

# The Political West as the End of History

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the enduring influence of the Political West, a power structure that emerged during the Cold War era and continues to shape international relations nowadays. Contrary to expectations of its dissolution following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Political West expanded its influence, propelled by a belief in the ideological superiority of liberal democracy. This expansion, fuelled by notions of the “end of history,” has led to the perpetuation of Cold War dynamics, characterised by adversarial relations and ideological conflicts. The study contrasts the expectations of a post-Cold War era of positive peace with the reality of continued antagonism, exemplified by conflicts such as the Balkan wars and NATO's interventions in Iraq and Libya. The exacerbation of tensions culminated in the onset of Cold War II in 2014, marked by proxy conflicts and, notably, the Ukrainian crisis of 2022. In response to the assertiveness of the Western political bloc, an alternative alignment led by Russia and China has emerged, challenging the unilateral dominance of Western powers. This Political East, while embodying anti-hegemonic sentiments, maintains a conservative stance within the framework of the international Charter system. The paper concludes by highlighting the fundamental transformation of international politics into a multipolar landscape. Although both the Political West and East continue to espouse the principles of the Charter, the intensification of hostilities risks destabilising the international order. In the context of the enduring Cold War dynamics and the challenges posed by global environmental change, the future of humanity is increasingly uncertain.

## KEY WORDS

*Political West, cold war, Russia, China, Political East, Charter International System*

## Introduction

A Political West emerged during and was shaped by the Cold War in the decades following World War II. A number of terms are now used to describe the phenomenon, including the “Historical West,” the “Collective West” and others, and while they all attribute agency to some sort of collective body, this paper argues that the notion of a “Political West” is a more specific and substantive way of describing the power system that emerged in particular circumstances at a particular time. It became one of the most important and enduring sub-orders within the broader United Nations-based Charter International System, established in 1945. Shaped by the Cold War struggle between the Atlantic powers and the USSR, the political-military alliance system of the Political West radicalised after the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the absence of a peer competitor, in the era of unipolarity the Political West broadened its claims and ambitions. It purported to become the physical embodiment of the “end of history,” the notion that the political evolution of human community had reached some sort of culmination.<sup>1</sup> The abstract philosophical position had enormous real-world consequences, and although disputed at the time and later, the general position that the complex phenomenon represented by the Political West was of universal applicability provided the ideological cover for the maintenance of the cold war structure of power into the post-communist era. This thesis continues to shape international politics to this day, regenerating Cold War-style adversarial relations accompanied by the ideological delegitimisation of rivals.

This dialectical view of international politics inverted Marxian causality. Instead of material factors and class conflict driving development, end of history liberal historicism prioritised cultural factors, above all democracy and liberal freedoms. If the problem of human development had been solved, then there was little scope for alternative representations of human community and development. Dialogical approaches to international affairs, in which both sides change as a result of interaction, were impeded.<sup>2</sup> Instead of disbanding, as predicted by neorealist international relations theory, the Political West embarked on the path of expansion. The theorists of the New Political Thinking and the architects of perestroika in the Soviet Union envisioned a new era in international politics in the late 1980s. They appealed to the potential of the Charter International System to finally be realised, which helped put an end to the Cold War. Instead, the Political West was imbued with a sense of victory and made claims to a universality that properly belonged to the international system of which they were a part. Far from being transformed, international politics continued to be characterised by the cold-war logic, albeit now fought with new ideas and new methods. The post-Cold War peace was ultimately lost, leading to a quarter century of Cold Peace (1989–2014), followed by a Second Cold War and ultimately the return of interstate war to Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1945, there has been a fundamental distinction between the overarching system, which since 1945 has been the one focused on the UN, including its subsequent

1 Fukuyama 1989; Fukuyama 1992.

2 Sakwa 2017; Sakwa 2018.

3 Sakwa 2023.

conventions, declarations, protocols, and resolutions, as well as the associated body of international law, and *political orders*, which denote enduring constellations of power governed by the fluxes and strains of international politics. The United States became the centre of the Political West after 1945, while the Soviet Union headed its own bloc. Following the end of the Cold War in 1989, it was expected that the structures, practices and institutions associated with the Political West, particularly the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) established in 1949, would also disintegrate.<sup>1</sup> Neo-realists did not anticipate that this would usher in an era of positive peace, but rather believed that a more “normal” pattern of great power politics would be restored. The US would adopt classic patterns of “off-shore balancing,” intervening only when the global balance of power was at risk of being upset by the emergence of a peer competitor, while for the rest of the time pursuing its national interests.

