Peace in an authoritarian international order versus peace in the liberal international order

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There may well be a correlation between the recent increase in war and displacement and the retreat of peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding as effective tools since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. There certainly is a strong correlation between the weakening of the liberal international order (LIO) and the retreat of peacemaking and peacekeeping since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. The retreat of the West and the rise of competing bloc interests are connected to the rapid increase in violence around the world. Peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding tools had already seen a weakening of their success rate by the end of the 1990s.[1] Indeed, the LIO and related liberal/democratic peace theories have long been separated from their supposed Kantian and internationalist underpinnings. At best, the victor's peace of the postwar and post-Cold War international order has underpinned the LIO and the subsequent liberal peace framework, leading to a pattern of stalemated peace impasses.[2]

Throughout history, the victor's peace model has hinged upon top-down political reconstruction through diplomatic, political, economic, legal and social means after a war had been won. In short, this has meant that postwar legitimacy would depend on victory being accepted by the vanquished and that any subsequent reshaping of order would remain legitimate among subject elites and societies in the long term. The question of legitimacy for any victor's peace order has always been its historical 'Achilles heel' both in terms of its top-down nature and its mismatch with conflict-affected societies. It has produced a gap between power and legitimate authority which ultimately distances peace from justice. These problems have driven resurgent geopolitics at the structural level of international order as well as undermining many regional and local peace processes around the world. Peacemaking has gone into reverse where pronounced linkages have

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[*] Thanks to Sandra Pogodda, Roland Paris, Andrew Williams and Gëzim Visoka, and two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. Thanks also to an audience at the Kim Dae-jung Nobel Institute, Mokpo, South Korea, 5 Nov. 2024.

[1] Timothy D. Sisk, 'Peacemaking in civil wars', in Ulrich Schneckener and Stefan Wolff, eds, *Managing and settling ethnic conflicts: perspectives on successes and failures in Europe, Africa, and Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 248–70.

[2] Oliver P. Richmond, *The transformation of peace* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

International Affairs **000**: 0 (2025) 000–000; DOI: 10.1093/ia/iiaf076

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re-emerged between nationalist, sectarian, neo-liberal, authoritarian and geopolitical rationalities.[3]

These morbidities in international order are widespread, as with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent retrenchment in Kashmir,[4] the civil war in Syria, the war in Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin's revisionist geopolitical philosophy.[5] President Xi Jinping of China recently outlined new rules of 'neutrality' for a post-western order in relation to the Russian war on Ukraine. They imply conservative perspectives of peace that rest on internal or hegemonic victory, the containment of war and international neutrality: 'We must adhere to the three principles of no spillover from the battlefield, no escalation of fighting and no adding oil to the fire by relevant parties.'[6] The implications of these rules are on display across the Middle East in the tensions and contradictions between different multipolar factions over the war in Gaza. More broadly, they are present to an extent not seen since the height of the Cold War or even, in some respects, since the 1930s.[7] Underlying many of these recent developments are the failures of the liberal peace, of the foreign policy of the United States since 9/11 and of the latter's subsequent conduct in the Iraq War.

The victor's peace reproduces the balance-of-power models of earlier eras. Its epistemologies and methodologies of peace follow a realist ontology of fundamental and eternal enmity and shifting power relations. Local and regional forms of victor's peace thus tend to be ordered according to a number of key elements: firstly, the interests and capacity of regional and domestic military forces; secondly, the exercise of the means of violence by geopolitical and authoritarian actors; and, overall, by complex power relations. Such dynamics tend in practice to lead to the rejection of human rights, democracy, the rule of law and pluralism. The main issues in this context are how to preserve global trade and mitigate or evade sanctions, while war and violence are normalized. In Syria, for example, Russia backed the authoritarian rule of President Bashar al-Assad according to Putin's geopolitical preferences and his reading of prevailing Syrian domestic power relations.[8]

This article illustrates how such dynamics have supported the expansion and validation of authoritarian interests and regional geopolitics, forming a wider international pattern.[9] This dynamic can be described as an embryonic 'authoritarian international order' (AIO).[10] As a consequence, widespread stalemated peace patterns have begun to break down in the increasingly multipolar environment.[11] This has called into question the viability of the structure of the LIO and the liberal peace (based on the broader post-Cold War victor's peace that came into being briefly after 1990, supporting international cooperation, rights, democracy, development, the rule of law and free trade). Given the propensity towards 'Cold War liberalism',[12] neo-liberalism, militarism and their post-9/11 convergence on global counter-insurgency stabilization strategies, the LIO and the liberal peace model are difficult to defend (although their Kantian aspects are perhaps more viable as critical enterprises). Their shift into neo-liberalism and stabilization thinking in the 2000s forms a bridge between the LIO and the emergence of the AIO, but the question is whether this indicates a rejection of critique or future potential for post-liberal innovation.[13]

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[3] Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, 'The liberal peace fallacy: violent neoliberalism and the temporal and spatial traps of state-based approaches to peace', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8: 1, 2018, pp. 100–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1550012.

[4] Anuradha Bhasin, 'Kashmir, five years on', *Foreign Policy*, 19 Sept. 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/19/india-kashmir-pakistan-china-narendra-modi-terrorism. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 March 2025.)

[5] See David G. Lewis, *Russia's new authoritarianism: Putin and the politics of order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[6] Cited in Aliide Naylor, 'UN chief Guterres arrives at BRICS summit amid outcry over talks with Putin', *The Times*, 23 Oct. 2024, https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/un-chief-guterres-arrives-at-brics-summit-for-talks-with-putin-dbfnkpxrh.

[7] 'A UN vote on Palestine underlines America's weakening clout', *The Economist*, 18 Sept. 2024, https://www.economist.com/international/2024/09/18/a-un-vote-on-palestine-underlines-americas-weakening-clout.

[8] Burcu Ozcelik, 'Explaining the diplomatic rush to normalise Syria's Assad', RUSI Commentary, 6 Aug. 2024, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/explaining-diplomatic-rush-normalise-syrias-assad.

The theoretical framework of the LIO versus an AIO examined in this paper is an illustrative schematic used to address the question of which of the two is more significant for peace praxes' alignment with scientific knowledge in a post-liberal era. Does peacemaking still follow power, as has often been assumed with dominance of the concept of the 'victor's peace', or is it now more informed by scholarship, data and a deeper, scientific understanding of international order? This is significant to aid our understanding of how to maintain a non-violent international order, and, relatedly, of how to improve the essential tools for the preservation of that order. In some senses it may represent a hard and exclusive conceptual and methodological binary. It also raises the issue of how to bridge the LIO and AIO—if indeed this is possible—with peacemaking tools, and whether potential outcomes of such a convergence may offer any emancipatory potential, given that critical, transnational, transversal and emancipatory debates continue

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[9] Samer Abboud, 'Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace', *Peacebuilding* 9: 3, 2021, pp. 326–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2021.1895609.

[10] This is also connected to an emerging alliance including Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. Luke McGee, 'Trump may not understand how dangerous the world is now', *Foreign Policy*, 20 Nov. 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/20/trump-autocracies-russia-northkorea-ukraine. Some of the key articles contributing to this line of thought have been published in *International Affairs*, though so far there has been little critical analysis published in the same journal. See for example, Toby Dodge, 'State and society in Iraq ten years after regime change: the rise of a new authoritarianism', *International Affairs* 89: 2, 2013, pp. 247–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12016; G. John Ikenberry, 'Three Worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order', *International Affairs* 100: 1, 2024, pp. 121–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad284; David Lewis, 'Contesting liberal peace: Russia's emerging model of conflict management', *International Affairs* 98: 2, 2022, pp. 653–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab221; Şahan Savaş Karataslı, 'Hegemonic world orders, distributional (in)justice and global social change', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 23–39, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac312; Amitav Acharya, 'After liberal hegemony: the advent of a multiplex world order', *Ethics & International Affairs* 31: 3, 2017, pp. 271–85, https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X.

