

W(H)ITHER THE WEST?

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OPENING REMARKS

In his opening words, Stefano Ruzza unpacked the symposium title in two guiding questions: what is the West, and what is its future? According to Ruzza, when the idea of the symposium originally came about (in 2019), the stability of Western success appeared to be dwindling as the US and Europe appeared to be drifting away from each other, the European Union was losing one of its key members via Brexit, and the liberal international order was challenged by the increasingly assertive stance of China and Russia, as well as the rise of populism and nationalism in several Western countries.

Ruzza observed that more recently the overall feeling seems to have shifted, as the West appears to have kept its grip in the face of major international crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has been putting pressure on the entire world, and it has certainly taken its toll on the West, yet the West has arguably managed to perform better than its competitors. All the same, the West's reaction and response to the war in Ukraine have been more coherent than many observers would have expected, and have so far contributed to the revitalization of two of the pivotal institutions of the Western bloc, namely NATO and the European Union.

Yet, while the West may no longer appear to be in decay as it did in 2019, its destiny is still intertwined with longer-term tendencies that recent events may have changed or simply brought more explicitly to the fore. To explore these dynamics, and the implications they may have for the future of the international order, the symposium was organized around three panels, each addressing distinct yet interrelated themes:

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WHAT IS THE WEST?

The title of the first panel hints at the problem of defining 'the West' from both an analytical and a political standpoint.

Christopher Coker addressed the issue from a historical perspective, focusing on the emergence of the West as a community of states whose members 'recognize something of themselves in each other'.

According to Coker, the Western community first arose in the imagination in the 1860s, with the abolishment of slavery and the cooperation between the two leading liberal countries of the day, England and France. At the time, the UK's prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, famously said that Anglo-French cooperation was 'the cornerstone of modern civilization', defending all the 'civilized values', and indeed one can argue that to date the West has considered itself as such. As this imagined community came into being, three pre-eminent power brokers emerged, each claiming the most significant contribution to Western liberalism: the UK, with the Glorious Revolution in 1688; the US, with its Declaration of Independence in 1776; and France, with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789.

Tracing the ontology of the West, Coker referred to Pitirim Sorokin's idea that every civilization has an associated cultural world or world view, which for the West has been anchored in the free market, free trade and individualism since the 1860s. This world view has been paired with a historical narrative framed around war against 'the enemies of the West': the German Empire in the 1870s, the Third Reich after 1933 and the Soviet Union after 1945.



In this sense, the ontology of the West has been marked by two main gateway events: the Franco–Prussian War in the 1870s and the Second World War, both of which brought Western powers together and prompted them to build an Atlantic community. In fact, Coker argued, the Atlantic Charter signed by Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 captures the essence of the West as a ‘political civilization’ – a term used in 2016 by Donald Tusk to warn against the threats faced by the West as a result of Brexit and the presidency of Donald J. Trump.

Defining ‘the West’, however, does not only entail ontological considerations. Because civilizations and communities define themselves against the behaviour of others, understanding the West is also a question of axiology. Before Germany joined the West in 1949, German behaviour in the Second and Third Reich was definingly un-Western; and so were the Soviet Union’s attempts to create a Soviet civilization from the 1930s. The anti-Russian focus of Western lights during the Cold War, Coker argued, was civilizational, not just political: ‘it was not just about communism, it was about Russia itself being the antithesis of everything that the Western nations swore in themselves’.

When Coker wrote his book *Twilight of the West* in 1998, he believed the West was going to fragment because of its internal contradictions. Yet the West survived, as Coker himself admitted, because a number of phenomena, including the most recent war in Ukraine, have come to represent ‘the next challenge to Western values’ and in so doing ‘have concentrated minds’. Echoing Sorokin again, Coker argued that without a world view grounded in a historical narrative, the West cannot be a community, or a civilization.

In the current landscape, however, one may ask whether the West has now escaped its transatlantic context. Countries such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine and are standing up to Vladimir Putin, yet these countries are not formally part of the transatlantic community. And if democracy is the key feature that members of this community recognize in each other, then the West can no longer be only transatlantic: ‘It has now to be global and it cannot be called the West anymore. So, this political civilization must find another


name for itself', concluded Coker, wondering whether the West would be able to defend Western values and whether it actually believes in its own values.

Continuing this line of thought, **Richard Higgott** challenged the idea that Putin's actions have somehow prompted the rescue of those values that are frequently labelled interchangeably as 'Western', 'liberal' or 'universal'. Instead, he argues that Western liberal values have – and still do – fall victim to Western hubris and Western dismissiveness of the values of others.

Indeed, while we generally appreciate the *longue durée* of European liberal values, tracing their origins and evolution from the Greco-Roman world through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Peace of Westphalia, we tend to ignore non-European, non-Caucasian influences and adaptations – to the point that nowadays the birth of liberal values is often seen as synonymous with what is referred to as the post-Westphalian order.