However, the institutions and ideological practices of the Cold War were perpetuated. The Political West assumed the position of victor. Its practices and ideology have become more radicalised and expanded, claiming a universality that was absent when challenged by the Soviet adversary and its allies. The negative peace that characterises a cold war has been reproduced. The negative peace of the cold war type is not only the absence of war, in which conflict can be managed and constrained, but is imbued with a messianic and Manichean globalism that seeks not only to defeat but also to delegitimise the adversary. The ideology of the end of history fostered militancy, allowing the neoconservative ideology of American exceptionalism to merge with liberal humanitarian interventionism, creating a crusading spirit of democratism. Democratism involves subordinating pluralistic democratic norms to geopolitical considerations.<sup>2</sup> Positive peace practices are incompatible with hegemonism, which asserts not only the dominance but also the normative superiority of a particular power system.

For a short period, former adversaries collaborated within the framework of the norms established by the international system to reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. However, this unity was short-lived, and in the 1990s, Russia and the Political West found themselves in disagreement over various Balkan conflicts. Despite some cooperation, this was ultimately ruptured by NATO’s 78-day bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999. Controversies surrounding NATO’s enlargement to include former Soviet bloc countries, the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the placement of elements of Ballistic Missile Defence in Eastern Europe, the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, and other events have highlighted the growing divide between the Russia and the Political West. The onset of Cold War II in 2014 was caused by the perpetuation, and indeed radicalisation, of the Political West in conditions where Russia was unable or unwilling to become part of the negative peace order dominated by the Political West. This was followed soon after by hot war in Ukraine, which turned into a proxy war with the Political West in 2022.

However, this is balanced by the emergence of an alternative alignment and contrasting model of international politics. The emerging Eurasian political order, led

1 For example, Mearsheimer 1994/5; Waltz 2000.

2 Sakwa 2023.

by Russia and China, is a manifestation of the growing power of the “world majority.” Similar to the Cold War era, there is a group of nations that refuse to align themselves with any particular bloc. The Non-Aligned Movement, which was prominent during the first of Cold War, has resurfaced in a more assertive and active Global South. The Political West as the sole protagonist of history is being challenged as never before.

### **The Political West and the International System**

Humanity vowed to prevent the recurrence of a catastrophe like World War II, leading to the establishment of the UN. The Charter International System has since become increasingly complex. The UN Charter of 1945 was strengthened by the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention in 1948. The Security Council was created with a permanent membership of five leading powers was designed to compensate for the failure of the League of Nations in the interwar years. The UN is also home to about two dozen specialized agencies that deal with food, health, culture, and more. Together, all this has created an international system in whose framework international politics is practised. It provides the normative foundations for the conduct of international politics. The Charter system provides a baseline against which actions are judged, although states do not always strictly adhere to its precepts. The normative dimension of international politics is shaped by resolutions of the UN Security Council and the General Assembly, as there is no world government to ensure compliance. It is hard to quantify the weight of international public opinion, but its reference point is the values represented by the Charter system.

Idealists at the end of first Cold War dared to hope that the norms of the Charter International System and the practices of international politics would come into closer alignment. This would have allowed elements of a positive peace to emerge. Instead, as the years went by, the gulf widened. It is at the level of international politics that states contend and various political orders are created. In his work on world order Henry Kissinger notoriously failed to distinguish between system and order, a category mistake characteristic of much contemporary realist analysis.<sup>1</sup> For neorealists, it is precisely relations between states that creates an international order, neglecting the normative and institutional framework in which international affairs are conducted. This is something that classical realists understood. Thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kennan considered ideational and normative factors a core part of their analysis.<sup>2</sup> Many of the first generation of realists had escaped from Nazi Germany, and were thoroughly imbued with an understanding of the tragic dimension of international politics, where even states motivated by good intentions can pursue policies with evil consequences.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the international system and international politics there is the whole world of international political economy as well as the cosmos of international organisations and transnational civil society. The dynamic relations between these four levels constitute the entirety of contemporary international affairs.<sup>4</sup>

1 Kissinger 2014.

2 See Ross and Dawson 2022.

3 An issue explored by Lieven and Hulsman 2006; Lieven and Hulsman 2006. For a recent study, see Kaplan 2023.

4 For notable attempts to move towards such a synthesis, see Bull 1977/1995.

As the wartime alliance disintegrated after 1945, the Soviet Union created its bloc of communist states in Eastern Europe. After Mao Zedong came to power in 1949, Moscow allied itself with the People's Republic of China. On the other side, the Truman Doctrine, announced in March 1947, promised US support for democracies against authoritarian threats, and on that basis the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Programme), approved in April 1948, provided American support for Western Europe to rebuild its economies. The creation of NATO in 1949 was only the most vivid manifestation of the emergence of a US-led Political West to counter the Soviet threat. The Political West was created to fight a cold war against an ideological and geopolitical adversary, and developed a set of norms and institutions to do so. In the US the Political West gave rise to a "dual state," in which a "Trumanite" state was forged to fight the Cold War, based on a ramified military-industrial complex with 'deep state' connections with political, media and think tank elites. This enduring bipartisan constellation of cold war power endures, despite repeated changes of political leadership in the "Madisonian" state, the world of parties, elections and White House administrations.<sup>1</sup> This duality is then reflected in international politics, with the Political West analogous to the Trumanite state, embedded in the larger liberal international order – the world of free trade, the rule of law and liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> The double bottom in US domestic politics is reproduced in the form of an endemic tendency towards double standards in international affairs. When proclaimed norms collide with the realities of power, the latter usually wins.

