

An aerial night photograph of a densely populated city, likely Hong Kong, showing a complex network of highways and numerous high-rise apartment buildings. The lights from the buildings and the long-exposure light trails from the traffic create a vibrant, glowing scene. The text is overlaid on the top left portion of the image.

# POST WESTERN WORLD

OLIVER STUENKEL



# Post-Western World



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How Emerging Powers Are  
Remaking Global Order

Oliver Stuenkel

polity

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# Contents

Maps, graphs, and tables	vi
Acknowledgments	viii
Introduction	1
1. The Birth of Western-Centrism	29
2. Power Shifts and the Rise of the Rest	63
3. The Future of Soft Power	97
4. Toward a Parallel Order: Finance, Trade, and Investment	120
5. Toward a Parallel Order: Security, Diplomacy, and Infrastructure	154
6. Post-Western World	181
Conclusion	195
Notes	206
Index	239

# Maps, graphs, and tables

## Maps

0.1	Mercator map	12
0.2	Hobo Dyer projection	13
0.3	Hobo Dyer projection / “South map”	14
5.1	The New Silk Road	169

## Graphs

0.1	World’s largest three economies, GDP at PPP as percent of world total; historical output within the boundaries of modern countries	4
1.1	The world’s three largest economies in 1820, in PPP	38
2.1	The Western blip: US and Chinese share of global GDP (PPP)	67
2.2	Population share in 2050	78
2.3	The biggest contributors to global growth.	80
4.1	Capital stock in the AIIB	126



## Tables

4.1	The Parallel Order: Finance	122
4.2	The Parallel Order: Trade and Investment	122
4.3	The Parallel Order: Security	123
4.4	The Parallel Order: Diplomacy	123
4.5	The Parallel Order: Infrastructure	123
5.1	Intra-BRICS Cooperation, Main Areas	165

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

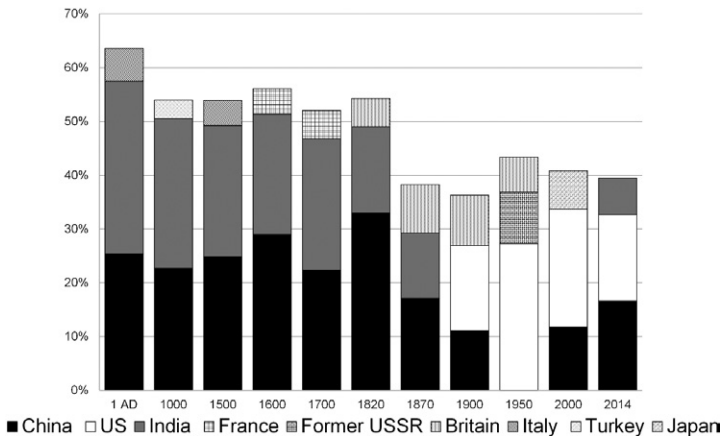
the reins of power to the United States. What is often overlooked in that context is that the distinction between legitimacy and coercion is problematic, and that the latter was an important element of consolidating liberal order—just as in any previous system.<sup>7</sup> This order-building involved 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.<sup>8</sup>

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, favorable 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.<sup>9</sup>

Harvard University's Graham Allison calls the last one thousand years "a millennium in which Europe had been the political center of the world."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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),



**Graph 0.1** World's largest three economies, GDP at PPP as percent of world total; historical output within the boundaries of modern countries. Sources: Angus Maddison, World Bank



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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

## 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”),<sup>18</sup> 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 anomie and alienation, of instability without a stabilizer, of devolving order without an orderer.”<sup>19</sup> 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 concerts can produce stability.<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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. Mas-tanduno 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.”<sup>22</sup>

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO’s Secretary General from 2009 to 2014, categorically affirms that “when the United States retreats, terrorists and autocrats advance.”<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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 battle 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.<sup>26</sup> 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 underappreciate 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).

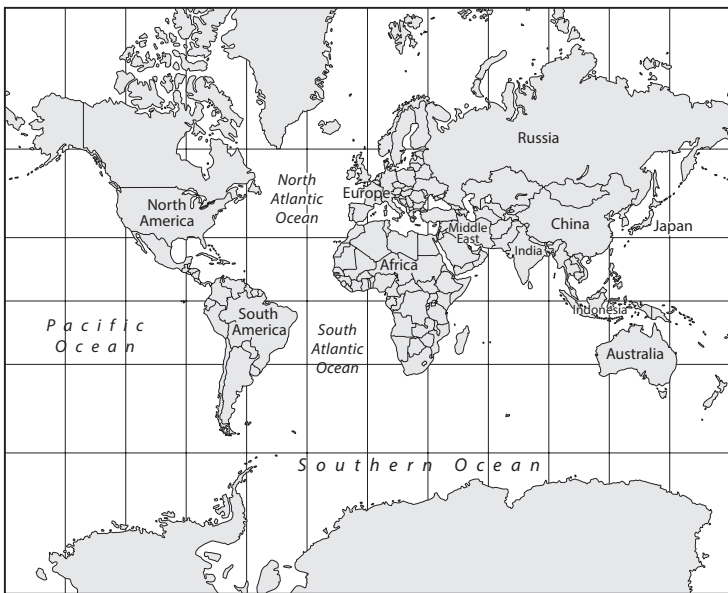
Second, the economic “rise of the rest,” particularly China, will allow it to enhance its military capacity and eventually its international influence and soft power. I question the commonly used argument that China will never turn into a truly global power like the United States because “it has no friends,”<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup>

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-centrism 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 km<sup>2</sup>, Africa's extension is 30.22 million km<sup>2</sup>—fourteen times larger. Even India (3.288 million km<sup>2</sup>) is significantly larger than Greenland or Scandinavia (0.928 km<sup>2</sup>). While no two-dimensional map can adequately project the world, the Hobo Dyer map (Map 0.2) is better at representing each



**Map 0.1** Mercator map

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





Map 0.2 Hobo Dyer projection



Map 0.3 Hobo Dyer projection / "South map"