Post-Western World

How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order

Oliver Stuenkel
Acknowledgments

Kugel, Leandro Piquet, Flavia Goulart, Andrew Downie, Hanna Meirelles, Fabio Rubio, Patrick Schlieper, my sisters, and my parents. My wife Beatriz was amazingly supportive, as always, commented on several parts of the book, and her working hours are a comforting reminder that political activism is sometimes even more demanding than academia. This book is dedicated to Anna, Jan, and Carlinha, the three newest members of our family, who will grow up in a post-Western world.

Oliver Della Costa Stuenkel, São Paulo, February 2016

Introduction

The way we understand the world today occurs within an unusual historical context. The West has held a dominant position both economically and militarily for the past century and a half. More important, the main concepts developed by many leading International Relations (IR) scholars to explain global affairs—when making sense of the past, analyzing the present, or predicting the future—are profoundly Western-centric. Rather than producing value-free and universalist accounts of global affairs, the majority of international affairs analysts in the Anglosphere provide provincial analyses that celebrate and defend Western civilization as the subject of, and ideal normative referent in, world politics.

To those thinkers, when it comes to the past, non-Western thought is rarely seen to have had a decisive role in the history of ideas. The so-called “global conversation” is mostly limited to US-based commentators, academics, and foreign-policy makers. Norms are understood to have generally diffused from the Western center to the periphery. Non-Western actors either adopted or resisted such new ideas, but rarely were they the agents of progress. According to this widely accepted model of “Western
diffusionism," history is seen as a Western-led process, which creates little awareness of non-Western contributions to ideas on global order. The discipline of international relations has so far failed to embrace the far more nuanced perspectives that scholars of global history, anthropology, and other disciplines have been adopting for decades. Most mainstream analyses of the history of international affairs begin therefore with the rise of the West, while pre-Western or non-Western history receives little if any attention.

That is highly problematic, as key events in the history of global order, such as the transition from empire to multilateral order made up of nation-states, were not Western-led processes but products of intense bargaining between Western and non-Western actors. Even colonial administrators were often unable to create rules through top-down imposition, as is generally thought. The most important example is the rise of self-determination, the bedrock of today's liberal global order, which is not the product of Western thinkers but of anticolonial movements, which, long before Woodrow Wilson, acted in opposition to Western interests—notably succeeding in establishing the global norm at the height of Western dominance in the decades after World War II, when traditional historic accounts depict non-Western agency as entirely absent. Throughout history, the spread of ideas was far more dynamic, pluridirectional, messy, and decentralized than we generally believe.

The United States played a key role in the construction of the post–World War II order, and Henry Kissinger is right when he argues that no other country would have had the idealism and the resources to deal with such a range of challenges or the capacity to succeed in so many of them. US-American idealism and exceptionalism were essential in the building of a new international order. And yet, when explaining the rise of post–World War II order, liberal US-based international relations scholarship in particular often imagines the world to have voluntarily handed over the reins of power to the United States. What is often overlooked in that context is that the distinction between legitimacy and coercion is problematic, and that the latter was an important element of consolidating liberal order—just as in any previous system. This order-building involved the stationing of US troops in the defeated Axis powers; threats against and strong-arming of communists in France and Italy; overthrowing recalcitrant governments in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; and systematic efforts to impose US political and economic preferences around the world.

This selective reading of history leads to an overemphasis on Western agency, ownership, and cultural attractiveness, and plays down the decisive role of military power in the creation and maintenance of today's global order. On a broader scale, favourable historical conjunctures, such as the end of the Cold War or the so-called Arab Spring, in which some believed liberal pro-Western forces dominated, are interpreted as supportive evidence for Western claims, while adverse historical conjunctures such as the recent deterioration of civil rights in China or the end of democracy in Egypt, Thailand, or Russia, instead of undermining liberal claims and principles, are simply interpreted as the result of lower levels of historical development, or temporary aberrations.

Harvard University’s Graham Allison calls the last one thousand years “a millennium in which Europe had been the political center of the world.” Such views dramatically underestimate the contributions non-Western thinkers and cultures have made, and how much the West depended on foreign knowledge, technology, ideas, and norms—such as from China and the Muslim world—to develop economically and politically. They also disregard the fact that non-Western powers have dominated the world economically for much of the last thousand years. Many important events occurred outside of Europe throughout history, such as those creating and sustaining the Chinese, Ottoman, and Mongol Empires. The global evolution of rules and norms was profoundly affected by,
for instance, the Mughal Emperor Akbar’s promotion of religious tolerance in India in the sixteenth century, or the Haitian anticolonial rebellion in the early nineteenth century, which inspired slaves across the Americas. Those events, however, often do not fit into a Western-centric narrative of history. Indeed, Western-centrism has led us to retroactively co-opt many influential ideas and norms such as democracy, human rights, and diplomacy as Western, extrapolating current Western superiority back into the past, and thus creating a simplistic teleological history, even though such ideas often emerged in many places at the same time, or built on each other, and thus have no sole origin.