The Political West saw the end of the Cold War as its singular victory. However, when Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, brought the Cold War to an end he appealed not to the values of the Political West but to the principles and norms of the Charter system. This was the core idea of the New Political Thinking that had matured in the late Soviet years. It represented not a capitulation to the West but an appeal to the universality of the Charter system. This is why his landmark speech to the UN in December 1988, effectively ending the Cold War, is so important. Rejecting the old Marxist-Leninist framework for the conduct of Soviet foreign policy, Gorbachev insisted that the formula of development "at the expense of others" was "becoming obsolete," stressing the importance of "freedom of choice" and the "de-ideologisation of inter-state relations" and their demilitarisation. He stressed the importance of "freedom of choice" and the "de-ideologisation of interstate relations" and their demilitarisation. He outlined a comprehensive agenda on which the new positive peace order should be based, defined as one going beyond the definition of peace as the absence of war. The positive peace proposal included strengthening the centrality of the UN, the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and a concern for environmental issues. The fundamental principles were pluralism, tolerance and cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

Returning to the mainstream of civilisation, as it was referred to at the time, did not entail joining the Political West, but rather the dominance of Charter principles,

1 Glennon 2015.

2 Ikenberry 2020.

3 "Gorbachev's Speech to the UN," Temple University, December 7, 1988, accessed December 12, 2023, [https://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/gorbachev\\_speech\\_to\\_UN.htm](https://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/gorbachev_speech_to_UN.htm).

which were deemed the heritage of all of humanity. It also entailed adaptation to the Civilisational West, ostensibly ending 300 years of ambivalence.<sup>1</sup> Russia would join as a nation progressing towards democracy and market economy, while upholding human rights and the rule of law. The Soviet Union, and later Russia, would no longer aimed to create an alternative modernity, but instead sought to benefit from Western civilization. Therefore, it was a fundamental category error to expect Moscow to accept anything that resembled defeat. This mistake had profound and catastrophic long-term consequences. Moscow viewed the end of the Cold War as a shared victory and a return to the founding ideals of the Charter system. It was also seen as an opportunity for international politics to move towards a more cooperative model to tackle common challenges such as environmental degradation and climate change. This was a powerful vision of a positive peace.

The Political West, instead, took advantage of the moment for its own purposes, perpetuating the negative peace characteristic of the Cold War. This is understandable, given that the ideals and institutions of the Political West had indeed triumphed. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved in February 1991 and the Soviet Union itself disintegrated in December of that year. Russia was recognised as the “continuer” state, assuming the prerogatives, treaty responsibilities and debts of the Soviet Union, but entered a period of intense political and economic trauma. Despite its evident weakness, Moscow insisted that it would remain a “co-creator” of post-Cold War international order. The only universalism that Moscow recognised was that of the Charter International System. Moscow insisted on the primacy of sovereign internationalism, the fundamental principle at the heart of the Charter system, whereas the US advanced its own model of hegemonic internationalism, in which all potential rivals would be deterred and contained.<sup>2</sup> The Political West’s claim of an exclusive victory effectively prolonged the Cold War and hindered the transformative potential of the moment.

Russia’s status concerns were reinforced by a growing perception of threat. Despite the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, NATO not only survived but set on the path to enlargement. The expansion had been repeatedly and explicitly rejected by numerous leaders of the Political West at the time of German unification in 1990.<sup>3</sup> When Boris Yeltsin realised that NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme of 1994 was not an alternative but an addition to enlargement, he warned that “the new Europe would be thrown back, if not to the Cold War, to a cold peace.”<sup>4</sup> There appeared to be “no place for Russia” in the new security system.<sup>5</sup> From Moscow’s perspective, the expansion of the institutions of the Political West (above all, NATO and the European Union), represented the continuation of the Cold War through different means.

Furthermore, Moscow perceived that the Political West had taken over the rights and privileges that were supposed to belong to the Charter system as a whole.<sup>6</sup> These concerns were compounded by the emergence of the concept of a “rules-based order,”

1 Neumann 2016.

2 For analysis of the principles underlying hegemonic internationalism, see Wertheim 2023.

3 Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, “NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard,” National Security Archive, George Washington University, December 12, 2017, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>. For an evaluation, see Sarotte 2022.

