Who wants to rule a broken world? The future of the international order and our challenges as humankind

Erick da Luz Scherf[1], Marcos Vinicius Viana da Silva[1], and José Everton da Silva[1]

[1]*(School of Legal and Social Sciences, University of Vale do Itajaí, Brazil)*

Abstract: The future of the liberal international order seems to be at stake, and therefore, has generated a lot of academic debate around a possible international order transition. Despite the growing number of analyses on this topic, we argue that, similarly to traditional scholarship on IR theory, the focus has been on material factors such as military or economic power, leaving behind some other crucial issues in the process of international order-making. With that in mind, our goal is to examine which global challenges should really be taken into consideration by IR scholars when studying and researching emerging world orders. Our research design is built upon a qualitative and inductive approach, based on literature review. Our main conclusions were that, differently from what mainstream scholarship in IR has been proposing, the biggest challenges faced by international society nowadays - in the context of a transient world order - may not be related at all with the dispute between the US and China for global dominance, they may be more related to greater obstacles human civilization has yet to overcome.
Keywords: International relations. International order. Transition. Global challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

The future of the international order, and nonetheless of the international system itself, appears to be one of the major concerns for International Relations (IR) scholars and analysts most recently. Great and rapid changes in global politics, such as the return of populism and nationalism [1-2], a recent backlash on multilateralism as a tool for international cooperation [3], and the US heading downhill away from its role as a major sponsor of the international order [4-5], among other issues at stake in the international political stage, has led many to put into question the future of the international liberal order as we came to know it for almost a century [6]. As many experts from a variety of academic fields strongly agree with the statement that "the post-war liberal international order is in grave danger".[7]

Considering this, alongside the fact that many authors have decreed the end of the 'American Century', academic works investigating an alleged dispute between China and the US for the leadership of a transient world order have appeared in large scale [8-10]. However, despite the importance of these mainstream analyses developed so far - regarding the future of the international order - most of them may be failing to rise some important questions related to the possible features of this new order still on the making.

Much like traditional scholarship on IR theory, the focus has been on material factors such as military or economic power, when in fact, questions of world order comprise deeper understandings over legitimacy, rules and values [11], instead of mere power calculating. Thus, differently from other works which have been focusing on the military or economic aspect of the dispute between the US and China in the race to "rule the world", this article intends to offer some insights on issues not always judged as relevant by IR scholars when analyzing questions of international order-making.

The question is, the race to "rule" the world should be the greatest concern of IR scholarship nowadays?; or should we be focusing instead on ways of ensuring there is still a world left for us to live and enough people in it to maintain the core structure of human civilization?; or what values the international community should be willing to uphold going onto a new world order still in the making?; issues of climate change, the new coronavirus pandemic, global inequality, immigration detention, among many others, have no place in the debate about the future of the international order?

An article alone would not be able to provide answers to all these questions, among others that may come up. Thus, its goal is to briefly examine what other issues, besides material factors of military and economic nature as well as hegemonic power swapping, should be taken into consideration by IR scholars when studying and researching about a new international order, still on the horizon. Our research design is built upon a qualitative and inductive approach, based on a literature review. Firstly, we try to examine shortly what is the

meaning of "international order" and explain the so-called "international order transition" that seems to be taking place nowadays. Secondly, we go on to analyze the main challenges the world and consequently the international system are facing today. Thirdly and ultimately, we provide some recommendations to IR scholars regarding the future of "world order" research agendas.

II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

There are many ways in which one can define "international order", and our aim certainly is not to dive into the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of this concept, as many important and more extensive works have already done so [*e.g*, 12-14]. Instead, we shall accompany Kissinger on his classical conceptualization of order as "[…] a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action." [15]

Even though the modern world order was never completely global, it has helped shape, since its Westphalian roots, the architecture of the international system. With that said, since the early 1990s, we seem to be living under an international order built and projected by the United States and its allies [16], which introduced to the core of international society values such as free trade, multilateralism, collective security, and liberal democracy (among others), all part of the "liberal internationalism" package [17].