The same is true about the present, and most observers regard the West as essential to maintaining global stability. Western-led institutions such as the G7, the OECD, and NATO are generally seen as benign while groupings without Western participation are thought of as either ineffective (the G77), quirky and nonsensical (the BRICS), or threatening and malevolent (the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB] or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization).

Few analysts care to ask about the global public contributions provided by such organizations, and most generally view them with suspicion. Although rarely stated explicitly, this points to a latent sense of Western entitlement and a notion that non-Western leadership initiatives lack legitimacy. In the same way, global agenda setting—the result of initiating, legitimizing, and successfully advocating a specific policy issue in the economic or security realm—is generally seen as something that only Western actors do. Non-Western thought is rarely considered to be a source through which to construct legitimate knowledge of the modern world.

Most important (and this is one of the main arguments of the book) our understanding of the creation of today’s order, its contemporary form and predictions about the future, are limited because they seek to imagine a “Post-Western World” from a parochial Western-centric perspective. This view, developed by most contemporary international relations (IR) scholars, embraces a normative division between Western universalism and non-Western particularism, and Western modernity and non-Western tradition. A major Western narrative remains that there is one vanguard modernity, an idealized type of Western modernity, that will dominate the world. Non-Western actors are thought of as relatively passive rule-takers of international society—either they resist or socialize into existing order—yet they are rarely seen as legitimate or constructive rule-makers and institution-builders. It is no coincidence that many leading US-based scholars expect Western global leadership to coincide with the end of the cyclical nature of the rise and decline of great powers in global order.

Non-Western agency is by and large only recognized when actors fail to live up to Western standards, or if it poses a fundamental threat to the West, such as the “yellow
peril" emanating from China a century ago, anticolonial movements in Africa, terrorists coming from the Muslim world, or a perceived nuclear threat posed by Iran.16 Recognition of non-Western ideas is also at times used to conveniently disassociate the West from concepts that from today’s perspective are regarded as unsuitable or dangerous. For example, Stalinism and Maoism are often portrayed as versions of oriental despotism. Far from being anti-Western, however, communism is very much a Western idea; indeed, it is the result of a utopian experiment inspired, essentially, by the most radical ideals of the European Enlightenment, and Karl Marx’s ideas were profoundly Western-centric and parochial.17

Toward post-Western chaos?

As a consequence, the future of global order—possibly no longer under Western rule—is generally seen as chaotic, disorienting, and dangerous. At the Chatham House’s 2015 London Conference, for example, the basic assumption made explicit in the first session and the keynote conversation was that the end of unipolarity would inevitably lead to a “leaderless” and dangerous world, “Can we expect...the rise of anarchy?” a discussion point for the opening debate asked.

Such pessimism in the face of the West’s relative decline is widespread. John Mearsheimer, a leading realist scholar, sees “considerable potential for war” (a prospect he describes as “depressing”),18 and Randall Schweller sees the global system breaking down, moving from a US-led era of order to chaos. International affairs, he writes, will be defined by lack of structure, leaders, followers, and states unable to cooperate effectively. He affirms that “power is being dispersed more evenly across the globe... This will make working together to get things done more difficult.” Taking a step further, he warns that “old schools of thought will become obsolete, and time-honored solutions will no longer work... The new norm is increasingly the lack of a norm.” The only alternative to US leadership is “banality and confusion, of anomic and alienation, of instability without a stabilizer, of devolving order without an orderer.”19 He fails to explain just why cooperation in a more multipolar order is more difficult, or why global norms will disappear. Yet one thing, he asserts, seems certain: no country or grouping will be able to maintain global order like the West did. This assessment also profoundly mischaracterizes the past decades as a peaceful period; proxy wars, instability in the Middle East, and bloody conflicts in Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Korea, as well as in many African countries, are a stark reminder that millions of people around the world do not associate US-led liberal order with peace and stability. Granted, no single view is representative of the entire field, and several IR scholars, particularly realists, write about how great power politics can produce stability.20 Among (often highly influential) pundits and policy-minded academics, however, alarmism often prevails.