4 The speech is summarised by Andrei Kozyrev in Kozyrev 2019, 283. For his view, see Kozyrev 1995.

5 Hill 2018.

6 For analysis, see Dugard 2023.

which indicated the effective merger of the Political West with the liberal international order. The liberal international order that the US had sponsored after the war, with its economic institutions based on the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 and the security structures associated with the “Trumanite state”. This reinforced liberal hegemony – the view that there are no legitimate alternatives, and that the whole world would sooner or later become part of this system. The free trade regime, liberalisation of the international financial system from the 1970s, removal of restrictions on capital flows and much more was termed “globalisation,” and provided the framework for an unparalleled era of prosperity and global peace (although there were numerous regional wars). Alongside this, there was the idea of universalism, the view that democracy, human rights and liberal freedoms were universal public goods, and should be applied universally. Human rights in this period, indeed became “the last utopia.”<sup>1</sup> Hegemonic internationalism gave rise to the practice of democratic internationalism, in which proclaimed ethical norms were prioritised over national autonomy and sovereignty.

The Political West acted appropriately in vesting these norms in the Charter International System. In a normative perspective, the practices of democratic internationalism can be considered entirely justified. However, norm advancement was influenced by power considerations. Democratic internationalism undermined the fundamental international politics norm of the Charter system, sovereign internationalism. This idea combines the Westphalian concept of state sovereignty, including the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, with internationalism, a commitment to international law, human dignity and multilateral approaches to common challenges. Instead, the Political West advocated for democratic internationalism in which national sovereignty was subject to the projection of democratic and human rights norms, as determined by Political West’s leaders. As Cold War II intensified, the international settlement established after World War II began to unravel. The idea of “rules-based order” represented a direct challenge to the universalism and impartiality of the international law derived from the Charter system and the associated practices of sovereign internationalism.

### **Characteristics of the Political West**

After 1945 US policymakers realised that the overwhelming American power could be more effectively exercised if it was exercised through multilateral agencies.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the Political West is now home to a range of institutions, including what is now the European Union, as well as NATO, the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and much more, which are seen as expressions of American hegemony couched in universalistic terms. The US played a leading role in creating the United Nations, working alongside other wartime Allies, including the Soviet Union, China, Britain and France, as core founding members to shape the institution. Despite its ambivalence toward subordinating its sovereignty to an international institution, but liberal internationalism during Cold War helped to legitimise US hegemony and reinforce the norms of the liberal

1 Moyn 2012.

2 Wertheim 2020.



order at the heart of the Political West. After 1989, the tensions became more evident. Ultimately, the ambitions of liberal hegemony outpaced the resources and commitment available for their implementation. This resulted in a series of military engagements, most of which were damaging and ended in failure of one sort or another.

The West in general is not limited to the Political West, which is a specific and temporary version of it. Although the Political West is closely related to the recent manifestation of the 'rules-based order', it is not the same as the liberal international order (LIO).<sup>1</sup> The LIO is a combination of international law, liberal democracy and open trading, with roots dating back to the nineteenth century. However, it gained prominence after 1945 under the protection of US hegemony.<sup>2</sup> The rules-based order is a manifestation of the post-communist era, which was further radicalised geopolitically by the collapse of the Soviet alternative in 1989–1991. The Political West, on the other hand, is a geopolitical project by its very nature. It was created during the Cold War and after 1989, it aimed to maintain unipolarity to prevent any geopolitical, developmental or ideological alternative from challenging its dominance. The Political West is a distinctive feature in international politics. Critics denounce this power system as a new type of empire where power (dominium) is combined with hegemony, the voluntary submission of states to a subordinate position – referred to as bandwagoning in neorealist terminology. The Political West today consists of several components.

Firstly, this is an order with global ambitions. With the US at its core, the security system includes NATO as well as a US hub-and-spoke alliance network, including security treaties with Japan and South Korea, and defence commitments to Israel and numerous other states. This is supported by a network of approximately 800 military bases and installations worldwide, as well as battle fleets that patrol the high seas. American exceptionalism is often portrayed as America being an example to the rest of the world, the shining "city on the hill." However, when it is embedded in the Political West, it is expressed more as a missionary power, reproducing the earlier civilising mission of the Civilisational West. Woodrow Wilson, who originated this tradition, described it as "making the world safe for democracy." Liberalism gained a Cold War inflection, which caused it to lose some of its inherent characteristics of tolerance and pluralism. This return to a more nineteenth-century perspective tied liberalism to an imperial mission.

