible by America's commitment to European security. NATO, as the old saying goes, was designed to keep the Russians out, the Germans down, and the Americans in. Most of this institutional binding occurred in the shadow of the Cold War, which raised the stakes and facilitated commitments between liberal democracies. But the binding strategy was not simply a tool of bipolar balancing. It was an order building tool that allowed the Western democracies to reorient and transform their mutual relations. That is the claim: binding is an under-recognised and under-appreciated organisational logic in modern international relations.

There are two levels of critique that have followed. One is about the general role of binding institutions in explaining the stability of the American-led order. During the Cold War, this outcome was probably overdetermined. But after the Cold War, the rise of unipolarity created an interesting theoretical debate. The absence of balancing against the United States as the world moved from a bipolar to a unipolar system was important evidence for my argument. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, radical asymmetries of power opened up. The United States commanded half of global military spending, its economy was without peer, and its influence was projected to every corner of the world. Yet, counter-balancing was nowhere to be found. How much of this non-balancing was due to the political and institutional character of the United States and the order that it led? Countries just did not feel threatened because of the complex system of institutions and bargains. In other words, it mattered that the US-led order was a 'liberal' hegemonic political formation. If the United States had not been a liberal democracy and if it had not bound itself to other key states in complex ways, there would have been more counter-balancing. The alternative (realist) view is that other world-historical factors reinforced the status quo: nuclear weapons, nationalism, and complex interdependence (see Ikenberry, 2002). Others argued that it was the radical imbalance of power manifest in

unipolarity – not the liberal character of the American-led political formation – that made balancing essentially impossible, and certainly unwise (see Wohlforth, 1999).

The other type of critique focuses more at the internal workings of the hegemonic order. Behind the array of binding institutions are political bargains – agreements and understandings about roles and obligations. *After Victory* builds this idea into its theory about institutional settlements. The hegemon agrees to build institutions and place itself in them, creating conditions to establish restraint and commitment. Other states, in turn, acquiesce and support the lead state. But how does the architecture of the hegemonic order actually function? I argue that a set of bargains lie at the heart of the order: agreements between the hegemon and other leading states. What is less clear in *After Victory* is the nature of these bargains. Are there bargains that operate as 'lynchpins' in the hegemonic system, either with particular states (such as Germany and Japan) or in particular sectors (economics, security, and so forth)? The most salient bargains seem to be twofold: a security bargain and a political bargain. In the first, the United States provides security in an extended alliance system, and its partners accommodate themselves in various ways to American interests and agendas. The second is a political bargain: the United States agrees to bind itself to its partners, making itself more predictable, approachable, and user-friendly. Its partners offer support to the general hegemonic enterprise. But these commitments are provisional, and there is an opportunity here to probe more deeply into the master agreements and foundational bargains (see Mastanduno, 2018).

How does strategic restraint and institutional binding actually work on the ground? The strong version of the theory is that the institutional agreements lock states into formal rules and commitments, much as a constitutional democracy might operate. But there is little evidence that this is how it works. When a group of states agree to a set of multilateral rules for their relations, and embody them in institutions, they are creating a political process. This vision is a looser and more informal one of how binding and restraint operate.

The key move happens when states agree to create an institution – with organisational rules and principles – that they will mutually inhabit. Afterwards, the restraint is manifest in the political process that ensues. One mechanism might be the process of 'pulling and hauling'. The leading and secondary states agree to occupy the same institutional space, which creates a platform for reciprocal influence. The institutional character of the hegemonic order creates voice opportunities (see Hirschman, 1970). In binding itself to weaker states, the hegemon is providing channels of access to engage and potentially influence the lead state. This restraint is manifest as an agreement to create a political process (see Risse-Kappen, 1997).

A second mechanism is similar, but it operates through the wider domestic systems of the states within the order. This mechanism is what Stanley Hoffmann (1971) had in mind when he argued that international law creates a 'network of rights and obligations', diffused across the international system. Here, the institutions – for example, NATO – create agents and resources that operate to shift the political balance over foreign policy in the partnership states. The institution facilitates the creation of constituencies that reinforce the commitments and expectations that the institution embodies (see Simmons, 2009).