Echoing a broad consensus in the West, The Economist in 2014 matter-of-factly stated, “Unfortunately, Pax Americana is giving way to a balance of power that is seething with rivalry and insecurity.”21 While chaos and disorder are indeed possible scenarios, Western-centrism profoundly impoverishes our analysis of the dynamics that will shape global order in the coming decades. The newspaper regarded the claim to be so natural that it saw no need to explain it any further, merely reporting that recently “a Chinese fighter-jet and an American surveillance plane passed within 20 feet, just avoiding a mid-air collision.” That is hardly a convincing example of post-American chaos; it merely shows the West’s role as a self-interested stakeholder in today’s unequal distribution of power. And indeed, at first glance, the West stands to lose the most from multipolarization. But while China is commonly compared to Wilhelmine Germany, thus automatically framing it as a threat, it may be useful to step back and
ask whether we could also compare contemporary China to the United States in the late nineteenth century. Mastroduno writes of it, “a massive country that viewed itself primarily as a regional power, whose economy grew rapidly to the point of overtaking, peacefully, the previously dominant economies of the prior era, and whose security relationship with the prior dominant power was a cooperative one.”

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO’s Secretary General from 2009 to 2014, categorically affirms that “when the United States retreats, terrorists and autocrats advance.” Yet there is little evidence of any correlation between current instability in some parts of the world such as the Middle East and a more cautious US role. Quite to the contrary, current trouble in the region can be seen, partially, as a consequence of an overactive US policy under President George W. Bush. And still, in 2015 The Economist placed a disintegrating US-American flag on its cover, arguing that the country “must not abandon” the Middle East. Despite a highly uneven record in stabilizing other regions, there is still a strong conviction that Western involvement is needed to prevent a complete breakdown of order elsewhere. Non-Western engagement in other regions, such as China’s growing presence in Africa and Latin America, Russia’s meddling in the Middle East, or Brazil’s attempt to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, are often seen, on the other hand, by Western observers as destabilizing or strengthening autocrats. This sentiment, however, is not shared in many regions of the world. In fact, it often surprises Western analysts when they hear that many Brazilian, South African, or Indian policy makers, when asked about the greatest threat to international stability, point not to North Korea, Iran, or China but to the United States.

To adequately assess how global order will evolve, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the Western-centric worldview the dominant international relations literature brings with it and offer a more balanced account, one which considers not only US-American and European but also Chinese and other forms of exceptionalism and centrism, which do not place the same importance on Western agency in the past, present, or future. Similarly, it is necessary to import into international relations the many insights that global history, a far less parochial discipline, provides.

In this book, I discuss some of the key questions regarding what multipolarization means for the future of global order, seeking to go beyond a Western-centric perspective. How can a more balanced reading of the history of global order change our discussion about its future?

What does the trend of multipolarization mean for the distribution of military power, the balance for influence, and the capacity to produce new ideas and set the global agenda? How will such changes affect international institutions? Are we headed to a world marked by frequent strife, or will the end of Western dominance, certain to generate temporary disorientation and anxiety in some parts of the world, make the world more peaceful? While it is impossible to fully address all these questions in a satisfying manner, this analysis will discuss how the Western-centrism inherent in many influential thinkers’ analyses affects our understanding of these issues.

With these questions in mind, this book is organized into six chapters: chapter 1 briefly analyzes the pre-Western global order and the rise of the West and Western-centrism. Chapter 2 critically assesses the much-touted “rise of the rest” and describes its consequences in the economic and military realm, asking whether a post-unipolar order could be durable and peaceful. Chapter 3 argues that rising powers will be far more capable of converting their growing hard power into actual influence, legitimacy, and soft power than is generally thought. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the web of global and regional institutions that non-Western powers, especially China, have begun to establish to complement existing institutions and to gain more autonomy. Finally, chapter 6 will assess implications for global rules and norms.
To summarize, the book makes four key arguments, which organize the chapters:

First, our Western-centric worldview leads us to underestimate not only the role non-Western actors have played in the past (the history of global order is not as purely Western as we like to believe) and play in contemporary international politics, but also the constructive role they are likely to play in the future. With powers such as China providing ever more global public goods, post-Western order, marked by a “managed rivalry” and what I call “asymmetric bipolarity,” will not necessarily be more violent than today’s global order (chapter 1 deals with the past, chapters 2 and 6 with the future).

Second, the economic “rise of the rest,” particularly China, will allow it to enhance its military capacity and eventually its international influence and soft power. I question the commonly used argument that China will never turn into a truly global power like the United States because “it has no friends,” as I argue that soft power is, to a significant degree, dependent on hard power. As China and other emerging powers rise economically, they are likely to gain more friends and allies, just as the West has done in the past by offering tangible benefits (chapters 2 and 3).