This results in a second characteristic, an inherent militarism. This is hardly surprising as NATO (a collective defence organisation established to protect against the Soviet threat) lies at its core. In the post-Cold War era, NATO conducted a bombing campaign in Serbia without UN authorisation. It was subsequently involved in prolonged campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, none of which achieved the intended objectives. After ensuring its survival by going "out of area," NATO returned its focus to Europe in 2014. Following the end of the Cold War, many European states reduced their defence spending to cash in on the "peace dividend," but this trend reversed after 2014. At NATO's Newport Summit in South Wales, the commitment to spend no

1 Dugard 2023.

2 Ikenberry 2020.



less than two per cent of GDP on defence was reaffirmed. In the US, defence spending had been increasing for some time, including Barack Obama's plans to modernise the country's nuclear forces. Militarism encompasses more than simply the proportion of budgets allocated to defence. The "Trumanite" state established in Cold War I represents a bipartisan security-centred "deep state" that persists despite shifts in international affairs. Despite changes in presidential and Congressional leadership, liberal hegemony remains. The foreign policy establishment's persistent militaristic character is attributed to "the Blob" reproducing itself over generations.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the US is to maintain global hegemony and primacy, whether it is referred to as 'leadership' in the more Democratic-oriented part of the establishment or "primacy" for the neoconservatives. President Donald J. Trump cast such delicacies to one side, and simply declared that American "greatness" would ensure that the US remained the number one state, achieved through trade wars and mercantile pre-eminence.

The third characteristic pertains to the ideology of Atlanticism. The Atlantic basin continues to be the core of the Political West, connecting the European Union and the US in a relationship that is not always harmonious but is long-lasting. Transatlanticism ultimately hinders the EU from achieving the "strategic autonomy" sought by its more Gaullist-minded member states. Efforts to establish an independent defence identity in Europe have been hindered, resulting in the outsourcing of security to NATO and the US. This has diminished the influence of traditional powers such as France, Germany, and Italy. While these countries engage in active diplomacy, their efforts lack significant impact on major issues, unless reinforced by Washington. This was the situation prior to the Ukrainian conflict. Both Berlin and Paris laudably tried to find a diplomatic path to avert the conflict, but their efforts were unsuccessful since the US, smarting from defeat in Afghanistan and the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021, was not willing to review Europe's post-Cold War security order. This decision was economically motivated, and as long as the US was willing to contribute the majority of defence expenditure, the European states could allocate their budgets to domestic needs. The price paid was the relative marginalisation of the European legacy powers.<sup>2</sup> Despite much talk in the 2010s of "strategic autonomy", the European Union as a whole was relegated to a subaltern role in international affairs.

This leads on to a fourth characteristic, the focus on maintaining bloc unity. Within the US and the alliance system a dense network of think tanks and allied mainstream media, often working in collusion with security agencies, ensures a remarkable homogeneity in thinking on national security issues. This internal hegemony has marginalised formerly critical groups, including peace movements, church-led pacifism and anti-militarism, and various left-wing movements calling for spending to be diverted from arms to development, including infrastructure modernisation. The communicative monopoly extends to domestic political life. The Labour Party leader in the UK, Keir Starmer, even went so far as to assert that opposition to NATO was incompatible with party membership, despite the fact that anti-war and peace associations have long been part of the hallowed tradition of the British labour movement. Starmer imposed

1 Walt 2019.

2 The UK is a special case, believing that close alignment with the US allowed it to exercise a degree of "special" influence with the hegemonic power.

Leninist-style discipline, transforming what had traditionally been a broad movement into an authoritarian party. Within the alliance as a whole, the curators of Atlanticism are eternally vigilant against any breaches in alliance discipline, and guard against any attempt by outsiders to drive “wedges” between the two wings of the alliance across the Atlantic. The result has been the disempowerment of the European allies.

Atlanticism is always watchful for external powers attempting to create division between its two wings. This explains why the idea of pan-continental European unity, dubbed the Gaullist “heresy,” is strongly condemned. This ultimately prevented Russia from joining the Political West after the Cold War. Its inclusion would inevitably have diluted Atlantic ties, altered its hierarchy of power, and added a pan-continental European dimension that would have eroded the centrality of Washington. Russia would not have joined as a subaltern, but unity on the basis of sovereign equality was not something that Washington was ready to consider. This pattern is now being repeated globally in relations with China.

