

International Economic Policy | 2. International order/anarchy

1. International (global, world) order

The expression 'international order' refers to the rules and constraints (accepted or imposed, formal or informal) that states face when they interact. This interaction is relevant for economics because it can be analyzed using game-theoretic methods and models. The following is a list of issues and questions related to the international order.

2. How is power distributed among states?

An international order could be conceptualized as a zero-sum game: the less a state is constrained in its interaction with the rest of states, then the more those other states should be constrained in their international behaviour. In this context, 'freedom (or capacity) to act' of a state in the presence of the rest of states could be defined as that state's power against the rest. In view of this, an international order would correspond to a distribution of power ('get things done') among the states. Apparently, a stylized fact of the international order is that it tends to be hierarchic: power is asymmetrically distributed among states.

3. Is there a global hegemon (a dominant global state)?

Having power not equally distributed does not imply that power is concentrated. It is possible that the order is characterized by a balance of power: any state could be counterbalanced by some group of other states (at least before the 19th century, the European state system was characterized by the balance of power: every attempt by some state to become dominant, such as Spain under the Habsburg or Napoleon's France, was neutralized by coalitions of weaker states). Another apparent stylized fact of the international order after the Industrial Revolution is that it tends to be create global (or at least, regional) hegemons. For most of the 19th century, the UK enjoyed the role of global hegemon; after the Second World War (and more or less up to now) the US has been acting as a global hegemon. The power of the global hegemon is typically expressed in its ability to set, and to a certain extent enforce, the basic rules of the international order.

4. How stable (and durable) are hegemonic international orders?

If the concept of hegemon is relaxed to that of leading power (a sort of 'primus inter pares' among states instead of a 'king' of states), many examples of leading powers (at a regional and a global level) can be identified. In Europe, since the end of the 15th century, a sequence of leading powers could be defined: Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, UK (in the Middle Ages, Italian city-states like Genoa and Venice were leading powers). At the world scale, UK in the 19th century and the US in the 20th century were obvious leading powers. This suggests another stylized fact of international orders: states do not permanently stay at the top positions of the international order. That is, being hegemonic or dominant is a temporary trait of states: rising powers eventually replace leading/hegemonic powers.

5. What characterizes best an international order: unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity?

A unipolar international order has a global dominant power, a hegemon (unipolarity characterized the international order after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989). A bipolar international order has two leading powers (the situation during the Cold War and the one that could occur if China’s rise matches US global power). A multipolar world order has several leading powers (each one perhaps regionally hegemonic).

6. If international orders tend to be hegemonic, what ensures a peaceful transition at the top?

Traditionally, the replacement of leading or hegemonic powers have been conflictual: wars have typically determined how power in the international order is redistributed at the top. A notable exception has been the hegemonic transition between the UK and the US (around after the end of World War I). Can this episode be replicated with the successor of the US as global hegemon, if there is any such successor?

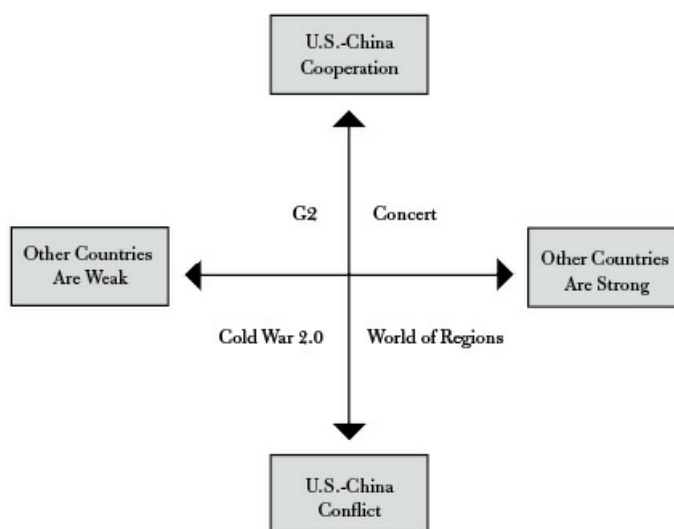
7. What does it take to be a hegemon?

Why did Japan fail to replace the US as a global hegemon during the 1980s (despite an apparently superior economic performance)? The same question could be applied to Germany. Why did the USSR fail to replace the US during the Cold War era (despite the fast military catch-up)? Is it necessary to become a global hegemon to have both strong economies (large, developed domestic markets) and powerful military forces (large, technologically advanced armies and weapons)? Must both structures (economies and armies) be first satisfactorily tested on international ground?

8. What is the most likely future after the US loses its hegemonic power?

Ian Bremmer (2012) defines G_0 (G-Zero) as “A world order in which no single country or durable alliance of countries can meet the challenges of global leadership.”

The sketch on the right maps four post- G_0 scenarios, where: G2 is a friendly bipolarity involving the US and China; Concert is a more multipolar world, where something like a G20 organizes global governance; Cold War 2.0 is hostile bipolarity (which China replacing the USSR); the ‘World of Regions’ scenario is uncoordinated multipolarity (with global power too fragmented).