Third, rather than directly confronting existing institutions, rising powers—led by China—are quietly crafting the initial building blocks of a so-called “parallel order” that will initially complement, and one day possibly challenge, today’s international institutions. This order is already in the making; it includes, among others, institutions such as the BRICS-led New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (to complement the World Bank), Universal Credit Rating Group (to complement Moody’s and S&P), China Union Pay (to complement MasterCard and Visa), CIPS (to complement SWIFT), and the BRICS (to complement the G7), more than twenty initiatives described in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Fourth and finally, these structures do not emerge because China and others have fundamentally new ideas about how to address global challenges or because they seek to change global rules and norms; rather, they create them to better project their power, just as Western actors have done before them. They also arose because of the limited social mobility of today’s order and because of existing institutions’ incapacity to adequately integrate rising powers. As part of a hedging strategy, emerging powers will continue to invest in existing institutions, recognizing the strength in today’s order. Emerging powers embrace most elements of today’s “liberal hierarchical order” but they will seek to change the hierarchy in the system to obtain hegemonic privileges (such as the right to act without asking for a permission slip), so far only enjoyed by the United States. Furthermore, eluding the facile and overly simplistic extremes of either confronting or joining existing order, the creation of several China-centric institutions will allow China to embrace its own type of competitive multilateralism, picking and choosing among flexible frameworks, in accordance with its national interests (chapter 6).

Western-centricism affects the way we see the world, and how we interpret contemporary political developments. The most visible manifestation is the today globally accepted Mercator map (Map 0.1), which distorts the world in the West’s favor, making regions closer to the equator look far smaller than they really are. Greenland, for example, appears to be as large as the African continent, and far greater than India or Iran. Even Scandinavia seems larger than India.

Yet while Greenland’s size is 2.166 million km², Africa’s extension is 30.22 million km²—fourteen times larger. Even India (3.288 million km²) is significantly larger than Greenland or Scandinavia (0.928 km²). While no two-dimensional map can adequately project the world, the Hobo Dyer map (Map 0.2) is better at representing each
continent's actual size, depicting Africa's vast extension compared to Europe.

Even more disconcerting for some, in countries such as Argentina or Brazil, it is not entirely uncommon to see maps most Europeans would describe as "upside down"—yet unusual as they seem, they are no less adequate or realistic than maps that place the North on top (Map 0.3).

Paradoxically, Western-centrism is not limited to Western analysts—indeed, anti-Western thinkers are equally—sometimes even more—Western-centric, and marked by broad ignorance about non-Western affairs. For example, while students in Kenya, Indonesia, and Paraguay learn about Napoleon, they are unaware of Empress Cixi, who dominated Chinese affairs for a good part of the nineteenth century, and whose actions are crucial to understanding modern China. Great non-Western leaders who did not engage much with the West, such as Kangxi, China’s leader
during 1654–1722, or Ahuitzotl (Aztec leader from 1486 to 1502), are usually completely ignored; not only in the West, but everywhere else in the world as well. Yet their legacies and impact are crucial to understanding how non-Western powers behave today and in the future.

For instance, while most books about world history written by international relations scholars in the United States analyze the consequences in Europe of Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905, very few will include the fact that Japan’s military victory—one of the first times a non-Western army had beaten a modern Western power (others include Ethiopia’s victory against Italy a decade earlier)—sent shock waves through Asia and energized leading thinkers across the continent. Rabindranath Tagore, Sun Yat-sen, Mohandas Gandhi, the sixteen-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru, the young soldier Mustafa Kemal (who would later become Atatürk), and a schoolboy called Mao Zedong were all ecstatic, dreaming of Asia’s rise. Newborn children were named Togo, in honor of the Japanese admiral victorious in the Battle of Tsushima. Cemil Aydin writes that “the global moment of the Russo-Japanese War influenced international history by shattering the established European discourse on racial hierarchies once and for all, thus delegitimizing the existing world order and encouraging alternative visions.” The Japanese example showed that non-Western peoples were able to modernize without losing their own cultural identity. It is precisely this type of information that is necessary to grasp global dynamics, understand contemporary trends, and meaningfully predict future developments.

Paradoxically, thus, a post-Western world is likely to sound odd even to scholars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, since they too have largely Western-centric perspectives (often of the anti-Western type). Both sides—those enamored with the West and the postcolonial thinkers who blame every misfortune in history on the West—suffer from a Western-centric fixation that is unhelpful for making sense of the past, present, or future. Even Russia,
the West's most virulent critic, is profoundly Western-centric, as what it strives to recover from beneath the liberal distortions is little more than a mirror image of the West as it is seen through the lens of Russian common sense. The antagonization of the "false" Europe (suffering from what Russians see as "post-Christian" trends such as homosexuality or atheism) translates into a construction of a "true" Europe centered on Russia, not a genuine non-Western alternative.

The dangers of Western-centrism in the contemporary debate

Why does all of this matter? Going beyond Western-centric perspectives allows us to appreciate multiple interpretations of global order as well as key issues ranging from humanitarian intervention, to the BRICS grouping, and rising powers' provision of global public goods. That matters because non-Western views about key international events are generally given little attention.