Over time, and particularly since the Second World War, we have witnessed the internationalization of these European, Western, liberal values; through the second half of the twentieth century we saw the establishment and triumph of the so-called liberal order: history ended with the end of the Cold War, as Francis Fukuyama famously wrote. Yet, only a few decades later, the liberal order and the values that underpin it face philosophical, political and practical challenges as well as challengers such as China, India, Russia and Turkey: the twenty-first century seems to have been so far characterized by the 'crisis of liberalism'.

Higgott identified four major challenges to European, Western, liberal values. First, we see horizontal challenges from across the political spectrum. In tribalist, partisan and populist ways, the hard left and the hard right today both represent the core units of a sustained critique of liberal values: via in-group solidarity and out-group hatred they both challenge assumptions of classical liberalism, especially the rights of the individual and constitutional democracy. Second, we see vertical challenges from all levels of society: issues of inequality based on race, class and gender at the national level, coupled with a mounting resistance to liberal values and a drift




away from the liberal order at the international level, are leading to the so-called 'demise of the liberal international order'. Third are those challenges resulting from the power vacuum created by classical liberalism in the realm of economics. As Higgott said, 'with its commitment to equality and the rule of law, classical liberalism basically vacated the playing field for a more predatory individualist and neoliberal economic theory in which most of humanity has no deliberative input'. Neoliberalism and economic globalization have been a massive generator of aggregate wealth and gains, but they also have very serious distributional consequences that give rise to a whole range of antagonisms. The fourth challenge originates from the international contradictions of liberalism, which are coming into sharp relief and are feeding into a variety of populist and nationalist movements.

Classical liberalism has failed to recognize growing dissatisfactions or to acknowledge that 'universal' values could exist without being defined solely as 'Western' values: there are non-Western societies that subscribe to values such as freedom, democracy and contemporary international practices, yet some of them do not accept the liberal credo. And there are other civilizational states, such as China, India, Russia and Turkey, that reject liberal universalism, or the universalism implicit in liberal values of equality, freedom, tolerance, individualism, secularism, pluralism and democracy. China, in particular, has demonstrated that capitalism is not a prerogative of the democracies. At the same time, Chinese philosophical and cultural approaches are not unpopular in large parts of the world. All this means that presenting the current crisis of liberalism as a zero-sum struggle between democracy and authoritarianism is likely to prove a losing strategy for the future of the liberal order, *pace* Joe Biden's rhetoric. In fact, the juxtaposition of democracy vs authoritarianism misses the point altogether: as Higgott emphasized, while emerging Chinese views of an alternative world order may seem vague and difficult to operationalize for the time being, what needs to be acknowledged is that 'they are there to challenge the hegemony of liberal values, of the liberal discourse, they are there to challenge the liberal political order and the idea of Western arbiters of the universal good rather than [Western values being simply] one of the several options for all humanity'.

The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation might well have given new life to NATO, but war is not a tipping point between Western democracies and authoritarian states: 'there is a difference between revivifying NATO and revivifying Western liberal values', said Higgott. 'Fence-sitting among several non-Western democracies such as India, Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa has been apparent in this process'. Since the end of the Second World War, Western liberal values have imposed liberal-based conditionalities on relationships with colonial and postcolonial societies. This situation is, according to Higgott, no longer acceptable to many non-Western states, especially those based on Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and other belief systems that stress societal obligations. If we accept this argument, finding a space along the spectrum of East–West liberal values becomes a prerequisite for mitigating current and future value conflicts: elements of liberalism, along with certain norms, rules and practices, will survive, but, 'like it or not, the international order will need to accommodate non-liberal, illiberal and other liberal countries'. The key question is thus whether a dialogue, or at least a peacefully contested negotiation, between Western and non-Western values is possible or the escalating conflict between liberal internationalism and cultural civilizational nationalism is in fact inevitable.

Following through with reflections on definitions of the West and what its future may look like, **Anna Caffarena** focused on the close connection between the idea of 'the West' and the liberal order. Indeed, for Caffarena, 'the West is the liberal order project' in that the very concept of 'the West' is anchored in the belief that progress is possible beyond borders and that, to achieve it in the international domain, there must be rules and institutions. In this sense, Caffarena pointed towards multilateralism to explain the crucial relationship between the liberal order and the Western political community, which, in line with Coker's final remarks, could go beyond the geographical West.

Multilateralism is the organizing principle of the liberal order and provides the international system with an infrastructure that frees states and societies from the condition of anarchy, or disorder, in which security becomes necessarily the paramount, if not the only, concern. It is only with an orderly international



system that individuals can pursue their goals and in so doing contribute to global progress. Order is thus important for liberal aspirations, but an orderly international system is also absolutely key for democratic states, which need the support of their citizens and are by definition open societies, well aware of their interdependence and exposure to transnational challenges. In other words, without a rules-based order the West cannot achieve progress, whereas, once in place, a liberal order allows the West to go beyond narrow self-interest, to act on the basis of the values it shares, to deliver for its citizens and ultimately to be true to itself.