[11] On 'stalemated peace models' see Oliver P. Richmond, 'A prelude to revisionism? The stalemated peace model and the emergence of multipolarity in international order', *Contemporary Security Policy* 46: 2, 2025, pp. 197–225, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2437928.

[12] Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against itself: Cold War intellectuals and the making of our times* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

[13] See, for an early attempt to theorise beyond the liberal peace, Oliver P. Richmond, *A post-liberal peace* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011); David Chandler and Oliver P. Richmond, 'Contesting postliberalism: governmentality or emancipation?', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 18, 2015, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2014.5.

across global civil society and the global academy, as well as within states and institutions.[14] It helps to clarify some of the dynamics of the current and predominant pattern of juxtaposed global hegemonic forces that are competing over the control of the international system, as well as over its ideological nature.[15]

The article briefly outlines the AIO and its multipolar system. Then it explores what this may mean for peacemaking tools and practices, the ongoing challenges to liberal peacemaking and the related LIO, and, finally, for the goal of developing innovations which might lead to a more emancipatory praxis of peacemaking.[16] It deploys a critical–inductive mode of analysis, which draws on the theoretical and policy literature related to the pros and cons of the LIO's evolution and the emergence of alternative peacemaking frameworks associated with China, Russia, BRICS Plus[17] and other actors. It also draws on interviews, research and workshops conducted in, around and beyond the United Nations system.[18] These include contact with civil society networks, politicians, policy analysts, staff of international non-governmental organizations, UN staff and academics outside the western core academies.

A failing peace system

Recent and ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Gaza appear to be impervious to peacemaking, even where they have been the target of longstanding efforts. In many of these cases peacemaking has been rejected or defanged by its recipients—social and civil actors as well as elite actors—on the grounds that 'liberal peace' represents western-centric approaches, interests and outcomes. Either it—and the related LIO—may be a camouflage for northern-centric power politics, or any ugly compromise it brings may mainly benefit the aggressors. In addition, liberal forms of peacemaking inevitably challenge elite power, meaning that progress in peace processes is either glacial or absent entirely (as has been the case in the Balkans since 1995 and Cyprus since 1964)[19] and therefore there are few incentives left in a multipolar order to maintain a weak stalemate or a lengthy peace process. A lack of global North commitment or political will

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[14] See for example, United Nations Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, *A new agenda for peace*, Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 9 (New York: UN, 2023), https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace.

[15] See for example, Lewis, 'Contesting liberal peace'; David Lewis, John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran, 'Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management', *Conflict and Cooperation* 53: 4, 2018, pp. 486–506, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718765902.

[16] Oliver P. Richmond, 'What is an emancipatory peace?', *Journal of International Political Theory* 18: 2, 2022, pp. 124–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/17550882211036560; Teresa Whitfield, ed., *Still time to talk: adaptation and innovation in peace mediation*, Accord 30 (London: Conciliation Resources, 2024), https://www.c-r.org/accord/still-time-to-talk.

[17] The BRICS group of countries comprised Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa to 2024, then extended to 'BRICS Plus' with the accession of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

[18] These research activities have included a workshop at Koç University, İstanbul, Turkey, in May 2022, another workshop at Near East University, Lefkoşa, Cyprus, in July 2023, and another at the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, New York, in April 2023; meetings in İstanbul at the Turkish Academy of Sciences in June 2024; and interviews in Nepal with various international and domestic peace actors in July 2024.

[19] Derek Chollet, *The road to the Dayton Accords: a study of American statecraft* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Harry Anastasiou, *The broken olive branch: nationalism, ethnic conflict and the quest for peace in Cyprus, Vol. One: The impasse of ethnonationalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

(in other words, hypocrisy when doctrine, law and norms are measured against actions)[20] means that extended and failed processes have led to fragile stalemates or unimplemented agreements that are prone to collapsing.

Peacemaking during and after new rounds of violence now seems delegitimated to the extent that the resultant 'peace' is, in a Keynesian sense,[21] associated with victory, implicit domination, injustice or de facto losses, as after the First World War. This is an implausible foundation upon which to negotiate (as in Ukraine, where peacemaking is widely contested because Russia has demanded the acceptance of Ukraine's territorial losses and a rejection of NATO membership for eternity before peace talks can begin properly).[22] Similarly, peacemaking involving terrorist or non-state actors has been extremely difficult since 9/11 because of the problem of authorization and recognition that involvement in any political process seems to enable for a wide range of non-state actors.[23] Even before 9/11 there was always a recognition problem for various actors in many peace processes, from Cyprus to Kosovo.[24]

Peace praxis reconstituted itself after the Cold War into liberal peacebuilding aimed at maintaining the LIO. This evolution was supposed to represent a comprehensive synergy of the scholarship and practices that had emerged since the formation of the state system itself.[25] Its apogee was probably between the cases of Bosnia-Herzegovina (after the Dayton Agreement reached in 1995) and the Kosovo and Timor-Leste interventions in 1999 (on the part of NATO and the UN, respectively).[26] Since the end of the brief 'liberal' phase of the post-Cold War order[27] (the period between the US-led intervention in Kosovo and the invasion of Iraq, when the statebuilding model emerged)[28] the focus has been on how to fit 'resilient' local or community agency[29]—which the structure of global capital and digital technology claims it supports[30]—into international counter-insurgency and stabilization regimes.[31]

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[20] George Lawson and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Recognizing injustice: the "hypocrisy charge" and the future of the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 201–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac258.

[21] John Maynard Keynes, *The economic consequences of the peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

[22] Peter Dickinson, 'Putin's 2022 "peace proposal" was a blueprint for the destruction of Ukraine', *Atlantic Council*, 5 Nov. 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-2022-peace-proposal-was-a-blueprint-for-the-destruction-of-ukraine/.

[23] Comments by Jonathan Powell at a Chatham House panel on peacemaking: 'What is to gain from peacemaking?', London, 9 July 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/open-event/what-gain-peacemaking.

[24] Gëzim Visoka, 'Statehood and recognition in world politics: towards a critical research agenda', *Cooperation and Conflict* 57: 2, 2022, pp. 133–51, https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367211007876.

[25] Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of war and peace: realism, liberalism, and socialism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); Roland Paris, *At war's end: building peace after civil conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Oliver P. Richmond, *The grand design: the evolution of the international peace architecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[26] Roberto Belloni, *The rise and fall of peacebuilding in the Balkans* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Gëzim Visoka, *Shaping peace in Kosovo: the politics of peacebuilding and statehood* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); David Chandler, *Peacebuilding: the twenty years' crisis, 1997–2017* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[27] Roland Paris, 'Saving liberal peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies* 36: 2, 2010, pp. 337–65, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000057.

[28] David Chandler, *International statebuilding: the rise of post-liberal governance* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010): Oliver P. Richmond, *Failed statebuilding: intervention, the state, and the dynamics of peace formation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

[29] David Chandler, 'Beyond neoliberalism: resilience, the new art of governing complexity', *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* 2: 1, 2014, pp. 47–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2013.878544.