The fifth characteristic is the delegitimization of dialogue and the weakening, if not elimination, of diplomacy. According to this perspective, engaging in dialogue with an adversary confers an undeserved legitimacy upon them. By this logic, any diplomacy becomes impossible. If dialogue is equated with appeasement, then in this Manichean world, the only alternative is the defeat of the opponent, in the communicative sphere but ultimately, if necessary, on the battlefield. The communicative blockade arises from the ideology of the end of history. If the only legitimate alternative form of modernity or development is the one advanced by the Political West, then it becomes the responsibility of the West to expand its sphere on interests. This leads to the establishment of a global Monroe Doctrine, a universalism does not tolerate any islands of particularism. The logic is impeccable, and logically leads to the revival of cold war as a political strategy. This is reinforced by democratic peace theory, the view that liberal democracies do not go to war with each other.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, having more democracies can lead to increased security for the Political West. This means that the sovereign internationalism at the heart of the Charter International System is displaced by democratic internationalism, and its associated practices of democratism.<sup>2</sup> The expansive dynamic tolerates no resistance, generating conflict and war. If politics is governed by an ineluctable dialectic of development, then there is little room for political dialogism, in which both parties change as a result of interaction – in other words, diplomacy.

This opens the door to a sixth feature, the systemic application of double standards, a systemic feature of the order represented by the Political West. It is common for human rights and democratic inadequacies of allies of the Political West to be ignored while the failings of adversaries are targeted for criticism and, in extremis, regime change operations.<sup>3</sup> According to a critic of Israel's bombing of Gaza in autumn 2023, “the heaviest bombing campaign since the Second World War,” it is “misguided to view any of this as a failing of the American-led liberal order: it is the American-led liberal order, working as it was always intended to work. Morality is only cited to punish

1 Doyle 2012.

2 Finley 2022.

3 Headley 2015.

America's enemies: when it's America's allies whose actions disgust the world, nuances and diplomatic cover can always be found."<sup>1</sup>

The use of this dual approach to the conduct of international affairs undermines the autonomy of the UN Security Council and the Charter system as a whole. These have increasingly become an instrument for the waging struggles against adversaries rather than a forum for their adjudication. The erosion of the supremacy of Charter internationalism, which is based on diplomacy and dialogue within the framework of sovereign internationalism and multipolarity, allows a subset of states (the "rules-based order") to claim certain exclusive privileges in the determination of when and how Charter norms should be applied. The unipolarity that predominated in the 1990s has evidently eroded, yet the practices of hegemonic internationalism remain.

There are numerous other elements, including in recent years the weaponisation of the economic instruments of coercion, in the form of sanctions and other punitive measures falling short of kinetic conflict. This has led to a denial of political space for alternatives in international politics, which in turn has resulted in a growing intolerance of dissent at home. As a consequence, there have been populist and other upsurges, since conventional forms of political representation are blocked. The political stagnation at the elite level is mirrored by the rise of insurgencies from below, a dynamic that is ultimately both debilitating and destabilising for the Political West itself. All this adds up to the Political West becoming increasingly hermetic, closed to the concerns of others and, indeed, condemning intrusions from outside the "golden circle." In Greek mythology, Hermes is not only the god of communicators but also of deception. In contemporary conditions, sovereign internationalism generates dialogue and diplomacy, while hegemonic internationalism creates a hierarchical, exclusive, and tutelary approach.

### Multiple Wests and the Political East

Russian politicians and commentators often refer to of the "Collective West," to denote much the same concept as the Political West. However, this term can be misleading as it implies a homogeneity that does not exist. The pluralism of the West is due to the existence of multiple Wests. The Civilisational West took shape around 500 years ago during exploration and the establishment of global trading networks. This is the West of the age of imperialism and colonialism in which the "standard of civilisation" set by the West was imposed on supposedly "lesser" developed peoples. The Political West has replicated this civilisational dimension in its advocacy of a universal Western-centred regime of democracy and human rights. However, the Civilisational West is also the West that saw the flourishing of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, which provided the material basis for the standard of civilisation to be asserted globally.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there is a "deep" West, the Cultural West with its roots in antiquity and which today continues to produce art and science of universal significance. Russia is considered to be a part of the Cultural

1 Aris Roussinos, "The Post-America War Has Begun," UnHerd, 10 November 2023, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://unherd.com/2023/11/israel-could-collapse-the-american-empire/>.

2 Anderson 2023.

West has made significant contributions to it over the last millennium. However, its relationship with the Civilisational West has always been ambivalent, and with the Political West it has become outrightly adversarial.

The three Wests have combined to create a dynamic and expansive form of modernity, but one that is also torn by contradictions. Although much of this modernity is attractive to the rest of the world, there is notable ambivalence. The representation of the Political West as the end of history and as the universal model of modernity raised the question of whether there is one modernity or many in as sharp a form as ever before.<sup>1</sup> Russia has always had an ambivalent relationship with Western modernity, despite repeated attempts to emulate the civilisational West. As a European power, Russia draws deeply on its cultural legacy and model of modernity. Therefore, the political contradictions can be considered contingent and thus susceptible to resolution. Some geopolitical strategists in Washington hope for alignment with Moscow against the more intractable foe, China. In cultural terms China, India and many other states stand as equals with Western culture. However, in terms of civilization, countries like India endured centuries of colonialism at the hands of the West. World Majority states increasingly resist the global pretensions of the Political West. For them, the only legitimate political universalism is generated by the UN and the broader international system that it has generated. Everything else smacks of an illegitimate attempt to substitute a part – the Political West – for the whole, the Charter international system. From this perspective, the “end of history” ideology is not only misguided but also damaging.