However, many questions have arisen around the failure of this liberal world order and its sponsors in living up to these values: as "recent political tumult and the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency have driven anxious commentators to lament the collapse of a post-1945 'liberal world order'" [18]. Moreover, some important scholarly works have pointed out that the rise of China as a great power is actually fastening this dismantle of this liberal system [19-20].

Therefore, mainstream IR scholars have tended to link this hegemonic power transition to the greater question of international order transition. Such theoretical stumble led many to wrongfully believe that this possible "power transition" between two opposite political poles is what will define global politics in the decades to come. On the other hand, we argue that international order-making in the 21st century goes way beyond the 'Thucydides's Trap' [21]. Questions of international order transition go far beyond mere power transition, while mainstream analyses have failed to see beyond the security, political, and economic realms.

III. RESULTS

The study and practice of global politics have changed dramatically over the years, however, IR scholarship is still marked by state and power fetishisms [22-23], where the state is portraited as a 'thing' that operates in the international system, exercising power and sovereignty. It is this mindset that probably blocks many scholars from theorizing about the international order beyond great power politics and beyond material factors.

We suggest that the major challenges humanity is facing today are of different natures, however, if left unsolved, can have a great negative impact on global politics and on the future of the international society. Therefore, scholars and practitioners in the field of international relations should worry not only about questions of "power" or "hegemony" in world order transition, but also with the issues that affect us as humankind. On Table 1, we provide some examples of global challenges and risks that concern (or at least should concern) human civilization.

Table 1. Major global challenges faced by humanity today

Challenge / Risk	Brief description
Climate change	"If climate change was to reach 3°C, most of Bangladesh and Florida would drown, while major coastal cities – Shanghai, Lagos, Mumbai – would be swamped, likely creating large flows of climate refugees. Most regions in the world would see a significant drop in food production and increasing numbers of extreme weather events, whether heat waves, floods or storms. This likely scenario for a 3°C rise does not take into account the considerable risk that self-reinforcing feedback loops set in when a certain threshold is reached, leading to an ever-increasing rise in temperature. Potential thresholds include the melting of the arctic permafrost releasing methane into the atmosphere, forest dieback releasing the carbon currently stored in the Amazon and boreal forests, or the melting of polar ice caps that would no longer reflect away light and heat from the sun." [24]
Ecological collapse	"Local ecological collapse may have caused the end of a civilization on

	Easter Island. More recently, ecological collapse in and around the Aral Sea has had dramatic social and economic consequences for the region, although timely intervention has led to some marked recovery. In today's highly connected world, local disruptions may sometimes also lead to unintended ecological effects on other far flung areas. This might escalate into the rapid collapse of most ecosystems across the Earth, with no time for effective recovery, drastically compromising the planet's capacity to sustainably support a large and growing human population." [25]
Food insecurity and hunger	"According to the latest estimates, 9.2 percent of the world population (or slightly more than 700 million people) were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity in 2018, implying reductions in the quantity of food consumed to the extent that they have possibly experienced hunger." [26]
Poverty/Inequality	"According to the most recent estimates, in 2015, 10 percent of the world's population or 734 million people lived on less than $1.90 a day. That's down from nearly 36 percent or 1.9 billion people in 1990. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis as well as the oil price drop, this trend probably will reverse in 2020. The COVID-19 crisis will have a disproportionate impact on the poor, through job loss, loss of remittances, rising prices, and disruptions in services such as education and health care." [27]
Pandemics	"In the 5th and 14th century, Plague epidemics spread internationally and killed approximately 15% of the global population over the course of a few decades. Systematic vaccination campaigns have allowed us to eradicate two diseases that had affected humanity for centuries, Smallpox in humans and Rinderpest in animals, and two more diseases – Guinea Worm and Polio – are close to being eradicated. Progress in medical treatment and public health systems has significantly reduced the prevalence and impact of others, such as Malaria, Typhus and Cholera. However, there remains a serious risk that the emergence of a new infectious disease in humans could cause a major outbreak, with particularly high mortality and rapid spread in our densely populated, urbanized and highly interconnected world." [28]
Unsafe and irregular migration	"Since 2014, more than 4,000 fatalities have been recorded annually on migratory routes worldwide. The number of deaths recorded, however, represent only a minimum estimate because the majority of migrant deaths around the world go unrecorded. Since 1996, more than 75,000 migrant deaths have been recorded globally. These data not only highlight the issue of migrant fatalities and the consequences for families left behind, but can also be used to assess the risks of irregular migration and to design policies and programs to make migration safer." [29]
Violence	"Violence has probably always been part of the human experience. Its impact can be seen, in various forms, in all parts of the world. Each year, more than a million people lose their lives, and many more suffer non-fatal injuries, as a result of self-inflicted, interpersonal or collective violence. Overall, violence is among the leading causes of death worldwide for people aged 15–44 years. Although precise estimates are difficult to obtain, the cost of violence translates into billions of US dollars in annual health care expenditures worldwide, and billions more for national economies in terms of days lost from work, law enforcement and lost investment." [30]