This being so, Caffarena continued, 'one would expect Western states to take great care of the liberal order, to keep it in good shape'. However, this has not been the case recently: in the last two decades the liberal order has been eroded by internal fissures and weakened by the enactment of double standards and selective approaches to rules and institutions. All this has increasingly offered a pretext to all those countries that are challenging the liberal order. China, for instance, now holds that it is practising 'true multilateralism' against Western 'fake' or 'false multilateralism'. Similarly, in the wake of the war waged against Ukraine by the Russian Federation, countries such as China, India, South Africa and others have abstained from condemning Russia openly and have rejected Western criticism based on the argument that the West has not consistently censored the US war against Iraq in 2003 – an argument that, according to Caffarena, is hard to fully reject: 'While two wrongs clearly do not make one right, double standards are definitely a major problem'.

The future of the West is intertwined with the future of the liberal order, and both depend on the extent to which Western countries are ready to be consistent with principles and norms through time and across issues. Consistency is thus fundamental to preserving the legitimacy of the liberal order and possibly expanding the Western political community to include countries that, though not traditionally considered 'Western', may nevertheless favour an order based on rules over a less institutionalized, concert-type model of international relations where power plays the decisive role. This is relevant also in the current situation: while some may argue that a revived NATO is enough to

make the West an effective (military) player in the international system, limiting its role as a defensive actor would fundamentally distort the idea of the West as a force for progress.

Along with consistency, another crucial aspect of the future of the liberal order relates to Western countries' attitudes towards accountability. Indeed, even if it is often overlooked, accountability is a crucial component of the liberal order, for it is accountability that makes it sensible to respect norms and reach the level of mutual trust needed to support reciprocity through time. Yet, as explained by Caffarena, the problem is that:

Today the very idea of mutual responsibility and accountability is often rejected on the basis of appeals to sovereignty – the right to decide for oneself – as the unwillingness of some EU members to face the challenges of migration as a European community has clearly shown.

Just as inconsistency provides a pretext for those who criticize the West and the liberal order, lack of accountability downgrades the liberal order to a mere agreement between sovereign states, which is exactly the sort of arrangement that those who challenge the liberal order would prefer in order to feel entitled to selectively adopt or reject rules and institutions based on their national interests. All this means that if Western countries do not opt for and invest in consistency and accountability, they will continue to weaken the liberal order they created and on which they depend, making it less attractive to those countries that subscribe to the idea of progress and still consider rules preferable to power politics. 'Consistency and accountability', Caffarena concluded, 'turn out to be the best bet for the future of the liberal order project and ultimately for the West'.




ARE WESTERN VALUES UNIVERSAL?

As the analyses and remarks of the first three panellists clearly demonstrated, it is difficult to define what the West is without making reference to the values that underpin and are championed by the Western political community. Delving into the topic, the conversation continued around a seemingly straightforward question – ‘Are Western values universal?’ – that in fact points to the crux of many contemporary debates on the role of the West in global politics. In the words of **Stefano Ruzza**, chair of the second panel of the symposium, ‘In the moment we define values as “Western” we are providing a cultural connotation to them so we are assuming that they can be “universal” to a point’.

The first to unravel the issue and present his perspective was **Aaron McKeil**. Western values are usually thought to include individual liberty, liberal democracy and the rule of law. These, McKeil argued, are not universal values in any fundamental sense: ‘They are not universally valued, not universally valid, nor universally desired’. Instead, these are the values the West prefers and as such they have become the predominant values in a Western-dominated international society.

In his classic essay ‘Western values in international relations’(1966), Martin Wight said that ‘it is a paradox that the principles of legitimacy in international society have been modified, rather than dissolved, when they are challenged only because people have been willing to defend them with force’. For McKeil it is thus important to distinguish between values people live by and values people are willing to die for.



Consumerism and prosperity, for instance, are core values of capitalist societies and are essential for the functioning of modern industrial economies. Yet these are not values people in Western societies would typically consider dying for.

According to McKeil, Western values are a category of goods that the philosopher Charles Taylor would call 'strongly evaluated' goods; that is, values that are constitutive of the self, both individual and collective. As a matter of fact, Western societies may wage war for Western values because these are constitutive of the modern liberal democratic polities in which they live. It is thus not surprising that the very idea of 'Western values' tends to evoke strong emotional responses in Western publics.

Despite their alleged ancient heritage, Western values emerged as a strategic, mostly American, discourse during the Cold War and played a constitutive role in making the imagined community of 'the West'. Used to justify the struggle of the West against its adversaries and to legitimate the considerable costs involved in containment and deterrence, this discourse on Western values has produced order and stability, as well as a deeper integration of Western communities. All the same, it has also cemented and reified the reality of a divided international system, essentially made of two orders, East and West, each championing its preferred values.

