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## International Relations Textbooks and the Problem of International Order

Stephen A. Kocs

**Abstract** The establishment and maintenance of order—that is, of settled rules and arrangements that regulate actors’ behavior—is central to politics at all levels, including the international level. Political order, after all, is a requisite for modern human existence. Given the priority of the problem of order, the most important questions that can be addressed in an introductory International Relations (IR) course are those that concern the sources, nature, and historical evolution of international order. But a survey of conventional introductory IR textbooks reveals that these questions are typically dealt with glancingly or ignored altogether. Thus a strong case can be made that conventional IR textbooks overlook a vital aspect of the subject they are intended to cover. This failure appears to arise from an effort by IR textbook authors to explain international politics in terms of timeless dynamics that exist apart from history. But excluding history as a source of explanation comes at a high cost. In effect, it prevents textbooks from adequately weighing the significance of the historically specific bargains that have provided the foundation for international order in modern times.

During the past two decades, the problem of international order has emerged as a topic of consuming interest for International Relations (IR) scholars and commentators. Much of the attention being devoted to the subject appears to arise from a sense that the existing international order—typically referred to as the Liberal International Order (LIO)—currently faces its most severe challenges since it came into existence in the late 1940s. These challenges include the rise of illiberal populist movements around the world (including in the United States), the growing international reach of illiberal powers such as China and Russia, and the emergence of potent new sources of global disorder including climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021, 225). Many scholars credit the LIO with making possible the extended peace among Western states and the extraordinary increase in Western living standards since 1945. Thus the rise of fundamental challenges to the LIO has prompted an intensified effort to clarify the order’s nature and workings, as well as the prospects for keeping it in place. Numerous scholarly and foreign affairs journals including *International Organization*,

*International Affairs*, *International Spectator*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Security Studies*, *Ethics and International Affairs*, and the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* have published special issues devoted to the future of the LIO.<sup>1</sup> Prominent think tanks including the Brookings Institution, the RAND Corporation, and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs have initiated special projects examining the problem of international order from a policy perspective.<sup>2</sup> The number of academic books and articles focused specifically on questions of international order has grown explosively. Whereas a Google Scholar search for the phrase “liberal international order” returns 224 results for the five-year period from 1997 to 2001, it returns 7,120 results for the five-year period from 2017 to 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Given the amount of scholarly work now being focused on international order, one might assume that conventional introductory IR textbooks would provide students with a strong grounding in the topic—addressing questions such as: What is an international order? How is an international order created and maintained? What causes international orders to break down? What are the defining features of the present-day order? How does the present-day order differ from past orders? But this is not the case. Conventional IR textbooks typically ignore these questions, or at best touch on them lightly.

In this article, I examine how conventional IR textbooks deal with the problem of international order. I argue that conventional textbooks employ a conception of international politics that deflects attention away from the presence and significance of order, leading to inadequate treatment of the topic. My analysis of what conventional textbooks say (or fail to say) about international order is based on an examination of twelve currently available introductory IR textbooks. The books are listed in the Appendix. All of them are “comprehensive” works designed to provide a wide-ranging overview of the field. All are published by leading textbook publishers.

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<sup>1</sup> See *International Organization* 75:2 (2021), *International Affairs* 94:1 (2018) and 97:5 (2021), *International Spectator* 53:1 (2018), *Foreign Affairs* 96:1 (2017) and 98:1 (2019), *Security Studies* 28:3 (2019), *Ethics and International Affairs* 32:1 (2018), and *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33:1 (2020).

<sup>2</sup> The Brookings Institute’s Project on International Order and Strategy (originally called the Project on Managing Global Order) was initiated in 2007. The RAND Corporation’s Project on Building a Sustainable International Order ran from 2016 to 2018. The German Institute for International and Security Affairs’ Project on the Future of International Order ran from 2015 to 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Search results as of April 22, 2022.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first part examines the concept of international order and discusses the role of foundational bargains among states in providing the basis for order. The second part surveys how the question of international order is addressed in conventional IR textbooks. The third part discusses how weak coverage of international order in IR textbooks gives rise to a deficient and misleading portrayal of international political dynamics.