9. The rise of the Rest? ['the Rest' as opposed to 'the West'] The rise of China? The rise of Eurasia?

The general perception is that the hegemonic power of the US is in decline (for sure, in relative terms; debatable in absolute terms). What is not so clear is what will come next. Is the preeminence of 'the West' going to be superseded by 'the Rest' (the BRICS, for instance)? Is specifically China the next global hegemon (as suggested by projects like the Belt and Road Initiative?) Or is it just a geographical matter, namely, that Eurasia (as the largest continental landmass on Earth) takes the global lead it has historically enjoyed?

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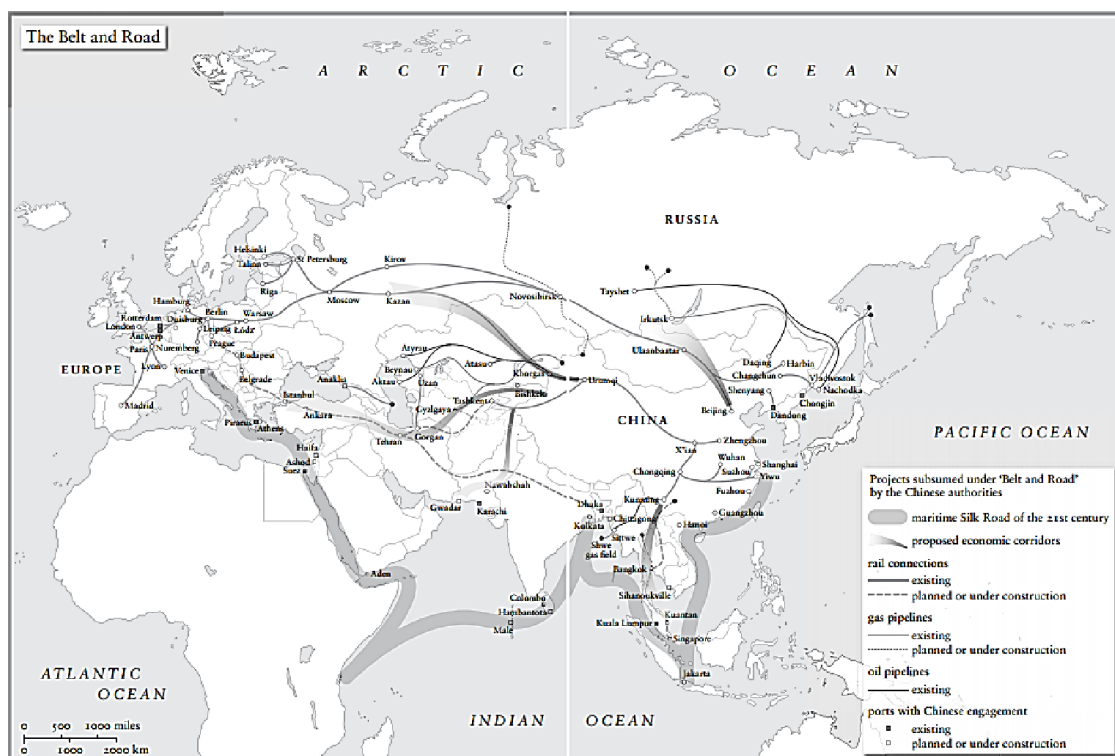
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Source: Mações (2018)

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11. Voluntary activity for evaluation

- Choose at least two of the books listed in point 10, preferably from different sections.
- Write an essay in which the following concerns are addressed (you could restrict to the ones underlined):
 - (i) summarize the main ideas of each book (if the book is lengthy, you may focus attention on a few chapters);
 - (ii) discuss these ideas critically (or else provide more support or evidence for them);
 - (iii) try to connect these ideas with the issues described in the lecture notes from the 4th of April (for instance, do the ideas impact positively or negatively on the issues?);
 - (iv) try to relate these ideas with your background (other issues of your interest, your own country, your own personal views) and, if possible, explain how reading the books have changed (or reinforced) your opinions on the topics covered in the books;
 - (v) if possible or interested, conjecture how the Covid-19 crisis is likely to affect or qualify the messages or conclusions in the books (provide the Covid-19 references you use in your analysis);
 - (vi) add whatever other reflection, question or conjecture (inspired by your reading of the books) you consider relevant (do open questions occur to you?);
 - (vii) as a mere suggestion, you may connect the books chosen from the above list with another (just one or two) of your own choice.
- You decide the length of the essay. The recommendation is that you keep it tight: focus on the essentials, be specific, structure your work well, use short sentences.
- Convert your work into a pdf document and send it to aqa@urv.cat before the 16th of June, 2020.
- Choosing more books to summarize and relate dispenses with the need to address concerns (iii), (iv), (v), (vi) or (vii). Use your own judgement to make this possibility operative.
- Feel free to suggest any another activity, somewhat related to the international order past, present or future. For instance, you could do the same as suggested above with a couple of recent academic articles, instead of books.