In the post-Cold-War world, the discourse on Western values has taken on new discursive content and the language has been replaced by 'universal' or 'human' values. In his 1989 speech at the United Nations, Bill Clinton argued that 'many believe there is an inevitable clash between Western civilization and Western values, and Islamic civilizations and Islamic values. I believe this view is terribly wrong. We continue to look for common values, common interests and common endeavours'. In 2004, Tony Blair stated that 'our best guarantee of security lies in the values that are not American or British or Western values but the values of *humanity*'. George W. Bush also spoke about universal values, and Barack Obama in his 2012 speech at the United Nations continued to use the same language: 'We believe that freedom and self-determination are not unique to one culture. These are not simply American values or Western values, they are *universal* values'.

As McKeil pointed out, however, the ongoing debate on Asian values and the rise of new authoritarianism in many parts of the world suggest that this is not a universally shared belief. Moreover, the chaos of the liberal order under the Trump Administration represented a 'reactionary, deeply racist and strategically reckless' twist of the idea of Western identity: in his speech at the United Nations, in 2019, Trump did not speak about universal or Western values: he spoke about American values.

Biden has resumed the universal-embracing discourse of democracy, rule of law and human rights in his diplomatic communiqués and joint statements, especially with Japan, creating a politically convenient myth to legitimate the new idea of a 'global West' that includes Japan and even India in the emerging struggle with China.

Yet, as McKeil stressed, Western values are not universal per se but are constructed as such. The idea of universal Western values is contributing once again to a more divisive international order: claiming that Western values are universal values represents an implicit rejection of alternative, mostly Eastern value systems, and an indication of intent to defeat them in a longer-term struggle. While it is unclear who will emerge as victorious, both the West and the East will defend the values they champion, and the international order will change as a result.

Shifting the focus inwards, **Adrian Pabst** pointed out the tension that exists within the West and specifically between its civilizational heritage and the liberal order it has both underwritten and championed. The West is a civilizational community founded on the political values of national self-determination, democracy and free trade. However, Pabst argued that this political community and the liberal order it has created tend to erode the foundations of Western civilization, hollowing out its folk culture and high culture. Akin to a liberal empire, the West as a political community undermines the customs, beliefs and practices of its nations and people along with all those intellectual, literary and artistic achievements that make the West a distinct civilization 'based not so much on values but social virtues: fraternity, duty, loyalty, humility, generosity, honour'.



From Pabst's standpoint, we are now in what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci called an 'interregnum'; that is, 'the crisis that consists in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born'. According to Gramsci, 'morbid phenomena of the most varied kind' occur in the interregnum, and indeed Pabst mentioned some of the most hideous features of our own interregnum: 'an economy that does not work for most people, societies that are becoming fragmented and atomized, the ecological devastation ... a global order that is based on coercion, trade, deficits and permanent war'. While the limits of liberalism are most clearly visible in its contemporary form, Pabst explained that these issues pertain to its philosophical and ideological underpinnings: individualism has made liberalism 'a self-fulfilling prophecy about us being selfish, greedy, distrustful of others, and prone to violence'. Liberalism has, in this sense, replaced the quest for reciprocal recognition and mutual flourishing with the pursuit of wealth, power and pleasure. It has, in Pabst's words, 'marked the unnecessary victory of vice over virtue'.

Adding to this and echoing Gramsci again, we are now witnessing a 'fraternization of opposites', in that seemingly alternative political choices such as liberalism, populism and authoritarianism are increasingly converging and colluding, but none of them is hegemonic: 'liberalism neither dies nor renews itself, populism is effective only at ejecting liberals from office, and authoritarianism opposes Western democracies without offering any viable long-term alternative to the challenges of the contemporary world'. Some may see this as the prelude to the death of liberalism. Yet, between the possible demise of the West, its revival, or the rise of the Rest often spoken about, there is, for Pabst, another scenario, whereby the Western liberal order continues to stagger on, 'sclerotic yet stoic, decadent yet durable ... in a zombie existence punctuated by periods of temporary crises'. In other words, in an interregnum that may continue indefinitely, the liberal West, and indeed the authoritarian East, look like the undead: not coming back to life but equally refusing to die.

Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial not to equate the West with liberalism or to see the West as just a liberal civilization. Neither liberalism nor any modern ideology can pretend to have invented or have monopoly over values such

as freedom, equality, tolerance, individual rights, constitutionalism, mixed and balanced government or the rule of law. In fact, these values come from very long-established traditions – some of which are Western, but not all. In fact, much of Western civilization is about forming character and encouraging virtue in the form of good practice through institutions, notably the rule of law, and notably democratically self-governing cities, but also autonomous associations, universities, trade unions, vocational colleges, professional associations and indeed religious communities. 'These are all institutions', Pabst stated, 'that the modern ideologies of liberalism, conservatism and socialism did not invent, but instead inherited from antiquity, and the Judeo-Christian traditions, which contemporary practices sadly undermine from within'.