### **The Concept of International Order**

Perhaps the first question that needs to be addressed is why, until recently, the study of international order has been relatively neglected by IR scholars. If international order is such an important topic, why has it not received more sustained attention? The answer to this question appears to lie in the way that IR as an academic discipline—particularly in the United States—redefined itself following the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979). In contrast to earlier realist scholars, Waltz identified anarchy as the decisive attribute of the international system. According to Waltz, the fact of anarchy imposes a structural imperative of self-help on the political units (sovereign states) that comprise the system. As a result of this imperative, states function as essentially undifferentiated units, locked in an unchanging struggle for survival in a durably anarchic environment.

As Jack Donnelly (2015) shows, Waltz's emphasis on the structural significance of anarchy has had a deep and lasting impact on American IR scholarship. References to anarchy, which were rare in IR textbooks prior to Waltz, became pervasive in the 1980s and have remained so ever since. In effect, key elements of Waltz's conception of international politics came to dominate the field. Although Waltz's theory has been subjected to sustained and penetrating criticism, scholars in the realist, liberal, and constructivist camps have all largely accepted anarchy as the primary ordering principle of international systems (Donnelly 2015, 401–2; Donnelly 2012, 617; Lake 2007, 47; Hurd 2008, 308). Most liberal and constructivist scholars differ from Waltz mainly in arguing that the damaging effects of anarchy can be mitigated, rather than in disputing the centrality of anarchy in structuring the international realm.

As Donnelly also shows, Waltz implicitly portrayed anarchy not merely as the absence of a centralized world government but as the absence of effective international governance. Crucially, these are two different meanings of the term, with fundamentally different implications. It is one thing to define anarchy as the absence of government—that is, the absence of a centralized governing apparatus capable of legislating for the world and effectively enforcing its acts. This meaning of anarchy is largely uncontroversial. It is quite another thing to define anarchy as the absence of governance

—that is, the absence of effective rules and authority. Under this definition, one assumes that effective governance *cannot* exist in an anarchic setting. This is a momentous assumption—one that does not flow logically from the simple absence of centralized government (Donnelly 2015, 409–12; Milner 1991; Hurd 1999) and that largely severs the study of international politics from history.

In adopting Waltz’s assumption that anarchic systems intrinsically lack effective rules and authority, American IR has also largely adopted the implications that follow from this assumption. One implication is that the international system is a self-help realm that allows for little functional differentiation among states. Each state is compelled to imitate the successful practices of other states, or it endangers its survival (Waltz 1979, 104–5, 128). A second implication is that the character of international politics has not changed fundamentally across the millennia (Waltz 1979, 65–70). In conceptualizing anarchy as the absence of rules and authority, Waltz’s anarchy assumption leads to the deduction that international politics *cannot* change fundamentally unless anarchy is replaced by a world government. However, both of these assumed implications of anarchy are logically problematic (Donnelly 2012; 2015). An anarchic system is not necessarily a self-help system, nor does it preclude fundamental alterations over time in the character of relations among states.

The study of international order, rather than assuming away the possibility of effective international governance, instead seeks to discern the underlying political bargains that regulate relations among states. It asks how political order among states is created, how it is maintained, and why it breaks down. It investigates the varieties of order that have existed in different international settings. It asks how and why international order has changed over time. These questions rightfully belong at the center of the study of international politics, inasmuch as questions about the nature and functioning of political order are central to understanding any political system, including the international system.

What exactly is international order? Following G. John Ikenberry (2014, 85), we may define it as “the settled arrangements that define and guide relations between states.” An international order prohibits certain behaviors by states and legitimizes others. It specifies the obligations and commitments of member states toward other states. It is embodied in a particular set of foundational rules and agreements. However, international orders tend to be more amorphous and difficult to pin down than is perhaps implied by this definition. For one thing, core elements of an international order may exist as informal understandings rather than formal commitments. As a result, it may be difficult for observers to characterize these commitments precisely. In addition, not all states may be equally integrated into a given international order. Depending on the nature

of the order, certain states may be participants in certain elements of the order but not others. Also, an international order may be regional rather than global in scope, meaning that some states lie outside it altogether. In addition, some elements of an order may contradict (or at least be in tension with) other elements. And because international orders are always contested, with member states each seeking to modify the order to more closely match their preferences, no international order exists in a completely stable and unchanging condition.