Such problems indicate that peacemaking, as it is currently constituted, is implausible at an ontological (i.e., a deep structural) level, reflected in epistemology and methodology (meaning conceptual and theoretical frameworks), as well as practice. At best, it is subservient to power politics (meaning a victor's peace). Even if current forms of peacemaking escape such traps, they tend to be subservient to Eurocentrism and neo-liberalism, meaning for example that peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding have been dominated by opaque western interests and subservient to resource deficits. This explains why peace in local, institutional and global frameworks has been hollowed out and reversed. Much of this process presaged the recent re-emergence of multipolarity (as with statebuilding after the Iraq invasion of 2003). Together, such dynamics have contributed to competition between the AIO and the LIO over the nature of political order.

This competition has pitted a failing LIO against a burgeoning set of peace blockages and counter-peace strategies.[32] The authoritarian challenge[33] favours conflict-management approaches including war, invasion, partition and forced displacement as a prelude to a developmental statebuilding model. Some of the AIO's adherents argue that they are non-aligned and remain internationalists, and their preferred alternative international system would support equality and non-intervention among states. They reject western hegemony and double standards within the LIO.[34] However, there are also double standards and blind spots at play in this response to the LIO which favours autocratic leaders and systems, and tends to reject the rationality of global cooperation and human rights. It eliminates checks and balances and undermines international norms through disinformation.[35] It has muddied the potential of peacemaking in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and other recently recurring wars. The underlying Schmidtian rejection of legal and normative constraints on state power supports a geopolitically driven international order rather than a democratic or liberal peace, or indeed a more advanced, pluralist or pluriversal evolution.[36] Subsequent

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[30] Andreas Timo Hirblinger et al., 'Digital peacebuilding: a framework for critical–reflexive engagement', *International Studies Perspectives* 24: 3, 2023, pp. 265–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekac015; Oliver P. Richmond, Gëzim Visoka and Ioannis Tellidis, *Peace in digital international relations: prospects and limitations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[31] Roberto Belloni and Irene Costantini, 'From liberal statebuilding to counterinsurgency and stabilization: the international intervention in Iraq', *Ethnopolitics* 18: 5, 2019, pp. 509–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.1640964.

[32] See, for example, Sandra Pogodda, Oliver P. Richmond and Gëzim Visoka, *Failed peacemaking: counter-peace and international order* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

[33] Matthew Draper and Stephan Haggard, 'The authoritarian challenge: liberal thinking on autocracy and international relations, 1930–45', *International Theory* 15: 2, 2023, pp. 208–33, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971922000136.

[34] Thanks to Gëzim Visoka for this clarification. See also Ravi Agrawal, 'A new South African foreign policy?', *Foreign Policy*, 26 Sept. 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/live/ronald-lamola-south-africa-foreign-policy.

[35] Draper and Haggard, 'The authoritarian challenge', p. 209. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral man and immoral society: a study in ethics and politics* (first publ. in 1932) and *The children of light and the children of darkness: a vindication of democracy and a critique of its traditional defense* (first publ. in 1944), in Elisabeth Sifton, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: major works on religion and politics* (New York: Library of America, 2015).

[36] Draper and Haggard, 'The authoritarian challenge', pp. 209–10 and p. 217; Hartmut Behr and Giorgio Shani, 'Rethinking emancipation in a critical IR: normativity, cosmology, and pluriversal dialogue', *Millennium:*

'authoritarian turns', the re-emergence of neutrality and the undermining of civil society are closely related to the return of war and violence as a political tool (as was observed during the post-Wilsonian interwar period).[37]

The authoritarian international order and its multipolar peace system

The search for potential spaces for emancipatory developments in peacemaking in the light of the serious constraints and blockages to the existing system has driven doctrinal and institutional development, relevant to the European Union's European Neighbourhood Policy and the UN system, as well as other regional organizations.[38] There have also been parallel developments among the expanding BRICS network as a revisionist grouping,[39] as well as multipolar alternatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,[40] the African Union[41] and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations,[42] which bridge both the LIO and the AIO. At the elite level these may increasingly tilt towards the AIO. There are some key questions—beyond security interests—that apply to both the LIO and the AIO. Which of them supports the expansion of rights, democracy, civil society and social movements, and their claims or challenges against inequitable power? Which has the capacity to deal with global justice claims (meaning historical, distributive, gender, security, discriminatory and environmental injustices associated with war, as well as with the structure of postwar political systems) and sustainability issues? It seems self-evident that liberal peace models and practices offer some prospect for further development along these lines,[43] even if they did not go far enough or quickly enough, but it is far from evident that the AIO offers a viable alternative. The AIO is inherently statist (whereas the LIO is more pluralist),[44] and both, albeit to different degrees, are geopolitically oriented towards regional and global hegemony.

The AIO is dominated by autocratic, authoritarian, unstable and fragile states, with substantial democratic deficits and limited regional organization. It tends to

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Journal of International Studies 49: 2, 2021, pp. 368–91, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298211031983.

[37] Draper and Haggard, 'The authoritarian challenge', p. 220.

[38] United Nations, *Peacebuilding and sustaining peace: report of the Secretary-General*, A/72/707–S/2018/43, 2018, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1468106; Robert Basedow, 'The WTO and the rise of plurilateralism—what lessons can we learn from the European Union's experience with differentiated integration?', *Journal of International Economic Law* 21: 2, 2018, pp. 411–31, https://doi.org/10.1093/jiel/jgy020.

[39] Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, 'The new age of hybridity and clash of norms: China, BRICS, and challenges of global governance in a postliberal international order', *Alternatives* 45: 3, 2020, pp. 123–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375420921086.

[40] See Lars Erslev Andersen, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: a forum where China works for a multilateral order in Central Asia', Danish Institute for International Studies, 2022, https://www.diis.dk/en/research/shanghai-cooperation-organisation.

[41] Siphamandla Zondi, 'African Union approaches to peacebuilding: efforts at shifting the continent towards decolonial peace', *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 17: 1, 2017, pp. 105–31, https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/view/160586.

[42] Tom Ginsburg, 'Eastphalia as the perfection of Westphalia', *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 17: 1, 2010, p. 36, https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/ijgls/vol17/iss1/3; Adekeye Adebajo, 'The revolt against the West: intervention and sovereignty', *Third World Quarterly* 37: 7, 2016, pp. 1187–202 at p. 1194, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1154434.

[43] Roland Paris, 'The future of UN peace operations: pragmatism, pluralism or statism?', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 2153–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae182.

[44] Paris, 'The future of UN peace operations'.

reject or disrupt global cooperation. It often propagates opposed views about the LIO within and outside the LIO's institutions. It has prospered during liberal peacebuilding's many stalemates and regressions, and has amplified its reach as a form of global counter-peace.[45] Some scholars have argued that multilateral cooperation becomes less effective because of institutional competition, but maintain that the coexistence of alternative pathways to peace makes a 'multiplex order' more legitimate.[46] Equally, the AIO's uncooperative multilateralism has been disproven in the case of Syria, where alternatives to UN peacemaking may have helped in restoring an illegitimate, authoritarian regime.[47] The related counter-peace agenda depends on the quadruple digital entanglement of neo-liberalism, authoritarianism, geopolitics and populism,[48] which has reversed the flow of emancipatory debate. Instead, it has flooded a failing LIO with revisionist and reactionary, non-scientific knowledge about peacemaking and political order. This constrains peacemaking and—in the worst cases—may lead to attempts to remove its ethical dimensions.