A third mechanism is socialisation. Engaging in cooperative institutional activity has effects on its occupants. They come to see the process – pulling and hauling and reciprocal influence – as legitimate. Historical legacies and grand narratives emerge about the meaning and significance of their cooperation.[8] None of these mechanisms spring to life

or overcome countervailing forces automatically. But they show how binding and restraint might work on the ground.

Finally, legitimacy lurks in the background of binding and restraint mechanisms. Institutions tie states together, but not all institutions are equal – and multilateral institutions in particular seem to embody a set of organisational principles that convey a sense of fairness and justice. Multilateral institutions offer states – powerful and weak, rising and declining – some measure of protection and equal treatment. As John Ruggie (1993: 11) argues, multilateralism is an 'institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct: that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions'. Multilateralism gives relations among states a loosely rule-based character. The more rule-based the order is, the less it is subject to the straightforward domination of powerful states. States do not bind and restrain themselves because they are required to do so. If they do, it is because they see advantages in doing so. As Ian Hurd (2017) argues, international law is actually best seen as a tool of state power, less an externally imposed constraint on the exercise of power than a resource that governments can employ to legitimate what they do. Similarly, operating within multilateral venues has legitimacy effects that even powerful states – particularly liberal states – will not want to ignore.

Is America an empire?

The arguments in *After Victory* have found their way into two other major debates in international relations – on the 'American empire' and rise of China. Realism is a foil for the book and realist theorists have offered major critiques of American liberal hegemony, led by John Mearsheimer (2018) and Barry Posen (2015). But there has always been another debate with theorists of empire. The empire critique is that despite all the grand scholarly gestures in *After Victory* about co-binding, institutional bargains, and liberal hegemony, the American-led political formation is still essentially an empire. A long tradition of argument about the United States as an empire was developed by revisionist historians, such as Charles Beard (1913) and, later, William Appleman Williams (2009), Gabriel Kolko (1968), and Walter LaFeber (1985). With the rise of unipolarity and the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, a new wave of work emerged illuminating the imperial logic of the American-led world order. Michael Mann, Perry Anderson, Tony Smith, David Hendrickson, David Calleo, Andrew Bacevich, Jeanne Morefield, Chalmers Johnson, and others have made major statements along these lines.[9] Within this debate, Jack Snyder (2003), Charles Maier (2006), and others have placed the United States 'in the company' of past empires, identifying both lineages and discontinuities. A more philosophical left-leaning critique of liberal hegemony charges that 'liberal thinkers' behind the American postwar order fail to acknowledge their own complicity in the perpetuation of social injustice and imperial domination (see Moyn, 2017).

In this grand debate, one could pose the question this way: is the United States the 'last empire', as Michael Mann (2005) has argued, or is it the first post-imperial great power? My argument is that the United States looks more like a post-imperial global power. To be sure, the liberal hegemonic parts of the world are circumscribed. Binding and restraint are most fully manifest among the advanced industrial democracies. More crude and old-style imperial forms of domination are present in America's long-standing great power presence in Latin America and the Middle East. But I hold to the view that liberal hegemony is usefully separated from more imperial forms of hierarchy and domination. Part of

my response is to look closely at America's liberal hegemonic relations with Western Europe and Japan, and here we find more consensual and reciprocal relations that I try to capture in *After Victory*. Unlike traditional empires, the American-led order has been built upon and circumscribed by two great order building projects: the globalisation of the Westphalian system and the rise of liberal internationalism. The spread of the nation-state system and the rise of new forms of institutionalised cooperation have fundamentally reshaped the terms of American global domination, to such an extent that the term 'empire' misses the logic, character, and trajectory of international order.