The intervention in Libya after Resolution 1973 provides a useful example. While observers in the United States described it as a "model intervention," for the BRICS countries, the West had broken the rules by transforming the responsibility to protect into a mission for regime change. Brazil's and India's criticism of the way NATO conducted the intervention in Libya was met with surprise in Washington because of the deeply ingrained view that since only Western powers are willing and capable of leading "hard" interventions and show a willingness to put their soldiers in harm's way, others had only limited legitimacy to participate in the debate over such matters. Yet for Brasilia, Delhi, and Pretoria, the way the P3 had handled the affair—including France's decision to supply weapons to the rebels when an arms embargo was in place, and an unwillingness to share information about the bombing campaign or when it would stop—symbolized a unipolar mindset that cared little about rules and norms when real interests were at stake, underlining the non-inclusive aspect of today's global order.

In the same way, Turkey's and Brazil's initiative to negotiate a nuclear agreement with Iran was rejected by the United States partly since, in the eyes of policy makers in Washington, these two countries lacked the legitimacy to take the lead in such a sensitive matter (or the power to implement such an agreement). Charles Kupchan, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, writes that Brazilian President Lula's decision to meet Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad serves as proof that Brazil would "not accept the Western Global Order." Turkey's quarrels with Israel were supposedly evidence of Turkey's "drift away from the West" and India's voting behavior in the UN shows that "its interests and status as an emerging power are more important determinants of its foreign policy than its democratic institutions," thus implying the United States' democratic institutions were somehow more important to US policy makers than national interest. Yet the history of US foreign policy is littered with instances when strong partnerships with nondemocratic regimes were established to promote US national interest: for example, in the Middle East where Saudi Arabia remains an important US ally. This highly US-centric argument shows how difficult it will be for policy makers in Washington to adapt to a truly multipolar world in which the United States will be one among several large actors. The behavior of Brazil, Turkey, and India was not antisysemic in any way, yet they were accused nonetheless because they did not behave according to US interests. Only those who regard US leadership, rather than the system's rules and functionality, as the decisive element of today's order will call emerging powers revisionist.

In the same way, the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the entire debate about sovereignty is structured around the notion of Western diffusionism. R2P is routinely seen as a Western concept, and Western
commentators frequently point to "revisionist" and "irresponsible" non-Western powers unwilling to share the global burden and truly support R2P. Most Western observers see R2P essentially as an expression of Western enlightened liberal thought. For them, the main challenge is to convince emerging powers of the usefulness of the concept. Just as Hedley Bull and Adam Watson argue in the opening sentence of their seminal work, today's rules and norms are essentially seen as "the expansion of the international society of European states across the rest of the globe."37

This overlooks R2P's partly African origins and the fact that all governments, including the BRICS, committed to R2P at the UN World Summit in 2005, making it a truly global concept. While it is generally thought that non-Western emerging powers are reluctant to embrace R2P, rising powers' views on the norm in question are far more nuanced. Common accusations depicting the BRICS as irresponsible stakeholders are misguided, as emerging powers have supported R2P in the vast majority of cases.38 In addition, as Isaac Terwase Sampson writes, "Though heralded as a new paradigm in international response to serious humanitarian catastrophes, elements of what is now known as R2P were already institutionalized in Africa, particularly within the ECOWAS region."39 While many policy analysts around the world still confuse R2P with humanitarian intervention (R2P is far broader and also involves a state's duty to protect its own population), "ECOWAS has already developed and commenced the operationalization of its mechanisms on conflict prevention; management and resolution with an appreciable success."40

This mistaken dichotomy of an all-powerful West against a reactive rest is not limited to supporters of R2P. Critics of the concept are divided into two groups. The first is part of a "politically correct Western left," as Rahul Rao writes, "so ashamed of the crimes of Western imperialism that it finds itself incapable of denouncing the actions of Third World regimes."41 The second, often based in the Global South, regards the concept as an imperialist plot by the powerful that is meant to disguise military interventions conducted to defend economic interests. Both groups err by regarding the principle of R2P as a Western concept serving Western interests, forgetting the important contributions non-Western thinkers and leaders have made to develop it.

The argument that non-Western powers are categorically opposed to intervening in other countries' affairs to protect individual rights is not supported by historical evidence. In 1964, India was the first country to formally introduce the issue of apartheid at the UN. Brazil organized the first important UN seminar on apartheid in 1966, an event that contributed to an initiative in the General Assembly to diplomatically isolate South Africa—a highly interventionist stance of which many Western powers were critical. In the same way, India's 1971 intervention in East Pakistan—which helped stop genocide against the local population—was strongly criticized by Western powers and led to India's temporary diplomatic isolation. It was only thanks to the Soviet veto that the UN Security Council did not condemn India. The crude "West vs. rest" dichotomy and the belief that R2P is Western (implying a need to convince non-Western actors of its usefulness) is thus unhelpful from a historical, theoretical, and policy perspective.