The stabilization of the AIO depends upon economic development, political acquiescence and local and global hierarchy. Ironically, these latter goals denote some common ground between the AIO and LIO around the recent western neo-liberal and stabilization/counter-insurgency strategies.[49] The AIO may be mostly made up of actors and states, absent a civil society network of social movements. It includes 'surveillance capital'-oriented[50] actors that are autocratic (in a system dominated by one-person rule, which is highly constraining), or authoritarian (i.e. where politics and centralizing government revolve around the use of force). It is conservative, often nationalistic, in itself authoritarian and focused on preserving social, economic, racial and gender hierarchies, as well as being isolationist.[51] It has limited contractual relations between citizens, leaders and any regional or international blocs or community, as force and fear replace political debate, checks and balances, and the latter's institutionalization.[52] Neo-liberalism, authoritarianism, autocracy and civil control dominate to varying degrees.[53] These qualities may also provide a global platform for cooperation with some LIO actors, which may also partially relate to such preferences (as appears to be the case under the Trump presidency in the US in 2025).

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[45] Oliver P. Richmond, Sandra Pogodda and Gëzim Visoka, 'The international dynamics of counter-peace', *European Journal of International Relations* 30: 1, 2023, pp. 126–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661231168772.

[46] Amitav Acharya, *Global governance in a multiplex world*, European University Institute working paper, 2017, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/46849/RSCAS_2017_29.pdf, p. 11.

[47] Abboud, 'Making peace to sustain war'.

[48] Claes H. de Vreese et al., 'Populism as an expression of political communication content and style: a new perspective', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23: 4, 2018, pp. 423–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218790035; Shoshana Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

[49] Samuel Moyn, 'A powerless companion: human rights in the age of neoliberalism', *Law and Contemporary Problems* 77: 4, 2014, pp. 147–69, https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/lcp/vol77/iss4/7; David Keen with Larry Attree, *Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding* (London: Saferworld, 2015), p. 2.

[50] Zuboff, *The age of surveillance capitalism*, p. 9.

[51] Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, 'Introduction', in Tom Ginsburg and Alberto Simpser, eds, *Constitutions in authoritarian regimes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 3–18.

[52] Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the market: political and economic reforms in eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 58.

[53] Larry Diamond, 'Elections without democracy: thinking about hybrid regimes', *Journal of Democracy* 13: 2, 2002, pp. 21–35, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive authoritarianism: hybrid regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Next, this article turns to the issue of what peacemaking tools are emerging—either within the AIO, or in relation to conflicts between these two different versions of international order. One response is that the more autocratic, authoritarian and conservative a system is, the more the peace it creates depends on the use of and threat of force, division, polarization, securitization, nationalism and bloc formation. In this form it represents a negative or victor's peace, with all its associated theoretical and conceptual instabilities.[54]

Elements of these weaknesses are on view in Russian peacekeeping and conflict-management approaches,[55] as well as in Chinese contributions to peacebuilding[56] and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[57] Even so their contributions to the UN system are often understood to be quite constructive even within the LIO.[58] Similarly, sites of complex 'multimediation',[59] such as that practised by some Gulf states—such as Qatar—or regional actors such as Turkey,[60] offer the potential to bridge the LIO and AIO (although they are of uncertain substance and are as yet unproven). All of these possible openings that relate to the AIO or hover around it tend to favour authoritarianism, autocracy and conceptualizations of the state system related to territorial sovereignty and non-intervention, even where rights abuses are ongoing. These ambivalences can be seen in the blocking of UN Security Council (UNSC) actions in relation to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia (which, as one of the UNSC's permanent members, has been able to veto its resolutions). Regional organizations have taken on more prominent roles (given there is no sign of the alternative 'Uniting for Peace' pathway in the General Assembly, which would allow the Assembly to take control where the Security Council is deadlocked),[61] but also they have shifted into more ambivalent positions towards the Russia–Ukraine war—just as two decades earlier there was concern about diplomatic positions over the US invasion of Iraq. There are also serious concerns about differing standards by which the current conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza are treated, where the Ukraine conflict appears to be treated more substantially than that between Israel and Hamas, within the LIO and the AIO.

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[54] On the victor's peace, see Richmond, *The transformation of peace*.

[55] Lewis, 'Contesting liberal peace'.

[56] Kwok Chung Wong, 'The rise of China's developmental peace: can an economic approach to peacebuilding create sustainable peace?', *Global Society* 35: 4, 2021, pp. 522–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2021.1942802.

[57] Tim Winter, 'Geocultural power: China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Geopolitics* 26: 5, 2021, pp. 1376–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1718656.

[58] Zheng Chen and Hang Yin, 'China and Russia in R2P debates at the UN Security Council', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 787–805, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz229.

[59] Christine Bell, '"Multimediation": adapting in response to fragmentation', in Whitfield, ed., *Still time to talk*, pp. 27–30.

[60] Adham Hamed and Marylia Hushcha, *Emerging approaches to international mediation in a fragmented world: shifting dynamics and Austria's response*, Austrian Forum for Peace working paper no. 1/2024, 2024, https://www.aspr.ac.at/fileadmin/Downloads/Publikationen/Weitere_Publikationen/Publikation_New_Actors_in_Mediation_fin.pdf.

[61] Christian Tomuschat, 'Uniting for Peace : General Assembly resolution 377 (V)', UN Library of International Law, 2008, https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/ufp/ufp.html.

The above ambivalences help to explain the entanglement of regressions and advances in theoretical work on peacemaking between the western-backed LIO, the multipolar AIO and critical scholarship on peace. The claim that multipolarity may offer a viable form of peace and international order[62] because it is less hierarchical, more developmental, less unstable and divided, and more focused on economic and status benefits, is implausible, for example, given the last ten years of UN and other efforts in the Syrian war.[63] The approaches taken by Russia on conflict management, or by China on developmental peace, point to a long, underlying history of militarization, forced displacement and partition, as well as centralised, top-down authority, relevant to such conflict-management attempts, as has also appeared to be the case in Syria, Azerbaijan and Gaza.[64] While peacemaking may be simplified conceptually under multipolarity towards narrow agreements on mutual security, borders, centralised power, and very basic developmental questions, this simplification extends and exaggerates the deficiencies of the liberal peace model, making the AIO an unlikely contribution to peacemaking, related to interests rather than norms.

For emancipatory movements in the global North and South,[65] therefore, the attraction of the AIO is at best illusory. The AIO is salient for conservative and neo-conservative political elites (often forming oligarchies) around the world (North and South, East and West) which reject the prioritization of rights and democracy, favouring military and diplomatic power and extractive capital. The AIO focuses on regional control and is propagated through the apparatus of an authoritarian, nationalist and often expansionist state, simultaneously rejecting the rule of domestic or international law, along with multilateralism. It aims at building regional power and displacing the LIO. This has had obvious consequences for conflicts in Syria, Gaza (between Israel and Hamas), Nagorno-Karabakh (between Armenia and Azerbaijan), as well as other recent wars.[66]

The AIO's 'conflict-management system' therefore represents a rejection of peacebuilding, peacemaking, conflict transformation and resolution approaches. It rejects these strategies' aim of non-violent political reform as a platform for more advanced, post-liberal political systems.[67] The AIO draws post-liberalism 'back to the future', in that peace is shifted away from a connection with rights, democracy and justice. Peace is instead aimed at a victor's peace: division of the spoils, territorial and economic power, and the maintenance of domestic, regional and global interests and power hierarchies. It offers little for civil society and social movements, let alone for an everyday peace, and yet it is perplexingly viable as an intellectual and ideological framework in the global South, as well as among western, disaffected, political and social populist groups.