Western civilization has always viewed human beings as naturally embedded in society, constituted by an inheritance of relationships and endowed with the creative agency to forge new relationships and build new institutions that require a sense of ethos and an inheritance of intergenerational innovation. So, if the West wants not only to live through the rise of the Rest but also, crucially, to renew itself, it needs to think about how it can bring back those shared traditions that bind together Western cultures across many geographic, linguistic and cultural boundaries. As Pabst said, 'The Roman idea of citizenship, the Greek notion of the free city, Germanic common law, Jewish and Christian ethics, above all the dignity of the person, the virtue of free association and the distinction of religious from political authority. These are all Western traditions, but they're not faring well in today's West'.

Considering the uniqueness of Western civilization, Pabst did not imply any exceptionalism or sense of supremacy. Rather, he stressed the fact that the West, as recent discoveries in archaeology and anthropology indicate, is like an organic network, an entity born of all sorts of interactions between ancient civilizations, spanning Rome and Greece to Babylon, Persia and India, but also to Islam. In this sense, in the history of Western civilization there is no linear progress. Pabst's conception of Western civilization is thus more like a collection of 'family resemblances' that cannot be reduced to any single essence:



Today the very idea of mutual responsibility and accountability is often rejected on the basis of appeals to sovereignty – the right to decide for oneself – as the unwillingness of some EU members to face the challenges of migration as a European community has clearly shown.

The third panellist, **Michael von der Schulenburg**, enriched the discussion on Western values by bringing in his personal experience, and the ways through which he has ‘lived’ Western values. He grew up in East Germany, but never joined the Communist Youth Movement. He was trained as a carpenter, but did not want to spend his life as a labourer. He escaped the communist world in 1969 and headed to the West to study. For him, Western values have been a personal choice, but also a professional one throughout his career at the UN, an institution that embodies liberal ideals and values:

In 1989 I was in Kabul as chief of mission for the UN Operation Salam to support a peaceful transition from the Soviet Union, which had just left Afghanistan ... It was dark outside, and I was listening to BBC News on a battery-operated radio because we did not have any electricity: the Fall of the Berlin Wall was an enormously emotional experience.

Yet what he is experiencing today is a huge disappointment: ‘The shrivelling of liberal values is not due to China, definitely not to Russia. We destroyed ourselves’ – and we have been doing so, according to von der Schulenburg, since the 1990s.

After the Cold War, the US emerged as the only superpower – ‘not because it had planned it, but because the Soviet Union was in disarray, Russia was in disarray’ – and increasingly committed itself to the project for the New American Century

(1997–2006), assuming that ‘what is good for America must be good for the rest of the world’. From von der Schulenburg’s standpoint, 1997 was a turning point, when the US shifted from its fight against an expansion of communist ideology to a militarized quest for global leadership: ‘Liberal democracy lost its value because it was militarized. Because of the militarization we have discredited what I think is a very good idea. In 1997 liberal values suddenly became a justification for a global power structure’ – to the detriment of multilateralism. The UN Charter is now often brought up against Russia, but the liberal West has moved away from it on many occasions over the years.

In March 2022, a Resolution of the UN General Assembly deplored Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as an act against the very heart of the UN Charter. However, as noted by von der Schulenburg, ‘Member States voted for the UN Charter, not for the West. We always confuse these two things’. Echoing what Caffarena pointed out in the first panel, von der Schulenburg also emphasized how damaging Western double standards are for liberal values, multilateralism and international law:

I was very happy when the ICC [International Criminal Court] was created. But then when the ICC wanted to investigate human rights abuses in Afghanistan, the Americans put a boycott on it, preventing ICC staff from travelling and threatening sanctions ... The US is not even part of the ICC, but now it uses the ICC against Russia. The rest of the world sees a double standard. How can we not expect that the Global South, which accounts for 90% of the global population, sees this? We think Putin is isolated ... but I guess we are isolated, too.

The world is facing extraordinary challenges and every society will need to find new ways to organize and function. ‘These societies will not be a copy of the West’, concluded von der Schulenburg, but there can be cross-fertilization if only ‘the West stops seeking global dominance, not because it has a better [social] system, but because it has the better army’.