In the same way, when speaking about the provision of global public goods in the security realm, contributions by non-Western powers are often overlooked. For example, in the last decade, China has become the largest single military contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations of the P5. China is setting up a permanent peacekeeping force of 8,000 soldiers, pledged to donate $100 million over the next five years to the African Union for the creation of an emergency response force, and will contribute $1 billion over the next ten years for the establishment of a China–UN "peace and development fund."42
In 2015, about one-fifth of all UN peacekeepers came from China. India provides even more troops. In the field of antipiracy in the Indian Ocean, China is making a significant contribution with its naval forces. Unlike the United States, China has not accumulated any debt with the UN over the past years. More recently, the Chinese government has sent a battalion to South Sudan, and there is a presence of Chinese military advisers in Iraq to help stabilize the country. While there is no consensus about exact figures, China has provided significant amounts of development and humanitarian aid for decades, and it has recently launched a series of initiatives to strengthen infrastructure links in its region, such as the “One Belt One Road” strategy, which will be described in detail in chapter 5. In the same way, India is a so-called “emerging donor” with a growing number of aid projects both in their neighborhood and in Africa. Finally, for the first time, China nominated its peaking year—2030—for carbon emissions. This does not mean that China’s (or India’s) global engagement is flawless or even positive from an overall perspective, yet it serves as a reminder that the world’s second-largest economy, along with other emerging powers, can no longer easily be categorized as a “free-rider,” “shirker,” or “rising spoiler,” as so many Western analysts suggest to sustain the specter of post-Western chaos. It is simply no longer possible to say that China assumes no international responsibility, or that its behavior is significantly less in accordance with today’s rules and norms than that of the United States.

Instead of objectively assessing emerging powers’ contribution of global public goods, Western-centrism often leads analysts to focus on hopes about China’s political collapse. From a Western perspective, it is difficult to understand how China’s Communist Party has been able to hold on to power for so long because it contradicts the generally accepted expectation that economic growth goes hand in hand with Westernization and democratization—even though there is only very limited historical evidence for this claim. Aaron Friedberg, a professor at Princeton with some policy making experience, writes that “the ultimate aim of the American strategy is to hasten a revolution, albeit a peaceful one, that will sweep away China’s one-party authoritarian state and leave behind a liberal democracy in its place.” His assertion that when far-reaching political change comes to China “it will doubtless owe something to America’s long-standing policy of engagement” vastly exaggerates US influence in Chinese domestic affairs. Believing that a democratic China would embrace US-led order, Friedberg does not recognize that even a liberal and democratic China would seek regional hegemony and work towards limiting US influence in Asia. Rather, there is a broad consensus in China that the country’s fall from preeminence is a historical mistake that should be corrected.

The BRICS: No motley crew

The rise of the BRICS grouping provides a final, useful case study of how Western-centrism distorts our capacity to adequately assess political developments. Initially, Western analysts routinely described the BRICS as a “disparate quartet,” a “motley crew,” or as an “odd grouping.” The idea of the BRICS as a bloc, according to this narrative, was deeply flawed; the BRICS member countries were deemed too diverse to ever act in unison. As the grouping institutionalizes, some commentators now regard the BRICS grouping as a potential threat to Western dominance and merely analyze the yearly presidential summits, yet it is far more than that. In fact, the history of the BRICS grouping can be divided into three phases. In the first phase (2001–2007), “BRIC” (then still without South Africa) stood for little more than an investment category invented by Goldman Sachs. The second phase (2008–2014) saw the emergence of BRICS as a political platform, though of largely informal nature. The transition to a third phase
began in 2015, marked by a process of institutionalization and the launch of the New Development Bank.

Today, the BRICS countries see the grouping as a tool to strengthen South-South relations and a way to adapt to a more multipolar order, underlined by the over twenty intra-BRICS meetings per year in areas as diverse as agriculture, health, and education. Those meetings are often the first instances in which member states engage on such a broad number of issues. However, rather than neutrally analyzing the potential impact of institutions created by emerging powers—such as the BRICS-led New Development Bank (NDB) or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)—a question that is often asked first is whether they will undermine or damage existing order. While Western scholars will agree that emerging powers matter individually, to most analysts in Europe or the United States the grouping (as an institutional phenomenon) is little more than an ephemeral oddity bound to disappear soon, and thus requires little attention. Western-centrism thus greatly reduces analysts’ capacity to make sense of, contextualize, and predict non-Western powers’ behavior or to meaningfully engage them.

The term “alternative order,” often used in the context of BRICS-related analyses, has an inherently threatening connotation, yet this approach wrongly assumes non-Western initiatives to have a destabilizing effect. The BRICS countries are not frontal attacks on US-American hegemony, but they contest the West’s pretensions to permanent stewardship of the existing system largely because it no longer seems legitimate to emerging powers, particularly in the realm of economic governance.