To be sure, the United States dominated the 20th century, imposing itself and its ideas on the world. It intervened to prop up and overturn regimes in South America, the Middle East, and Asia. But the overall effect of efforts to establish dominance has been to undermine imperial forms of order. The United States used its power to defeat the great mid-20th century empires: Japan, Germany, and the USSR. It also used its power – in finance and trade – to undermine the British Empire. The United States tended to build international order around anti-imperial logics and movements. It is an order that has established institutions and norms of legitimacy that serve to restrain imperial despotism and the exercise of indiscriminate power. It is an order that has not prevented the United States from intervening in weak states in the periphery. But it imposes costs on doing so, as the Bush administration discovered with its war in Iraq. It is a hierarchical order, but one that enshrines democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Sovereignty, liberalism, and multilateral cooperation coexist with power, inequality, and domination.

China and the global power transition

There is wide agreement that the world in undergoing a power transition, led by the rise of China. But there is less agreement to how it will play out. The classic view is advanced by Gilpin (1981), Organski (1950), Carr (2001), and other hegemonic realists. Order is created by a powerful state and when that state declines and power diffuses, international order weakens and breaks apart. A rising state emerges as the new dominant state and seeks to reorganise the international system to suit its own purposes. This narrative draws on the Western experience and comes most clearly into view with Pax Britannica and Pax Americana. *After Victory* shares this cyclical narrative as its starting point – great powers rise and fall and make efforts to organise the world. But it also offers a more evolutionary perspective, emphasising lineages and continuities in the modern international order. In particular, its portrait of the American-led order suggests that today's power transition may play out very differently than what the great realist theories expect.

Does the power transition vision truly illuminate the struggles going on today over international order? Some might argue no, that the United States is still in a position – despite its travails – to provide hegemonic leadership. Here, one might argue that a durable infrastructure – what Susan Strange (1987, 1988) called 'structural power' – undergirds the existing order. Security alliances, market relations, liberal democratic solidarity, deeply rooted geopolitical alignments – there are many possible sources of American hegemonic power that remain intact. But there may be even deeper sources of continuity in the existing system. This would be true if the existence of a liberal-oriented international order does not in fact require active hegemonic domination. It might be that power transition theory is wrong: the stability and persistence of the existing postwar international order does not depend on the concentration of American power.

Building on *After Victory*, I have argued both of these positions. My starting point is that international order is not simply an artefact of concentrations of power. Rules and institutions have a more complex and contingent relationship with the rise and fall of state power in two respects. First, international order itself is complex – multilayered, multi-faceted, and is not simply a political formation imposed by the leading state. International order is not 'one thing' that states either join or resist. It is an aggregation of rules and institutions. There are deep rules and norms of sovereignty. There are governing institutions, starting with the UN. There is a sprawling array of international institutions, regimes, treaties, agreements, protocols, and so forth. These governing arrangements cut across diverse realms – security and arms control, economy, environment and the global commons, human rights and political relations. Some of these domains may have rules and institutions that narrowly reflect the interests of the hegemonic state, but most reflect negotiated outcomes.

China and other rising states do not simply confront an American-led order. They face a wider conglomeration of rules, institutions, and arrangements, many of which they have long embraced. By separating 'American hegemony' from 'the existing international order', we see a more complex set of relationships. The United States does not embody the international order; it has a relationship with it, as do rising states. The United States embraces many of the core global rules and institutions – the UN, IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization, and so on. But it also has resisted ratification of the Law of the Seas Treaty and various arms control and disarmament agreements. China also embraces many of the same global rules and institutions and resists ratification of others. Generally speaking, the more fundamental or core the norms and institutions are – beginning with the Westphalian norms of sovereignty and the UN system – the more agreement there is between the United States and China.

These observations cut against the realist hegemonic perspective and cyclical theories of power transition. The international order that China faces is different than the orders that past rising states have faced in three respects. First, the international order offers a buffet of options. States can embrace some rules and institutions and not others. The British-led order that Germany faced at the turn of the 20th century was different because the contemporary international order is comparatively much more complex and wide-ranging. Second, China does not just face the United States. It faces a wider and deeper system. The United States did not just establish its domination. It built an order. We now see no dyadic struggle over control of the system. China faces an order – into which it is integrated – that is more than an American protectorate. Third, the liberal hegemonic characteristics of this order make it unusually durable in the face of power shifts. It has integrative tendencies. It offers opportunities for shared leadership across multiple institutional platforms. The economic gains from participation in the order are shared widely, even given the rise of inequality within countries. It accommodates a diversity of ideologies and development models. It is not just an Anglo-American system. China and other rising states are not facing an 'empire', but a wider and deeper order. It is led by the United States, but it has emerged from longer-term order building trajectories dating back to Westphalia and the liberal ascendency.