How do we build or develop values and rules that guarantee that these challenges are effectively addressed by the international community in the context of an emerging world order? This is the question we should be making. If the international liberal order "[…] rested on the imperial prerogatives of a superpower that attempted to impose order by stepping outside rules and accommodating illiberal forces" [31] and failed to provide answers for the challenges above cited, how can we guarantee that a new international order does not fall into these same steps?

The challenges cited in Table 1 are able to shake the structure of the international system, as they are a source of instability in global politics. Thus, they should be considered even before we can discuss the emergence of a new world order in the 21st century. As well described by Mattern: "stability of interstate relations is required for any […] normative goods to develop. As such, it seems that no matter what else one builds into the definition of international order, one common defining characteristic all along the spectrum of conceptions is that order embodies stable shared understandings of expectations and behaviors among states." [32]

One current example of how the liberal international order has failed to deliver such stable shared understandings of expectations and behaviors among states is the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning of the new coronavirus crisis, we have witnessed divergent political responses to the spread of the virus, with absolutely no convergence whatsoever in heath policies worldwide in order to stop dissemination and deliver adequate treatment. The question of how this new, emerging world order will offer governance mechanisms and normative goods to address the global challenges presented on this article, should be of great interest for anyone worried about the future of the international system.

IV. DISCUSSION

With our criticism of current literature on international order transition, we are not suggesting that a possible conflict between the US and China is not preoccupying, our goal is to instigate IR scholars to go beyond matters of power transition or the global balance of power, as questions of order also involve deeper understandings over shared norms, rules, values and understandings/expectations of accepted behavior in the international arena. Global challenges such as poverty, hunger, climate change, irregular migration, pandemics (amongst others) have been a source of instability in world politics and were able to defy the capacity of states in cooperatively dealing with these issues. Thus, we argue that these challenges must be taken into account by scholars and practitioners in the field of international relations when discussing about the future of the international order. As well pointed out by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs: "[…] although shifts in the international order recently have received considerable attention, our concepts to understand what is happening have hardly changed. Mental constructs like 'hegemonic power transition' or 'global governance' dominate discourses on international order in theory and practice." [33] Therefore, we are in need of new theoretical vocabulary that encompasses the challenges we are facing as humankind and other challenges arising from the shifts in the international order of today.

V. CONCLUSION

Our goal with this article was to briefly examine what other issues, besides material factors of military and economic nature, should be taken into consideration by IR scholars when studying and researching about a new international order, still on the horizon. We argued that mainstream IR scholars have tended to link hegemonic power transition to the greater question of international order transition. However, the process of international ordering goes far beyond mere power transition, it also involves deeper understandings over shared norms, rules, values and understandings/expectations of accepted behavior in the international arena. We suggested that the major challenges humanity is facing today are of different natures and if left unsolved, can have a great negative impact on global politics and on the future of the international society. Global challenges such as poverty, hunger, climate change, irregular migration, pandemics (amongst others) have been a source of instability in world politics.Nonetheless, we are in need of new theoretical vocabulary that encompasses such challenges in the process of international order-making.

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