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[62] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Morgan Ndlovu, eds, *Marxism and decolonization in the 21st century: living theories and true ideas* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 105.

[63] Sara Hellmüller 'Peacemaking in a shifting world order: a macro-level analysis of UN mediation in Syria', *Review of International Studies* 48: 3, 2022, pp. 543–59, https://doi.org/10.1017/S026021052200016X.

[64] Armenak Tokmajyan, '"No people, no problems": the growing appeal of authoritarian conflict management', Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 31 Jan. 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/no-people-no-problems-the-growing-appeal-of-authoritarian-conflict-management.

[65] For a sense of its scholarly and social dynamism, see the collection of essays in Egon Spiegel, George Mutalemwa, Cheng Liu and Lester R. Kurtz, eds, *Peace as nonviolence: topics in African peace studies* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2024).

[66] Tokmajyan, '"No people, no problems"'.

[67] See Hugh Miall, 'Conflict transformation: a multi-dimensional task', in Alex Austin, Martina Fischer and Norbert Ropers, eds, *Transforming ethnopolitical conflict: the Berghof handbook* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2004), pp. 67–90.

Indeed, northern policy-makers, academics and civil society leaders often refer to the positive potential of both geopolitical multipolarity and 'global South' debates for peacemaking as if they contributed to similar emancipatory projects.[68] Much of this confusion and elision stems from disillusion with the LIO.[69] In conflict-affected regions the LIO is perceived as detached, remote, ineffective and disinterested even in its UN peacebuilding guises.[70] This dynamic can be observed in the approach of the EU, the former post-war 'normative power'.[71] For example, EU peace strategies in the southern Mediterranean tend to be of a realist and neoliberal ilk, with little connection to contextual culture or history. This has not been well received, whether in the Balkans, occupied Palestinian territory or beyond.[72] Worse, in Cyprus, Bosnia and Kosovo EU conditionalities have appeared to play into the hands of nationalist and authoritarian actors in exchange for containing migration; glossing over potential genocide or forced displacement; and seemingly supporting counter-terrorism over rights, democracy and transparency.[73] Together with the United States' long association—especially during the 1960s and 1970s—with anti-communist dictators, often to the detriment of peace movements,[74] this illustrates the sometimes fine distinction between the AIO and the LIO. This analogy is especially pertinent given the latter's acute weaknesses and hypocrisies, as well as the former's unstable set of associations and its preference for relationships grounded in force over diplomacy and cooperation.

What is perhaps even more significant for any critical assessment of the AIO is that it raises the question of what space there may exist for the subaltern, local, everyday political claims that emerge in conflict-affected societies and often lead to hybrid peace outcomes. The AIO means the shrinking of space for civil society in states that 'backslide'[75] into authoritarian rule—such as Cambodia, Mali, Ethiopia and Rwanda. In fact, this issue of social and civil agency seems mostly rhetorical for the AIO, indicating future pressure to reinvent viable systems for peacekeeping, mediation and negotiation between regional blocs.

Multipolarity was present in earlier forms of political order in the nineteenth century, as well as before, between and after the First and Second World Wars.

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[68] Confidential official and unofficial sources, personal interviews, 28 June 2024, London, and 9 July 2024, online.

[69] Confidential official and unofficial sources, personal interviews.

[70] Dennis Jett, 'Why peacekeeping does not promote peace', *Middle East Policy* 30: 3, 2023, pp. 120–8, https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12700.

[71] Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40: 2, 2002, pp. 235–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353.

[72] Jett, 'Why peacekeeping does not promote peace'.

[73] Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran, 'Illiberal peace?'; 'Africa is juggling rival powers like no other continent', *The Economist*, 28 Feb. 2024, https://www.economist.com/international/2024/02/28/africa-is-juggling-rival-powers-like-no-other-continent.

[74] Robbie Lieberman, *The strangest dream: communism, anticommunism, and the U.S. peace movement 1945–1963* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

[75] Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: democratic regress in the contemporary world* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

All of these orders failed and collapsed into mass violence, principally because violence was not proscribed under these systems but was a seen as a legitimate political tool.[76] The main victims of these collapses of multipolarity were civilians and their resources, as well as public infrastructure on a scale that had never been seen before, whereas much of the architecture of elite, state, imperial, technological and neo-liberal power—certainly among the victors of these wars—mutated and survived.[77]

Furthermore, it is also difficult to trace any positive response from the AIO to indigenous or localized political claims in relation to the redistribution of resources, sustainability or representation, and the AIO's tendency to repress dissent and resistance is more substantial than in the LIO. This means that critical agency, resistance, the everyday and related innovations tend to be rejected or suppressed.[78] Any multipolar frameworks for peacemaking are associated with securitization, the balance of power and geopolitical epistemologies, autocracy and authoritarianism—as well as status issues—and they may ultimately reproduce revolutionary pressures.[79] Such systems are thus not well placed to innovate, particularly when it comes to responding constructively to material socio-economic and related challenges, translated into political resistance to oppression, injustice and hierarchy.[80] Peacemaking in such systems is therefore about maintaining state and territorial domination or influence, often using anti-imperialist/colonial and pro-subaltern rhetoric as camouflage and thus also rejecting self-determination and representation claims from beyond the established geopolitical orders.

At a deeper level, the AIO and LIO are graduations of the state/geopolitical model, differentiated mainly by weaker or stronger positions about the place of violence in politics. Yet, the LIO has at least offered the promise of pluralism while maintaining rights and civil or social agency (as opposed to the AIO's pluralism without rights), as well as checks and balances and other legal constraints, elections and institution-building.

Critical investigations of peacemaking under the AIO

The necessity of scholarship as a public good demands that academics interrogate risks for peace and security of international transitions and their possibilities[81] (which is also increasingly implausible in the AIO's various academies, including in many of the BRICS Plus countries). Yet, such critical investigation now operates in the marginal spaces available in the contestation between the LIO and AIO, and in light of the limitations of the liberal peace model.

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[76] For an excellent analysis, see the collection of essays in Sebastian Schindler, Christopher Daase and Wolfgang Seibel, eds, *Conference diplomacy and international order: from the Congress of Vienna to the G7* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

[77] See, for example, Michael Mann, *The sources of social power, volume 4: globalizations, 1945–2011* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[78] Oliver P. Richmond, 'Critical agency, resistance and a post-colonial civil society', *Cooperation and Conflict* 46: 4, 2011, pp. 419–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836711422416.

[79] Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran. 'Illiberal peace?'.

[80] Ronnie D. Lipschutz, 'Beyond the neoliberal peace: from conflict resolution to social reconciliation', *Social Justice* 25: 4, 1998, pp. 5–19.

[81] See for example, Noam Chomsky, 'The responsibility of intellectuals', *The New York Review of Books*, 23 Feb. 1967.