It is essential to note that the concept of international order employed in this article refers to *purposive* order that has been created by states intentionally. This definition is at odds with the one adopted by some scholars (e.g., Schweller 2001), who conceive of international order in terms of regularities or patterns that emerge as a spontaneous, *unintended* result of the policy choices of states interacting under anarchy. To a large extent, these two definitions of order are mutually exclusive. Those who view order as an unintended, emergent property of an anarchic international system follow Waltz in arguing (fallaciously) that anarchy imposes a self-help imperative on states, and that this imperative will in turn tend to override whatever purposive international orders states seek to construct. Thus the Waltzian conception of international order expressly downplays the significance of efforts by states to construct purposive international orders. This helps explain why the study of purposive international order has until recently been so neglected by the discipline (Rengger 2000, 48–49).

The concept of order employed in this article also differs from approaches that equate international order with the existence of international laws, norms, institutions, and regimes. These are indeed features of order, but the argument here is that the effectiveness of these features depends on an underlying political accommodation or “foundational bargain” among states. In the absence of such a bargain, international laws, norms, and institutions are likely to be rendered irrelevant. As shown by Russia’s 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine, a major power that rejects existing foundational bargains may behave in ways that show little regard for international laws and norms. In other words, international order as defined here refers to order that arises from a specific foundational bargain or group of bargains. The concept of foundational bargains is developed in greater detail below.

Why do states seek to establish international order? Perhaps most fundamentally, they do so because the existence of order reduces the potential threats that they face from other states (Bull 1977; Schroeder 2010, 81–83). To the extent that other states agree to abide by specified constraints on their behavior, a state confronts a more predictable and less dangerous external environment than would otherwise be the case. For the largest and most capable states, the appeal of international order is especially compelling. The

most powerful states can shape international order to particularly favor their own interests and preferences. And although a powerful state may be able to protect its security to some extent even in the absence of international order—for example, by threatening war against other states that attack its interests—it can normally advance its interests far more effectively, and at much lower cost, by working with other states to establish a mutually accepted international order (Lake 2009).

Historically, the scope and stability of international order have rested above all on the highly unequal distribution of capabilities among states. At any given time in modern history, there have been only a few states—sometimes no more than one or two—that possess strong capabilities for exerting influence far beyond their own borders. A few other states possess significant capabilities, and many states possess limited or minimal capabilities. This has been the case for more than two hundred years and appears certain to remain the case for the foreseeable future. The unequal distribution of capabilities among states greatly facilitates the creation and maintenance of an international order. The few states with relatively large capabilities (which may be economic, diplomatic, technological, and cultural as well as military) are well-placed to shape the international environment by making foundational bargains with other states. Such bargains, which serve the interests of both sides, establish the basic framework for international order. High-capability states take the lead in establishing foundational bargains because they are able to offer other states large incentives for cooperation and to impose large penalties for a failure to cooperate. By their nature, foundational bargains tend to be self-enforcing in a broad sense, although the participating states normally engage in ongoing efforts to adjust the terms of the bargains to make them more favorable to themselves (Lake 2009, 30–34).

Foundational bargains impose obligations and constraints on the participating states. In part, these obligations and constraints may take the form of rules—guidelines for conduct that are binding on all participants. But foundational bargains also usually include *quid pro quos*. Some *quid pro quos* may be symmetrical, in that the concessions offered by the participants are similar in nature. An agreement between two powerful states in which each acknowledges the other's leading status or sphere of influence would be an arrangement of this type. Other *quid pro quos* may be asymmetrical, in that the concessions offered by the participants are dissimilar in nature and create different roles for the participants. An example of an asymmetrical arrangement would be a security guarantee provided by state A to state B in exchange for B's agreement to allow A to maintain military bases on its territory. Historically, *quid pro quos* of various kinds have been central to the creation of international orders.

Logically, it makes sense that international order would rest on foundational

bargains. Bargaining is the essence of politics, and foundational bargains are present within states as well as between them. For example, the legitimacy of a modern national government rests ultimately on its ability to provide security and prosperity to the people it rules. In other words, there is a bargain between government and people: the people accept the government's authority in exchange for effective government measures to ensure their security and prosperity. At the international level, foundational bargains involve an exchange in which states accept constraints or obligations in return for the acceptance of constraints or obligations by other states. By definition, a bargain must offer something of value to those participating in it. If it does not, there is no basis for agreement. The only reason for a state to accept the constraints and obligations created by a foundational bargain is that doing so leaves it better off than if the bargain did not exist. If a state will not benefit from accepting a bargain, it will have no incentive to do so. This does not mean that all sides will benefit equally from a foundational bargain. For a bargain to be possible, it is simply necessary that each of the participating states believe that it is better off accepting the bargain than rejecting it.