The encroachment of the Political West on the international system is facing growing opposition and has led to a nascent Political East. At its core is the Sino-Russian alignment, along with the states committed to safeguarding their sovereignty and autonomy. This was evident, for example, at the Bali summit of the G20 (Group of Twenty) states in November 2022. The majority resisted the attempt by the G7 (Group of Seven advanced liberal states), which is increasingly perceived as the steering committee of the Political West, to impose its concerns. The final communiqué condemned the war in Ukraine, but acknowledged that “There were other views and different assessments of the situation and sanctions” and called for “diplomacy and dialogue.”<sup>2</sup>

Cold War II is a global conflict by nature. If Cold War I was primarily focused on Europe with global implications, Cold War II is the opposite. In Cold War I conflict was static in Europe but dynamic in the rest of the world, but today the conflict is dynamic in Europe and relatively static elsewhere. Cold War Europe was divided by an Iron Curtain in which spheres of influence were respected. Today, the very idea of a sphere of influence outside of the Political West is considered illegitimate, a logical consequence of the universalist pretensions of liberal hegemony. However, the Global South resists this logic, and above all refuses to be drawn once again into the endemic civil wars fought in the Global North. This stance is shared by many countries in the Global South, leading to the formation of various anti-hegemonic alliances such as the Shanghai

1 For analysis of the concept, see Eisenstadt 2000; Eisenstadt 2002.

2 “G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration,” G20, Indonesia, November 15–16, 2022, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://web.kominfo.go.id/sites/default/files/G20%20Bali%20Leaders%27%20Declaration%2C%2015-16%20November%202022%2C%20incl%20Annex.pdf>.

Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS alignment of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. These alliances will be joined by five new members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Abu Dhabi, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) from 1 January 2024. Additionally, there is a growing network of post-Western economic associations and processes.

The Political East is not merely the antithesis of the Political West, but rather represents an entirely different logic. It is not so much anti-Western as a manifestation of counter-hegemonic resistance to the ambitions of the Political West. Most importantly, it rejects the connotations of civilisational superiority represented by the Civilisational West. The Political East is part of an asymmetrical set of post-Western institutions and processes. Its fundamental principles operate according to a very different logic, drawing on the view that some sort of positive peace order based on the norms and practices of the Charter system is attainable. Instead of militarism, for example, the emphasis is on peace and development. While the Political West, in keeping with its Cold War origins, is defined by the rationality of bloc dynamics, the Political East is based more on a network logic. Above all, the Political East rejects the hegemonic ambitions of the core powers of the Political West. The rejection of the logic of the Cold War provides a framework for more flexible and contingent relationships between the countries of the Global South. The goal is to achieve modernity free from the hegemony of the Political West. This helps explain why the language of anti-colonialism has been resurrected and has a deep resonance in Africa and Asia. Russia seeks to exploit this sentiment by presenting itself as an anti-colonial power, drawing on the legacy of the Soviet Union in supporting Third World liberation movements. Russia's stance as an anti-colonial power is ambiguous and contradictory, given its own imperial past. For China, overcoming the "century of humiliation" remains a potent political resource, buttressing the Communist Party of China's developmental and political agenda. For all, recognition of distinctive cultures and traditions, tempered by the normative demands of the Charter international system, provides the framework for shaping a positive peace agenda.

This nascent alignment of states challenges the Political West's hegemonic claims but above all defends the autonomy of the Charter system. This is the central theme of the final statements and communiqués of the SCO, BRICS, ASEAN and many more. It was firmly asserted in the Joint Statement of Russia and China on 4 February 2022, on the eve of the Ukrainian military conflict. The Statement condemned the attempt by "certain states" to impose their "democratic standards," opposed "further NATO enlargement" and called on the alliance to "abandon its ideologised Cold War approaches." The statement reaffirmed the centrality of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as "fundamental principles, which all states must comply with and observe in deeds."<sup>1</sup>

The alternative political association is not simply a response to the Political West's expansive ambitions but rather a reflection of the maturation of the global state system and the shifting balance of economic power to the East. The world today the world is populated by approximately 200 states, with 193 of them being members