These observations make it hard to imagine an epic moment when the international order goes into crisis and rising states step forward – either China alone or rising states as a bloc – to reorganise and reshape its rules and institutions. The American-led order is so durable because it is not simply an 'American order'. It is an order that is easy to join and hard to overturn.

Conclusion

For realists, the iconic insight about power and its exercise was delivered in 416 BC by an Athenian general to the besieged people of Melos as reported by Thucydides: 'the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept'. The people of Melos had remained neutral in the war between Athens and Sparta. But Athens, eager to deny Sparta access to the island as a forward staging site, lay siege to Melos and demanded its surrender. The alternative was annihilation. The Athenian general cut to the bottom line: if you want to save yourself from destruction, you must bend to our wishes. In the end, the people of Melos refused, and the Athenians inflicted their violent wrath. Relations between powerful and weak states are rarely this brutal – after all, this act was essentially one of genocide – but realists see in this encounter an essential truth. The restraint on power comes not from reasoned argument or moral principles but from countervailing power.

Interestingly, however, international relations scholars have paid less attention to what the frightened people of Melos said to the Athenians. Leaving aside questions of justice, the Melians appealed to Athenian self-interest. To do what the Athenians threatened to do would 'destroy a principle that is to the good of all men – namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing'. But their point was a broader one. They argued that Athens itself had an interest in the preservation of this principle because they too would one day grow weaker and invite, in the absence of the principle, 'the most terrible vengeance'. The Melians argued that an attack on Melos would make other states turn against Athens, thinking they might be next. The Athenians were calculating that if they refrained from punishing Melos, it would make them look weak to others. The Melians, in contrast, were arguing that the empire would be put on more stable terms – it would have more legitimacy and support – if Athens showed restraint.

The Melians were not arguing against realist calculations of power and interest. They were arguing that the Athenians were missing key insights about how a great power should act to preserve its standing. I have always found the arguments of Melos more compelling than the arguments of Athens. Today, 2500 years later, it is often thought that the Athenian general uttered timeless wisdom about the realities of power. But I think the case could be made that the people of Melos offered insights that make sense not just to weak states poised on the edge of catastrophe, but to powerful states as well. *After Victory* was my attempt to explain why.

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Notes

1. During my graduate school and early professional years, Waltz (1979) and Gilpin (1981) offered the two great gateway realist theories – one based on anarchy and balance and the other on hegemony and power transitions (see Wohlforth, 2010).
2. This is where *After Victory* joins the larger literature and debate on historical institutionalism (see Fioretos, 2010, 2017).
3. In untangling cause and effect, we can think back to 1950, which saw the signing of the Atlantic Charter, the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, the arrival of Mao's troops on the border of Indochina, the Schuman Plan, and the outbreak of the Korean War.

4. In this view, the United States has always been given discretion within the postwar system to act alone at extraordinary moments. In effect, the United States is like the police or fire company during an emergency, who can temporarily break the traffic laws and suspend rules.
5. Another version observation is that the architects of the Iraq War – Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz – were pursuing a 'hegemonic realist' agenda of safeguarding American interests in the Middle East. The liberal internationalism of American hegemony was simply missing in their decision calculations (see Deudney and Ikenberry, 2017).
6. A Trump supporter might say that today's instability is a necessary cost as the system moves to a new – post-liberal hegemonic – equilibrium. But is it worth the risks?
7. For a sweeping theoretical treatment of the concept of binding and co-binding, see Deudney (2007). Deudney and I have developed the binding logic in a general statement of what we call structural liberal theory (see Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999).
8. For an early argument about socialisation and hegemony, see Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990). A groundbreaking work in this area is Johnston (2008).
9. For a survey, see Gardner and Young (2005).

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