While policy makers from Beijing, Delhi, and elsewhere in the Global South seek a larger role within the existing framework, they do not feel established powers are willing to provide them with adequate power and responsibility; reforms at the World Bank and the IMF have been too slow and not sufficiently far-reaching. The World Bank remains, despite its name, essentially a Western-dominated institution in the eyes of emerging powers, and there is little prospect that this will change any time soon. The institutional reform agenda of the first decade of the twenty-first century has largely failed. It is this resistance to reform of global structures that strongly contributed to the rise of the incipient parallel order described below. Just as the West has used international institutions like the World Bank and the IMF to project its power and draw countries into its sphere of influence, China and other non-Western powers will use their new institutions to cement their newly won centrality, tighten economic ties to other countries, and eventually generate stronger political influence. In addition, they will enhance non-Western powers’ capacity to navigate the international system according to their own interests, picking and choosing institutions on a case-by-case basis. Rather than creating their own “distinctive set of rules, institutions, and currencies of power, rejecting key tenets of liberal internationalism and, particularly, any notion of global civil society justifying political or military intervention,” as some analysts believe, China and other emerging powers are likely to construct these institutions according to paradigms and interests broadly similar to those of Western powers—with the benefits and incoherences those structures entail.

Today’s order: Easy to join—as a follower

All this points to a more fundamental disagreement about the nature of today’s global order: for the West, a world order that is “easy to join and hard to overturn” simply does not need new structures. For Ikenberry, today’s order is the “most successful order in world history…power and rules are not enemies, they can be friends, and they are both necessary in the production of liberal order.” There is no question that today’s global order has produced remarkable benefits for humanity. China’s achievement of bringing more human beings out of poverty than at any
other moment in history would not have been possible without a global context in which relatively underdeveloped states could take advantage of an open market. In the same way, the post–World War II order has been remarkably successful in avoiding wars between great powers. Ikenberry calls the post–World War II order a “distinctive blend of command and reciprocity, coercion and consent” in which the United States acts as a “liberal hegemon.” Rather than being a flat liberal order (akin to what President Woodrow Wilson had in mind after World War I), today’s order is built around institutionalized hierarchies, but the system also has “consent-based logics” embedded in it.

And yet, the ambiguous mix of hierarchy and rules makes Ikenberry’s hopes that China and other rising powers will join today’s order sound somewhat disingenuous, for he does not spell out where in the pecking order China is supposed to fit in, and implies that the US would somehow retain its stewardship. It is precisely this issue that irks policy makers in Brasilia, Delhi, and Beijing, when they hear Western calls for emerging powers to become “responsible stakeholders.” Indeed, several emerging powers articulate their grievances concerning what they consider a hierarchical order where the strong often enjoy special rights, and where existing institutions do not offer sufficient space for newcomers—thus automatically generating contestation.

This reflects historic concerns by non-Western powers about the two faces of liberal nationalism: internationalist when turned toward the West, and imperial at the expense of the non-West, a contradiction that would still be highly influential in 1919, when Woodrow Wilson’s liberal edicts did not apply to non-European peoples seeking freedom, and in 1945, when the UN’s liberal rhetoric did not apply to French and British colonies. Wilson, a symbol of liberal thought in the twentieth century and today embraced as a visionary foreign-policy maker, notoriously proclaimed that he would “teach the South American republics to elect good men.” It is this ambiguity and moral incoherence that has been liberalism’s main Achilles’ heel, particularly in the Global South, where the rhetoric of liberal internationalism is still seen as a fig leaf for great powers promoting their national interest: inside Europe, civilization meant peace, outside of it, violence. Not only did Wilson, who aspired to build an “open and fair” international order, reject Japan’s proposal to include racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations, he also failed to criticize unequal treaties that gave Western powers extraterritorial privileges, for example in China. Global law and global governance often serve to institutionalize new hierarchies and gradations of sovereignty, to legitimate deprivations of political autonomy and self-determination in ways that are at times reminiscent of nineteenth-century imperialism.

Indeed, there is a legitimate argument that contemporary praxis of cosmopolitanism, convinced that the international space is safe and must overcome boundaries to enlighten the few remaining backward societies in the world, relies on the unequal distribution of power in the international system. Historically, enlightenment cosmopolitans often developed moral justifications for later exercises in imperialism. In the same way, liberal cosmopolitan discourse flourished in the unipolar moment afforded by the end of the Cold War.

