
The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion and the Rise of Trump

By Patrick Porter

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Lately, a great many scholarly books have scrutinized the Liberal International Order (LIO). They have tried to answer the following question: Is the LIO, *Pax-Americana*, or the Western World Order coming to an end? Following Christopher Layne and John J. Mearsheimer, Patrick Porter became the latest realist asking the same question. Porter is a self-proclaimed classical realist. In his *The False Promise of Liberal Order* he proposes a Machiavellian-style salvation guide to the U.S.

Porter's book consists of six chapters, including introduction and afterword. The first chapter covers Porter's hypothesis which is: ordering is an imperial undertaking by dominating others' policies including domestic ones (p. 29). The second chapter challenges the idea of LIO. He tries to test his hypothesis by showing empirical findings in the third chapter. Fourth chapter argues that Trump's presidency is not the reason that brings an end to the LIO. It is the symptom of an empire in trouble (p. 178). In the fifth chapter, Porter draws a salvation guide to the U.S. administration. The final words of Porter are about the role of scholars, especially in IR.

Regarding the concept of order, Porter notes that "orders are power hierarchies created by the most powerful units in the system" (p. 11). Throughout history, there have been many ordering hierarchies, such as Roman, Impe-



rial Chinese, Ottoman, French, and British. Each of them had established their order using their brute force (p. 79). Thus, Porter challenges the supporters of LIO. He claims that neither the order of the U.S. nor of the former hierarchies were constituted by norms and values. Therefore, the concept of the

LIO itself, and thus attempts to restore it, may mislead us.

Porter argues that the dominant power of the U.S. is fading (pp. 10-34, 237-240). China is not the only peer competitor of the U.S.; Putin's Russia is also trying to restore its position, while India, Indonesia, Japan, and many other allies of the U.S., including Turkey, are hedging and challenging the dominance of the U.S. by trying to compete with it in some areas. Accordingly, Porter states that Obama and Trump were deceived by the false promise of the LIO and tried to save the position of the U.S. with their signatures in the context of the liberal order led by the U.S. (p. 156). The U.S. presidents fell into the trap of history. In other words, the U.S. cannot build a future by romanticizing the past (pp. 32-33). What, then, is Porter's alternative, modern-day Machiavellian proposal?

Porter gives some advice to the U.S. administration. First, as mentioned above, the U.S. should not search in the past for answers. This is the new multipolar world, and therefore

the world now is much more hostile than it was in the 1990s, so, the U.S. has more to lose (pp. 191-198). Second, regarding the previous assumption, the U.S. should abandon the pursuit of global leadership. Then what? Porter advises the U.S. administrations to think strategically. At first, China must be identified as the main adversary. Afterward, a policy of disturbing the relations between China and Russia, while containing China, should be pursued. Finally, the U.S. should downsize its presence in the Middle East, which harms the U.S. credibility and economy (p. 219). Based on these policy suggestions, it can be argued that Porter is trying to make the U.S. a holder/balancer actor like Morgenthau's British Empire in the 19th century (p. 208).¹

In many parts of his book, Porter does not forget to praise the U.S. At first, he asserts his hypothetical argument that the U.S. dominant power was better for the world during the Cold War (pp. 13-14). Then, he claims that "Chinese hegemony would probably be more brutal," (p. 44). It might sound odd to make such definitions while claiming the U.S. hegemony had brutal foundations. How can we determine that a Russian- or Chinese-led order would be cruller? What is Porter's most crucial evidence for this argument: the aggressive foreign policies of the so-called adversaries or their domestic variables? As Porter knows, the U.S. was just as aggressive as when it was a rising power during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Mexican, Philippines, and Banana Wars can be considered examples of this. So, one can say that the U.S. was just as aggressive as today's rising powers. Second, distinguishing regimes into democratic/liberal or authoritarian and claiming

that regime types matter is a very contradictory statement while arguing an illiberal world order. That might be the outcome of the Classical Realist theory which was simply built upon the interconnectedness of domestic and foreign variables, not its theoretical structure. Because the structure presented in his book is very consistent.

One can consider *The False Promise of Liberal Order* as a job application, like Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Porter advises the U.S. administration as Machiavelli did to the Medici family.² Patrick Porter's theoretical structure is much more realist than contemporary realists like Mearsheimer. While Mearsheimer admits that one way or another there was an LIO and it has come to an end,³ Porter believes that there was/is not an LIO and that the so-called order is like any other order in history; built by brute force and military might.

The False Promise of Liberal Order is an enjoyable read for those looking for realist's work with simple and parsimonious language and structure, rather than the trending normative inferences. The book appeals to a broad range of readers. One does not need to be a student of international politics to comprehend the arguments put forward in the book.

Endnotes

1. Hans, J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 142.
2. Patrick Porter, "Advice for a Dark Age: Managing Great Power Competition," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2019), pp. 7-25.
3. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2018).