The AIO seeks to protect what are—from liberal and critical as well as postcolonial and feminist perspectives—the anachronisms of autocratic and authoritarian statehood, the territorialized state system and resurgent forms of imperialist competition.[82] Peace in the AIO would indicate an authoritarian capitalist political order at domestic and international levels, meaning illiberal peace and autocratic modes[83] of international politics which are closely linked with the victor's peace. From a critical perspective, even small-scale examples of authoritarian conflict-management models, scattered around central Asia, the Middle East or central America have significant implications for the viability and destabilization of international order. From this perspective, the AIO forms part of the current 'polycrisis'[84] in that its proponents reserve the right to use force and violence as political tools for geopolitical and national interests to a much greater degree than the LIO. The AIO is conservative, neo-liberal and patriarchal; it often rejects scientific advances and is based on defending and extending global hierarchies rather than supporting emancipation through democracy, rights, development, equality, law and global cooperation. The AIO rejects peace systems based upon the latter qualities often associated with liberalism, social democracy and critical theory (including postcolonialism, feminism and environmentalism) and instead favours the failed balance of power systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From this emerges what has come to be known as 'authoritarian conflict management' or illiberal forms of peace (although in the past conflict management always tended to be elite-focused and somewhat authoritarian).[85] The liberal peace system has been developing along a similar pathway and may converge further with the AIO if it aims to build bridging mechanisms with the latter. Even with these limited tools and the potentially problematic issues around convergence, both the AIO and the unreformed LIO are fundamentally unstable.

Thus, the AIO's linkage to—and its attraction for—developing postcolonial theories and states in the global South is problematic, certainly from the perspective of global social justice moments and networks.[86] It is much easier to critically understand AIO networks in the global South from the perspective of southern economic and political elites that are caught up in various status and security dilemmas and that are similarly keen to preserve their privileges. Preserving the international system as an architectural hierarchy, but reordering it to favour key BRICS state actors such as Russia, China and India (in contrast to the outdated structure of the UN Security Council), means preserving not only regional hegemony, territorial boundaries and the right of sovereign exception, but also a contradictory form of non-intervention linked to authoritarianism.[87] It is unlikely that democracy, the preservation of human rights and international cooperation can coexist with the AIO. In other words, these revisionisms are all key aims of the AIO, which is effectively a counter-peace framework that seeks to stagnate, then reverse, the international peace architecture.[88] It has disguised its erosion of this framework via selective historical justice arguments bundled with geopolitical, national and elite interests, and achieves various revisionist aims at the expense of emancipatory local agency, which remains suppressed by its conflict-management strategy.[89]

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[82] Oliver P. Richmond, Sandra Pogodda and Jasmin Ramović, 'Introduction', in Oliver P. Richmond, Sandra Pogodda and Jasmin Ramović, eds, *The Palgrave handbook of disciplinary and regional approaches to peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1–17.

[83] Lewis, Heathershaw and Megoran, 'Illiberal peace?'; Geraldine Rosas Duarte and Matheus Souza, 'Illiberal peacebuilding in UN stabilization peace operations and peace agreements in the CAR, the DRC and Mali', *International Peacekeeping* 31: 2, 2024, pp. 157–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2023.2300135; Anna Ohanyan, '"Illiberal peace": oxymoron, political necessity, or old wine in a new bottle', *International Negotiation* 29: 1, 2024, pp. 44–85, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10081; Kristian Stokke, Klo Kwe Moo Kham, Nang K. L. Nge and Silje Hvilsom Kvanvik, 'Illiberal peacebuilding in a hybrid regime: authoritarian strategies for conflict containment in Myanmar', *Political Geography*, vol. 93, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102551.

[84] Adam Tooze, 'Welcome to the world of the polycrisis', *Financial Times*, 28 Oct. 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33.

[85] Henry Kissinger, *A world restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the problems of peace, 1812–1822* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

[86] Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26: 7–8, 2009, pp. 159–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275.

Peacemaking is thus problematic for the AIO unless it is appended to a counter-revolutionary victor's peace model (replacing the LIO, in other words), or in any transitional phase, a ceasefire and balance-of-power holding model of conflict management. In the longer term, these are aimed at upholding and extending the AIO, especially its hegemonic and authoritarian tendencies. Geopolitical tensions are essential to its *modus operandi*, making their manufacture strategically and tactically significant.

Where do developmental states and global South justice networks interested in peacemaking and political reform fit into this critical view of the AIO? The answer is that they have much more in common with the putatively law- and rights-based LIO. There is no space for rights or everyday political claims in AIO-managed conflict-affected environments, and law and justice are subservient to politics, meaning that social movements, civil society, and public or participatory institutions tend to be marginalized. It is perplexing that the BRICS, many of the members of which are developing and conflict-affected states and populations, would prefer the platform of sovereignty, non-intervention and securitized, neo-liberal developmentalism over social moments, civil society, rights, democratic and legal checks and balances, and regional integration, as was emerging within the liberal peace model (at least hesitantly).[90]

Some postcolonial and decolonial scholars also risk associating critique with anti-westernism or statism. Perhaps such associations represent a short-lived alliance between authoritarian governments (which view the AIO as a platform upon which to secure their rule) and societal groups (which might argue that the AIO's goal of reordering offers future potential for a form of historical justice by removing the hypocrisies of the LIO)—at least until their own freedoms and rights are stunted by the AIO. The reality of this conundrum may well be that, as in the West, the nascent peacemaking model in the global South has collapsed into an elite-led, neo-liberal, technocratic and digital-authoritarian project. This is disguised by rhetorical engagement with civil society, by justice claims, or institutional engagement (even if without much substance) in order to associate with any donor, ally or security provider which helps, indirectly at least, to maintain elite-led dominance in such states. The AIO does not meet the political or rights demands of civil societies in conflict-affected countries such as Colombia[91] or across the global South, given global civil society's alignment with decolonization and anti-racism. Critique appears to have become the cover for the AIO, however, while securitization, zero-sum interests and multipolarity aim to purposefully undermine an evolving common dialogue (or more accurately a plurilogue or polylogue)[92] about justice across emancipatory networks. Such a dialogue would reject elite-led challenges to expanded rights in both the North and South.[93]

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[87] Janis van der Westhuizen, *Where angels would have feared to tread: reformists, revisionists and the 2023 BRICS Summit* (Cape Town: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2023); see also Zhu Wenqi and Leng Xinyu, 'China in the Security Council', in Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, eds, *The UN Security Council in the 21st century* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016), pp. 83–104; Wong, 'The rise of China's developmental peace'; Zheng and Hang, 'China and Russia in R2P debates at the UN Security Council'.

[88] Richmond, *The grand design*.

[89] Thanks to Sandra Pogodda for these insights.

[90] David Long and Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Working for peace: the functional approach, functionalism and beyond', in Lucian M. Ashworth and David Long, eds, *New perspectives on international functionalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 1–26.

From a critical perspective, multipolarity introduces competing systems into peacemaking, increases the complexity of the international peace architecture and fragments the resource frameworks needed for peacemaking, which depend on transnational and transversal actors and coalitions for long-term legitimacy. AIO peacemaking is thus very unlikely to work well, either internally or externally, given its fragmented, complex, power-based and contested nature. It will not add much in terms of alternative understandings of rights, democracy and the rule of law, given that multipolar actors tend to favour authoritarianism and balance of power systems at the international level. Human rights actors have very little leverage, especially as the LIO has increasingly been under attack from within. Indeed, the evidence suggests that social movements, civil society and the systems underpinning local and national peace are increasingly restrained, blocked and censored within the AIO.[94]

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[91] Annette Idler, 'Local peace processes in Colombia', in *Local peace processes* (London: The British Academy, 2021), https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3415/Conflict-Stability-Local-Peace-Processes_MM5IYsf.pdf, pp. 47–56.