In that sense, the end of unipolarity may be seen as an existential threat to the cosmopolitan project and universalist Western rhetoric, as the West will lack the material (and possibly one day military) superiority to get away with openly seeking to remake the world in its image. Many thinkers, in the West and elsewhere, express concern about humanity’s capacity to avoid war and engage in joint problem solving in such a new environment. And indeed, there are legitimate fears about what such a development will mean for the future of democracy and human rights. Autocrats across the world may be increasingly disinclined to tolerate mostly European and US-American-financed
organizations openly promoting democracy abroad in the context of a global shift of power away from established powers towards emerging actors.59

The goal of this book is not to take sides between the West and non-West (thorny concepts to begin with, as I seek to show), or to denounce the West for past or present misdeeds or hubris. Such routes tend to draw a dangerously one-dimensional picture of the West. In addition, actors other than the West, such as China, have just as often fallen victim to hubris. After all, the postmodern fascination with difference, especially in this context between the West and the non-West, can lead to an exaggerated focus on otherness which is impractical.60 Rather, I seek to show that most observers (both Western and anti-Western) exaggerate the role the West has played in the past. I would like this book to contribute to the discussion on how to adapt to a more multipolar order in which key decisions can no longer be taken by a group of Western liberal democracies that largely think alike. This necessity, it must be noted here, does not depend on the fulfillment of forecasters' often-unrealistic expectations about China's or India's future growth trajectory. Today's post-unipolar order already obliges us to adapt our views as well as the institutions that help us deal with global challenges. In a global economy led by Asia, the conceptions of center and periphery, key to many economic and political analyses of the global order, will need to be adjusted in fundamental ways.

This book argues that, with power spread more evenly, the world faces an opportunity to strengthen cooperation and engage far more voices than ever before in human history, despite the fact that managing such a system will be far more complex. One additional advantage is often overlooked: The post-Western world will be—largely thanks to the economic catch-up in the developing world—more prosperous, with far lower levels of poverty on a global scale, than any other previous order. What is most needed is a broad debate that provides space for differing points of view, which may challenge some broadly accepted notions. At the same time, we must avoid a one-dimensional view of Western vs. non-Western contributions and understand how ideas that appear from different historical and cultural contexts can have a wider relevance.62 All peoples develop and sustain their own myth about the founding history of their tribe, nation, or civilization. A key element of this myth concerns why the grouping is unique and why it deserves a special place in global history. Just like any other civilization, the West has developed a strong sense of exceptionalism and a belief that it has a unique contribution to make in the world.63 While such narratives are normal and, to some degree, even to be welcomed, believing that the end of Western dominance will inevitably lead to chaos will limit our capacity to identify and exploit future opportunities for cooperation.

Beyond alarmism

Looking into the post-Western world, Moisés Naim predicts that in the twenty-first century "power is becoming easier to disrupt and harder to consolidate," predicting a troubling trend toward a far less resilient global system with weaker national and international institutions. If "the future of power lies in disruption and interference, not management and consolidation," Naím writes, "can we expect ever to know stability again?"64 "The world," Kupchan foresees, "is headed toward a global dissensus."65 In the same way, Schweller seems to resign himself to throwing his hands up in despair and then turning philosophical: "Disorder is not necessarily something to fear or loathe. We may, instead, embrace the unknowable, embrace our unintelligible world, our futile struggle to come to terms with its incomprehensibility."66 Such a statement is proof of both Western parochialism and a global order in which the West never really had to engage others on a level playing field and build a genuine dialogue. Western hegemony is so deeply rooted and ubiquitous that we think
of it as somehow natural, reducing our capacity to objectively assess the consequences of its decline.67

Developing constructive ideas about how to strengthen future cooperation is crucial, for despite some success stories the international community has utterly failed to address a broad range of issues we can no longer afford to ignore, ranging from climate change and migration to organized crime and protection of civilians in conflict. Identifying opportunities for better cooperation will require an open mind not only with regard to differing interpretations of the present, but also of both past and future.

In a sense, fears about a post-Western order are misguided in part because the past and present systems are far less Western than is generally assumed (the world order already contains many rules and norms that emerged as a product of clashing Western and non-Western ideas). Transition to genuine multipolarity will be bewildering to many. And yet it is likely to be far more democratic than any previous order in global history, allowing greater levels of genuine dialogue, broader spread of knowledge, and more innovative and effective ways to address the many global challenges we will face in the coming decades.

For most international relations scholars, it was the rise of the West that led to the creation of the first global order in history. The dominant accounts of world order in global history begin with the dawn of the modern ages, when Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Americas in 1492, a moment that marked the beginning of Western expansion across the globe; and 1648, when the Peace of Westphalia established the nation-state as the key building block of international order. Echoing a broad consensus, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson write that prior to the rise of the West, “There was no single, agreed body of rules and institutions operating across the boundaries of any two regional international systems, let alone throughout the world as a whole.”68 As Charles Kupchan writes, in the nineteenth century Europe’s major powers exported European conceptions of sovereignty, administration, law, diplomacy and commerce. In this sense, Europe not only eclipsed and dominated the rest of the world, it also established a global order based on uniquely European values and institutions. Europeans effectively replicated at the global level the founding principles of their own regional order.69