<sup>1</sup> "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," President of Russia official website, February 4, 2022, accessed December 12, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

of the UN. The era when the Civilisational West could teach the rest of the world how to live has long passed, and respectful mutual interactions are now demanded. The age of empire is over, and the West is now facing the legacies of the earlier era, accompanied by deepening internal contradictions. The fundamental assumption is that modernity is multiple, and that international politics should be multipolar and plural. Liberal pluralism is defended against the claims of liberal anti-pluralism.<sup>1</sup> In political economy, the benefits of globalisation were appropriated by a narrow beneficiary class, leading to widening inequality and growing demands for social justice. The absence of a coherent ideology to express these aspirations encouraged national populist movements. The Trumpian irruption and Brexit identified the problem, but provided inchoate and incoherent responses. The Political West is currently plagued by self-doubt, inadequate leadership, and a lack of a positive vision for the future. This highlights the stark contrast of its expansive aspirations. Despite deepening domestic contradictions and polarised political orders, ambitious foreign policy agendas have not been tempered and may have even been intensified – if the “diversionary” theory of international politics holds true.

It is in this context, an increasingly formalised Political East is emerging, not only to counter the expansive claims of the Political West but also to offer alternative models of social and political development. Similar to the Political West, the Political East can be disaggregated into its cultural, civilisational, and political components. However, the Political East is a more nebulous formation, drawing on widely disparate cultures. There are numerous civilisations, notably the Sino-centric ones and those based in the Indus Valley. There was considerable cross-fertilisation between the two, but they pursued divergent political trajectories. The result is a “multiplex” world rather than one dominated by the hegemonic West.<sup>2</sup> Chinese views on world order modify traditional interpretations of hegemony and international legitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

The post-Cold War era has come to an end, and international politics is once again assuming multipolar features. The Ukrainian conflict acted as a catalyst, exposing some of the long-term trends that are now maturing. The expansive ambitions of the Political West are being countered by the emergence of a Political East, although the latter has very different characteristics. Countries in the Global South resist being pulled into cold-war style proxy conflicts and opt against choosing sides, instead advocating for to universal principles outlined in the Charter.

The emergence of an alternative to the Political West represents a fundamental transformation of international politics, and reflects the emergence of genuine multipolarity. On the formal level, the Political East embodies a nascent post-Western, anti-hegemonic alignment; however, its “revisionism” is largely confined to great power contestation within the international political arena. On the plane of the Charter system, the Political East adopts a profoundly conservative stance, upholding the postwar

1 Simpson 2001.

2 Acharya 2017; Acharya 2018.

3 Caro 2023.



status quo anchored in the sovereign internationalism enshrined in the Charter system. The democratic internationalism of the Political West, by contrast, is revolutionary to the degree that it seeks to mould the world in its image. When it encounters resistance, the practices of the Cold War are regenerated. Nevertheless, the West is not a monolithic entity; the three dimensions identified in this paper interact to foster new forms of reflexivity, renewal, and change. Both the Political West and the Political East remain formally committed to the postwar Charter principles. However, escalating hostilities at the international level are posing unprecedented challenges to the Charter system. Without its restraining norms and institutional constraints, international politics will make Cold War II far more dangerous than the first. In the nuclear age and in the face of a climate catastrophe, the fate of humanity hangs in the balance.

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# Политический Запад как конец истории

## АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассматривается устойчивое влияние политического Запада – структуры власти, возникшей в эпоху холодной войны и продолжающей формировать международные отношения сегодня. Вопреки ожиданиям его самороспуска после распада Советского Союза, политический Запад расширил свое влияние, движимый верой в идеологическое превосходство либеральной демократии. Эта экспансия, подпитываемая представлениями о «конце истории», привела к сохранению динамики холодной войны, характеризующейся враждебными отношениями и идеологическими конфликтами. В исследовании противопоставляются ожидания позитивного мира в эпоху после окончания холодной войны и реальность продолжающегося антагонизма, примером которого являются такие конфликты, как Балканские войны и интервенции НАТО в Ираке и Ливии. Кульминацией обострения напряженности стало начало второй холодной войны в 2014 г., ознаменовавшееся прокси-конфликтами и, в частности, украинским кризисом 2022 г. В ответ на напористость западного политического блока возникло альтернативное объединение во главе с Россией и Китаем, бросившее вызов одностороннему доминированию западных держав. Этот политический Восток, хотя и воплощает антигегемонистские настроения, сохраняет консервативную позицию в рамках международной системы Устава ООН. В заключение в статье подчеркивается фундаментальная трансформация международной политики в многополярный ландшафт. Хотя и политический Запад, и Восток продолжают поддерживать принципы Устава ООН, интенсификация военных действий чревата дестабилизацией международного порядка. В условиях непрекращающейся динамики холодной войны и вызовов, связанных с глобальными изменениями окружающей среды, будущее человечества становится все более неопределенным.

## КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

*политический Запад, холодная война, Россия, Китай, политический Восток, международная система, Устав ООН*

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