[92] Arturo Escobar, *Pluriversal politics: the real and the possible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Behr and Shani, 'Rethinking emancipation in a critical IR'; Markus Kornprobst, 'Diplomatic peace', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 18*: 4, 2023, pp. 475–508, https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191x-bja10156.

[93] Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951); Cecilia Marcela Bailliet and Kjetil Mujezinovic Larsen, 'Promoting peace through international law: introduction', in Cecilia Marcela Bailliet and Kjetil Mujezinovic Larsen, eds, *Promoting peace through international law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Stephanie DeGooyer, Alastair Hunt, Lida Maxwell and Samuel Moyn, *The right to have rights* (London: Verso, 2018).

[94] Rush Doshi, *The long game: China's grand strategy to displace American order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Alexandre Marc and Bruce Jones, *The new geopolitics of fragility: Russia, China, and the mounting challenge for peacebuilding* (Washington DC: Brookings, 2021), https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-new-geopolitics-of-fragility-russia-china-and-the-mounting-challenge-for-peacebuilding; Oliver Jütersonke, Kazushige Kobayashi, Keith Krause and Xinyu Yuan, 'Norm contestation and normative transformation in global peacebuilding order(s): the cases of China, Japan, and Russia', *International Studies Quarterly* 65: 4, 2021, pp. 944–59, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqab060.

That all these negative dynamics occur to a much greater degree in the AIO than in the LIO suggests that peacemaking within the AIO is militarized and conducted through force and power, whereas in the LIO institutions, law and rights have been added to the victor's peace. The liberal peace framework has caused a cascade of bottom-up, expanding political claims which relate peace to justice and sustainability in a world of increasingly networked dynamism, transversality and mobility (as opposed to the twentieth-century international system of states with top-down sovereignty and weak institutions), to which the LIO has not responded adequately. This failure has left a vacuum in which the AIO has revived, challenging peace epistemology by returning war to the centre (not the periphery) of International Relations (IR). Proxy wars expand and may become global in this scenario, as any critical investigation of peace and war may conclude.

Is bridging the AIO and LIO possible?

The AIO points, firstly, to a compression or reduction of the LIO; secondly, to the expansion of geopolitical interests and clashes between systems; and subsequently, to the marginalization of critical, environmental and decolonial debates. It does little to respond to the scholarly framing of peace as justice, sustainability and emancipation that has emerged in the literature.

Multipolarity is a product of intense regional competition over interests, power and history, rather than ethics, justice and sustainability. The emergent AIO indicates the dominance and salience of political interests over law, multilateral cooperation around trade and global problems such as the environment, unaddressed historically contentious conflicts, and unaddressed social claims for justice, with different regions contesting human rights, democracy, the rule of law, civil society and peace with justice. No clear mechanisms exist for the mediation of these tensions through diplomacy, international institutions or other political or economic means; in addition, the proscription of violence as a political tool is breaking down, and there is no clear path towards global justice. All of this indicates multipolarity. Yet even though it prioritizes a basic stability (and only if, somewhat implausibly, regional bloc interests are preserved), the AIO is not a peace-oriented framework. The AIO has hollowed out and reversed the LIO, which itself was insufficient.

The AIO model of international order is associated with the propagation of an authoritarian and illiberal peace, which, even when viewed in the context of the ragged history of the Eurocentric and barely implemented liberal peace, rejects non-violence, justice or emancipation (i.e. critical understandings of peace). It replaces these goals and standards with the utility of violence translated into power, whether state, military, economic or technological. It is based on the victor's peace, which also underpinned the liberal peace, but the authoritarian peace model indicates that power and violence are necessary components of international order. Thus, it drives post-liberal IR and peace along a retrogressive track when seen through a critical lens (e.g. contra post-colonial, environmental and structural concerns, as well as issues of gender, justice and the everyday). Conversely, under the LIO and within the liberal peace, power and violence were at least problems to be solved—albeit with ragged outcomes—enabling further space to be opened up.

The conceptual terrain of peacemaking indicates a struggle between cooperation and justice, as radical, trans-scalar, transversal platforms for rethinking peace and order, and conservative, state-centric yet liberal understandings of the dynamics of violence and hierarchy. In other words, critique operates on both the LIO and the AIO. The latter's revisionist understandings, connected to isolationism and nationalism as well as colonialism, have re-emerged in both theory and practice, challenging the veracity of a long period of epistemological evolution. They could be said to represent peacemaking's 'dark age' which dismounts the position of post-Enlightenment science (justified by targeting the dominance of the West) as an epistemological force for progress, weak as this latter link may have been. Along this path is the resurgence of 'peace' through military intervention and occupation, partition, forced displacement, *faits accomplis* against international law, and fragile informal ceasefire lines based upon military exhaustion, patrolled in the long term by hostile factions and held in place by endless power diplomacy.

All of this is reminiscent of the era of liberal peace, the tools of which were at least expected to improve on the stalemates which persisted, for example, in Cyprus, Bosnia and Kosovo. These peace tools evolved accordingly though several generations.[95] In contrast, this understanding also harks back to a more distant era of *realpolitik* (characterized by the settlements involving postwar Germany, Taiwan, Korea and others).[96] It points to continuities with empire and its decolonization, where peace tools were used to preserve as far as possible the interests and jurisdiction of great powers rather than to engage with problems of justice or sustainability.[97] The AIO appears to be much further along this negative peace path than the LIO.

An inevitable bifurcation of this path is evidently looming, in that the maintenance of order as a limited approach to a pragmatic but limited form of peace seems to be under pressure in most conflict-affected societies, whether in the context of the AIO or the LIO. This pressure arises because of a lack of social legitimacy at grassroots level, a lack of alignment with scientific knowledge about peace, and the amplification of state and regional interests that has occurred as systemic legitimacy has declined since the 'war on terror' and the return of interstate wars. The loss of international consensus and social legitimacy for specific approaches to peacemaking leaves the current multipolar order without essential peacemaking tools at the global level as well as within regions, even if a short-term balance of power might be plausible. It returns the utility of violence to the centre of IR even as the LIO tries to maintain its more advanced (though highly problematic) peace frameworks and capacities. It forces the LIO to reconsider the notion of a victor's peace as a contradictory basis for future improvements—something which is risky for non-violent conceptualizations of peacemaking and for the future legitimacy of any resulting agreements.

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[95] For example, see Kai Michael Kenkel, 'Five generations of peace operations: from the "thin blue line" to "painting a country blue"', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 56: 1, 2013, pp. 122–43, https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034-73292013000100007.

[96] Norrin M. Ripsman, *Peacemaking from above, peace from below: ending conflict between regional rivals* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[97] Kissinger, *A world restored*.

Such issues are currently relevant to the discussions about a victor's peace in Ukraine, and what it means for peacemaking afterwards in terms of legitimacy and sustainability.[98] All of this suggests peacemaking systems in the LIO and AIO are fundamentally flawed, and that theory-building, as a prelude to practical reform, needs to move beyond both rather than choosing one or the other, or expecting an accommodation between the two models.