THE REST VERSUS THE WEST

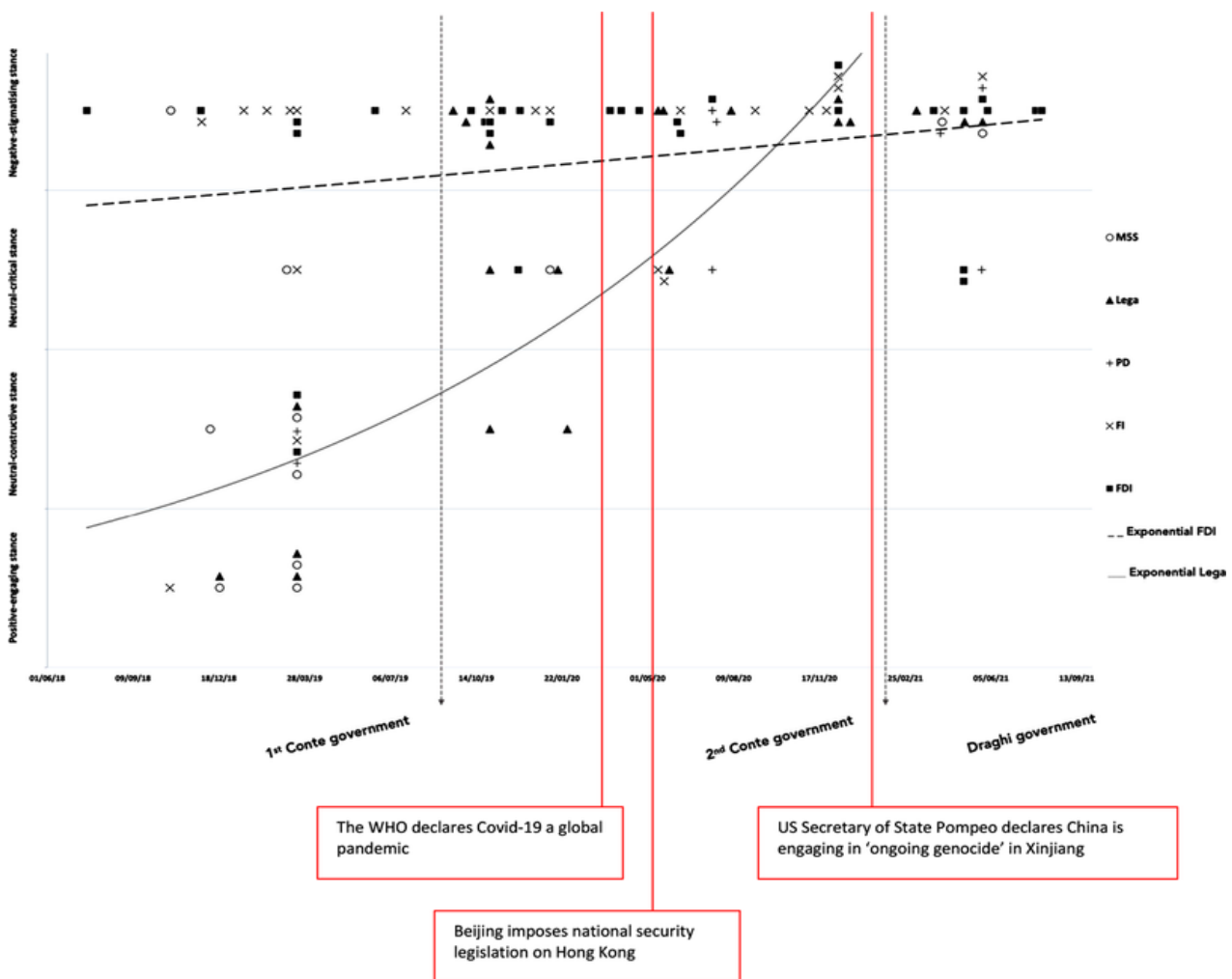
Following through from the conversation on values, the last panel delved deeper into the relationship of the West with the 'emerging Rest'. Focusing on China, Giovanni B. Andornino shared the results of his recent research on the evolving Sino-Italian strategic partnership in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2019, Italy and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for collaboration on the BRI. While the MoU is not a legally binding agreement, the decision of the Italian government to endorse China's controversial initiative has stimulated much debate. The BRI is a multilayered policy package launched by China in 2013. It is a grand policy design that spans different domains (far beyond infrastructures) and a vast geopolitical manoeuvre that reveals the Chinese leadership's ambitions for promoting and enhancing Beijing's international status. As pointed out by Andornino, status in international relations is a positional and relational good; that is, it defines rankings in a hierarchical order and stems from mutual respect and recognition. Andornino explained that an emerging power may achieve a substantial status enhancement when asymmetric relationships display patterns of deference from actors belonging to the dominant circle of recognition.

From this perspective, Andornino continued, the endorsement of the BRI by a key Western partner represented for China an exquisite opportunity to advance its strategic pursuit of enhanced status within the current international order, which helps to explain the substantial political capital invested by Beijing in negotiating and signing the BRI MoU with Italy. Yet, Andornino argued, such a strategy hardly seems sustainable. In fact, by assessing China-related political stances within the


Italian Parliament, one can gauge the volatility of China's status that results from shifting sentiments among Italian MPs.

The analysis on Italian non-legislative acts of parliamentary policy-setting and oversight conducted by Andornino suggests a steady and quick deterioration of China's prestige. As shown in the graph below, after an initial phase of relatively positive attitudes, Italian MPs across all main political parties displayed an increasingly negative stance towards China. According to Andornino, this downward trajectory can be explained by looking at the broader international landscape. Between March 2019 and August 2021 (the time frame of Andornino's analysis), three issues dominated China-related parliamentary proceedings: (1) the situation in Hong Kong after Beijing imposed draconian security measures under the 2020 National Security Law; (2) China's lack of transparency in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its duty of care in the face of extraordinary risks for global health; and (3) the ongoing repression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang.