This situation suggests that critical peacemaking innovations depend more on systemic change occurring to address the deficiencies of the LIO, rather than its replacement by the AIO, or on minor, problem-solving policy or theoretical innovations in tactics and strategy within either model of international order. Indeed, over the last 80 years or so, short-term innovations spanning UN observer missions, good offices, mediation and several generations of peacekeeping, peacebuilding and statebuilding[99] have emerged within the conceptual confines of the state system, the Cold War and the LIO, which have proven inadequate. Yet the LIO has also acted as a platform for the emergence of critical challenges from various theoretical angles: these challenges have enriched the connection between peace and justice, local legitimacy and questions of sustainability. These connections have often focused on the LIO's complex relationship and networks around global civil society and social movements, where deficits have also long been evident. Indeed, in the context of the LIO as a theoretical and institutional entity, the links between peace and justice have expanded from substate-level social ramifications towards 'global justice', as the latter concept has itself expanded in post-colonial and post-human epistemological contexts.[100] Yet the LIO has responded to such critical innovations by returning to its older form of conservative liberalism, evading their implications and creating the opportunity for the AIO to gain credibility.

The LIO had certain—often submerged—qualities through which democracy, rights, law and trade improved and some international or domestic conflicts were prevented. Its relative openness allowed for cooperation and platform-building, especially at the local and international levels, whereby subaltern political claims became far more prominent. This development led to structural global justice claims and squeezed state and elite power to the extent that both states and elites are now conducting a reactionary and counter-revolutionary counter-peace

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[98] Tetiana Kyselova and Dana M. Landau, 'Ukrainian visions of peace: (re-)shaping peace through victory', *International Negotiation* 30: 1, 2025, pp. 13-42, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10111.

[99] See Oliver Ramsbotham, Tom Woodhouse, Hugh Miall and Harmonie Toros, *Contemporary conflict resolution*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Polity 2024); Oliver P. Richmond and Gëzim Visoka, eds, *The Oxford handbook of peacebuilding, statebuilding, and peace formation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[100] Maximilian Lakitsch, 'Peacebuilding in the Anthropocene: negotiating the problems of acting in an entangled world', *Anthropocenes—Human, Inhuman, Posthuman* 4: 1, 2023, https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.1414.

campaign against international governance and, in particular, against everyday local peace formation dynamics and subaltern political claims. The AIO has very few peacemaking capacities at local and regional levels, despite the emergence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRI, and China's claims about its peacebuilding role. Serious limitations can be observed with respect to Russian 'peacekeeping' and 'conflict management', power-based diplomacy and mediation (as seen in the case of Syria), as well as the role of the Gulf States in diplomacy and mediation, and claims from global South states such as South Africa or Brazil about a non-western international order. These demands appear to have coalesced in an AIO, yet are fundamentally contradictory. Instead, as an umbrella for these demands, the AIO appears to erase or reduce rights claims. It suppresses local political agency and cannot respond to global problems because it rests on bloc competition or state-conducted oppression, often through the tools of war, violence and stratified political systems.

The LIO, for all of its maintenance of the status quo and its historical baggage, appears to have opened space for a wider discussion of peace and justice in a post-liberal context, in which historical, distributive and environmental questions of justice are included. This, in turn, opens up debates about global justice and structural questions about the global political economy and its hidden costs. It has enabled multiple sets of agency to combine after 1990 to reduce war and violence and to tackle the stratification dynamics to which geopolitics, nationalism and other morbidities of international order have been prone. It endeavoured, at least until 9/11, to maintain legitimacy and promised the emergence of a post-liberal order—as opposed to appending peace to regional and geopolitical interests and security, followed by internal norms. Thus, it is difficult to envision a successful bridging of the current AIO and LIO, unless the LIO drifts closer to the AIO in nature—making both more conflict-prone.

Conclusion

There is clearly a correlation between the retreat of the LIO and frozen or collapsed peacemaking and peacekeeping attempts. There is also a connection with the rise of counter-peace and strategic bloc competition in the current multipolar environment, which has created space for the AIO. This space has been opened up by and for the use of violence as a legitimate political tool, and it has heralded the return of full-blown security dilemmas around hardened borders and blocs. This means that it is unlikely that existing or new peace tools can bridge the growing gulf between the LIO and the AIO, or that the AIO will develop plausible peacemaking tools. Exclusion, division and controlled violence, as well as proxy wars, seem to be the main tools of 'peace' in the AIO's case (when compared to the model of the LIO that rests on rights, democratization, law and development), driven by security dilemmas and bloc interests, and peacemaking and peacekeeping tools are a site of contestation at best. This means that the LIO may be more stable than the AIO, but that both are prone to proxy conflicts which cannot easily be treated by existing peace tools. Where the two meet tends to be unstable. However, any post-liberal attempt at redeveloping peacemaking tools might draw on the LIO, and attempting to bridge the AIO and LIO is unfeasible.

The multiplicity of ethnographic practice networks lauded in critical thinking do not map onto multipolarity and the AIO in terms of the former's emancipatory claims. Nor do multipolarity and the AIO map onto pluriversalism, as more radical global South approaches advocate. Anti-colonialism appears to be a common ground for the territorial autonomy and independence of state interests and government under multipolarity and the AIO, but not when rights within the AIO are taken into account—or, for that matter, the biosphere, feminism or justice.[101] In critical terms there is common ground on rights and justice at global civil and social levels which is more closely connected to the LIO and liberal peace frameworks. Multipolarity has a weak normative and ethical capacity, as it posits limited cooperation and interaction between extremely different state-centric authoritarian systems, interests and spaces that are contested by all means possible. Post- and decolonial approaches, along with critical and emergent thinking, have much stronger and common normative ontologies where shared coexistence is viable outside the LIO and AIO.

Imperialism, authoritarianism and state-centricity offered three attempts at governing order to create a limited peace—all of which have failed, historically. The LIO offered a further attempt which has been more promising when viewed from the perspective of peace in its generation of discursive and practical space for further advances. Any elision of the AIO and LIO frameworks is at best superficial: their recent practices are governed by state-centric and neo-liberal political systems, meaning they each contain similar flaws albeit to a greater or lesser degree. These ontological clashes over systems based upon reserved violence versus cooperation cannot be bridged without a further set of theoretical and practical inputs, which requires significant institutional development on a far greater scale than during the LIO.

Ultimately, the AIO is based upon the premise that violence is a political tool that can be used to achieve national and global interests, for which counter-revolutionary strategies against the LIO can be implemented fairly quickly (and cheaply). The LIO is premised on cooperation, political, economic and social contact and rights, and democracy, but has been slow to achieve all of them, and is habitually Eurocentric: it also, to a large extent, maintains order against radical change. Yet, it has frequently (though not always) been receptive to political claims from marginalized actors, at least in discursive terms. There seems to be more chance that it may provide a platform for future evolution, in which violence is marginalized and stratifications meet with responses, than in the case of the AIO. This means that alternatives to both the AIO and the LIO are required and more work is needed on post-liberal frameworks for peacemaking, in which local political claims are scaled up so that they drive the reconstruction of a post-liberal international order.

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[101] Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the pluriverse: radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

Global or local conflicts are unlikely to be addressed substantially or consistently in critical terms under the AIO–LIO dynamic,[102] whether bridged or fully oppositional. This means that the recent progress made on local and everyday peacemaking, on rights, democracy and justice, and the implications of that progress for state and international reform will be ignored, and 'peace' will be reduced to geopolitical balancing, connected with bloc interests, or a victor's peace, rather than justice or human security. This renders peacemaking and resultant political orders both highly unstable and socially illegitimate, with the consequence that they do not meet the wider need for global innovation as war reinvents itself. Thus, security, surveillance capitalism and stabilization will be the LIO and AIO's only common ground, both internationally and domestically. This harks back to an older, failed story of peacemaking. We can do much better, in critical terms, if we are to set out a common and innovative, post-liberal agenda for peacemaking.

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[102] Confidential official and unofficial sources, personal interviews.