Salient China-related political stances tabled or seconded by the largest five parties in the 18th Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021)



Source: Andornino, G. B. (2022) China's pursuit of international status through negotiated deference: An empirical analysis of Italy's parliamentary attitude. *Italian Political Science Review*, 53(1), p. 98



Commenting on his research findings, Andornino stated:

Though actions had been taken and agreements had been signed, despite the prospects of deepening cooperation with China through the BRI, when normative and value thresholds are crossed the political investment in closer relationships is jeopardized and the space for deference shrinks.

This is so because in a parliamentary democracy such as Italy's, while foreign policy is not usually determined by parliamentary statements, when critical issues attain such high priority on the parliament's agenda, it is hard for governments not to heed the shift in tone and adjust their behaviour. Most notably, a bipartisan negative sentiment towards China in the Italian Parliament is likely to extinguish the political space for deference on the part of the Italian government.

In each of the three issues outlined above, China's conduct was seen by Italian MPs and parliamentary leaders as being opposed to critical normative thresholds and standards of appropriateness generally upheld by the West. Andornino concluded:


Values trumped material interests, shifting the same MPs and parliamentary groups into completely different positions in just three years, resulting in social closure mechanisms prevailing over foreign policy consistency and ultimately challenging the sustainability of Beijing's pursuit of status enhancement through deference.

The example of the BRI was also used by the next speaker, **Simone Dossi**, to explore the implications that the current transition of power away from the West may have for the liberal international order, particularly as regards its spatial

dimension. As recounted by Dossi, the evolving spatial nature of the current liberal order has been the subject of much debate among International Relations scholars. In Italy, Alessandro Colombo has focused on the combination of a globalized set of norms and institutions on the one hand and a strategic fragmentation of the international system on the other. Anna Caffarena has worked on the implications of this dynamic, focusing on the potential evolution towards what she identified as a concert-type arrangement whereby regional orders remain integrated in a systemic order that is less cohesive than the liberal international order but still ensures cooperation on a set of issues of common interest. The implications of the rise of China, as an emerging power and as one of the most credible challengers to the liberal international order, have been the object of intense debate.

According to Dossi, China may adopt two distinct attitudes, each affecting the global scope and ambitions of the liberal international order in different ways. Potentially, China might advance its own agenda, norms, rules and institutions in the region it identifies as its periphery, thereby promoting further international fragmentation on a regional basis. Alternatively, China might promote adjustments to the international order while maintaining a global perspective, thus advancing its preferences within the existing order without fragmenting it from a spatial point of view. These attitudes point to two different roles for China and two different scenarios for the future of the international order. On the one hand, China may help to end a long-term process of global integration, which started with Europe's expansion, adding to the fragmentation of the global political space into a set of loosely integrated regional political spaces. On the other hand, China may contribute to the spatial integration of the global system, de facto continuing the process of globalization but leading it to a post-Western stage.

Looked at from these two diverging perspectives, the BRI may be seen either as Beijing's radical challenge to the liberal international order or as an attempt to adjust – rather than contest – it. In other words, the BRI represents a vehicle for order shaping: it is, quoting Caffarena and Gabusi, 'a project that aims at reshaping order by reshaping space', and as such, Dossi continued, 'it might play a major role in either advancing or contrasting the spatial fragmentation of the international



order, depending on China's ambitions'.

In official documents published by China in 2015–2016, the BRI was characterized by a regional scope. Largely drawing on the geopolitical debates among Chinese scholars since the 2000s, the conceptualization of the BRI formed part of the broader reorientation of China's policy towards Eurasia to counter the growing projection of the US towards Asia. As argued by Dossi, in its early stages 'the BRI focused on Eurasia as China's enlarged periphery'. This spatial orientation is explicit in the 2015 document 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road', in which Asia, Europe and Africa are identified as the key geopolitical reference of the BRI and, interestingly, as a unified Asian-European-African continent (Ya-Ou-Fei dalu 亚欧非大陆).

In later documents, the BRI is articulated as a project with a broader spatial scope and global ambitions. In fact, official documents published by China in 2017–2019 increasingly associated the BRI with a global 'community of destiny' encompassing humankind as a whole, not just people in Eurasia. This global horizon is reflected in the 2019 report 'The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, contributions and prospects', in which it is stated that the BRI is proposed by China but ultimately belongs to the world as a means 'to meet the various challenges faced by humanity and work for a bright future in which the whole world enjoys peace, prosperity and development'. The emphasis on globality embodied in the words used in the 2019 progress report is matched, at least to some extent, by Beijing's simultaneous efforts to involve countries from outside Eurasia in the BRI – African and Latin American countries in particular.

Hence, Dossi argued,

The analysis of the language used in these documents points to a shift in China's attitude: initially centred on Eurasia as a sort of enlarged periphery, the BRI has increasingly been articulated as a project with truly global ambitions.

However, as Dossi acknowledged, this shift has not come without contention. Since 2019, for instance, a lively debate has ensued among Chinese scholars, many of whom have expressed doubts regarding the effectiveness and sustainability of the BRI. Most notably, the fact that some countries welcomed Beijing's financial support but have not committed politically to supporting projects that are domestically controversial has raised concerns over free-riding. Thus, according to Dossi, while the change in language used to describe the BRI underscores

China's global ambitions, there is still a reluctance to accept the costs that such ambitions may imply. So much so that, 'for the time being, China might be best qualified as a sort of "reluctant" agent of globalization', whose articulation of a global reform of the liberal international order remains rather ambiguous.

Looping back to where the conversation begun, the last panellist of the symposium, **Richard Sakwa**, reflected on the relationship between Europe and Russia on the ground of the ontological and civilizational clash discussed in previous panels.

The end of the Second World War and the triumph of the West after the Cold War seemed to pander to the view that there is a fundamental civilizational commonality among European states, which only needed to find adequate political expression in order to bring the age of wars to an end: European integration in the form of what is now the European Union helped to realize this aspiration, which over the years became embedded in a growing number of normative documents, all talking about sovereign equality, democracy, peace and unity. Underlying all this was, according to Sakwa, the assumption that Europe was liberating itself from its past history of enduring internecine conflicts. Yet 'something went wrong, and we now find ourselves in a war whose depth, intensity and divisiveness will shape our generation', while the West is increasingly discussed and challenged as the epitome of a 500-year history of dominance, imperialism and exploitation.

In order to understand what has happened, Sakwa argued that one has to account for the expansion of the 'historical' or 'political' West born out of the Cold War. Indeed, according to

Sakwa, at the end of the Cold War the West failed to seize the opportunity to include Russia and the post-Soviet states in a 'Greater West'. Instead of the transformation of the international system on the basis of the principles contained in documents such as the 1945 UN Charter and the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, 'we saw a radicalization of the political West and the emergence of a "no-alternative" discourse, which obviously reproduced Cold War mechanisms'.

The tensions resulting from the failed transformation of the West and its geopolitical enlargement mirror the frictions between the liberal international order and the broader international system in which it is embedded. In fact, Sakwa stressed the importance of distinguishing what he calls the 'Charter international system' (established in Wilsonian ideas and a whole stack of norms, protocols and institutions) from its sub-orders, of which the US-led liberal international order is just one. 'The key issue now', Sakwa claimed, 'is the problem of substitution: the liberal international order is framed to be a substitute for the international system' but there remains an ontological clash between different (possible) orders and different interpretations of these orders – so much so that even the war in Ukraine can be conceived as an ontological war between the historical/political West and Russia with its own civilizational dynamics. Yet, Sakwa conceded, it is a clash of ontologies that mostly pertains to the Global North and 'almost overlays Mazower's idea of an endless European civil war and the militaristic violence and contradictions embedded in Western culture for the last 500 years'.

W(H)ITHER THE WEST?

Opening remarks

Stefano Ruzza, Associate Professor of Political Science and Peace and Conflict Studies, Università degli Studi di Torino; Head of Research, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute

01

What is the West?

PANEL 1

Chair:

Vlad Zigarov, Programme Manager for the IDEAS Europe Programme, LSE IDEAS

Speakers:

Christopher Coker, Director of LSE IDEAS; former Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

Richard Higgott, Distinguished Professor of Diplomacy, Centre for Security Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS), Brussels School of Governance (BSOG-VUB); Emeritus Professor of International Political economy, University of Warwick

Anna Caffarena, Professor of International Relations, Università degli Studi di Torino; President, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute

02 Are Western values universal?

PANEL 2

Chair:

Stefano Ruzza, Associate Professor of Political Science and Peace and Conflict Studies, Università degli Studi di Torino; Head of Research, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute

Speakers:

Aaron McKeil, Course Convenor and Course Tutor, LSE IDEAS

Adrian Pabst, Professor of Politics, University of Kent; Deputy Director at National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR)

Michael von der Schulenburg, former United Nations Assistant Secretary-General

03 The Rest versus the West

PANEL 3

Chair:

Chris Alden, Director of LSE IDEAS; Professor of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); Research Associate with South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)

Speakers:

Giovanni B. Andornino, Assistant Professor of International Relations of East Asia, Università degli Studi di Torino; Vice-President, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute

Simone Dossi, Assistant Professor of International Relations of East Asia at the Università degli Studi di Milano; Research Fellow, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute

Richard Sakwa, Emeritus Professor of Russian and European Politics, University of Kent; Associate Fellow, Chatham House; Senior Research Fellow, National Research University-Higher School of Economics in Moscow



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