History provides numerous examples of international orders rooted in foundational bargains. Prominent instances include:

- *The traditional East Asian tributary system.* From the fourteenth century to the nineteenth century, relations between China and the smaller states surrounding it—Korea, Vietnam, and at times others—were stabilized by an international order in the form of a tributary system (Kang 2005, 2010a, 2010b). The system was based on a bargain in which the smaller states formally accepted tributary status and emulated many aspects of Chinese culture and society, thereby affirming China's self-image as the center of civilization. In return, the Chinese emperor recognized the rulers of the smaller states as legitimate and normally refrained from interfering in the smaller states' domestic politics or foreign relations. Under the tributary system, the smaller states faced little danger that China would seek to conquer or seize territory from them. In addition, the bargain provided the political underpinnings for an extensive regional trade system centered on China.
- *The Concert of Europe.* Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the European great powers established a set of largely informal arrangements to regulate relations among themselves and affirm their collective authority over European affairs (Schroeder 1972, 405; Elrod 1976). Under these arrangements, the powers strongly restricted competition among themselves for territory in Europe. They avoided interfering in each other's spheres of influence, and they managed questions affecting the European balance of power through consultation and consensus among themselves. The Concert system thus protected the status of

each of the powers. Underlying the Concert system was the negotiated territorial settlement achieved at the Congress of Vienna. This settlement secured important territorial and strategic gains for the four victorious great powers—Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria—thereby creating strong incentives for them to uphold it (Slantchev 2005).

- *The post-1945 order.* The international order that emerged in the aftermath of World War Two was complex, and is perhaps best understood as involving three distinct foundational bargains. The first of these, signified by the formation of the United Nations, represented a compromise between US efforts to secure global political-military supremacy for the United States (Wertheim 2019) and the desire of the world’s less powerful states to shield themselves from external domination (Tourinho 2021). Under the terms of what could be called the “UN bargain,” the United States endorsed a UN Charter that enshrined principles of sovereign equality, respect for states’ political independence and territorial integrity, and peaceful resolution of disputes. In exchange, the less powerful states accepted Charter provisions that—via the special powers granted to the permanent members of the Security Council—effectively granted the United States far-reaching authority in identifying threats to global security and leading the global response to those threats (Simpson 2004, 192–93). The second foundational bargain of the post-1945 era, which could be called the “liberal bargain,” established the initial version of the present-day LIO. During its first decades, the LIO was predominantly a Western rather than a global order, based on a bargain between the United States and its Western allies. For its part, the United States provided its allies with economic and security guarantees as well as support for liberal domestic institutions. In return, the allies placed themselves under US leadership (Ikenberry 2011, 207–16). The third foundational bargain was between the United States and the Soviet Union, and could be called the “Cold War bargain.” Of the three post-1945 bargains, this was the most tenuous and the least well defined. It amounted to a tacit agreement between the two superpowers to defer to each other’s vital interests in Europe and East Asia and to respect each other’s superpower status on security matters such as arms control.

Foundational bargains may range from the relatively minimal, involving few constraints and obligations by the participating states, to extensive bargains involving far-reaching commitments. At the minimal end of the spectrum, it is possible to imagine—hypothetically, at least—a bargain that amounts to little more than a promise among states to leave each other alone. But such a bargain would hardly offer security in the contemporary world, where states’ vital interests are continually impacted by developments that take place outside their borders. The bargain struck in the 1920s

between the United States, on one side, and Germany and Japan on the other, stands as a cautionary tale in this regard. As by far the world's largest economic and financial power, the United States was in a strong position to bargain with Germany and Japan—two rising and potentially revisionist powers—on the terms of an international order that would dissuade them from embarking on large-scale territorial conquest. But the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations, in line with their ideology of limited government, offered a bargain that involved few US commitments beyond adherence to the 1922 naval disarmament accords, tacit acceptance of Japan's sphere of influence in Manchuria, and an attitude of general goodwill toward Germany and Japan provided that they did not engage in military aggression. In offering minimal concrete incentives to Germany and Japan to refrain from territorial expansion, the United States passed up an opportunity to establish a more robust international order in the aftermath of World War One.

Foundational bargains, and the international orders that arise from them, lie at the center of international affairs. Because they are designed to satisfy states' vital interests, foundational bargains are a major factor in determining whether states remain at peace with each other. Historically, foundational bargains have also typically established the parameters for international commerce (for example, by determining to what extent trade will take place according to liberal principles), established the basic rules of permissible and prohibited international behavior, created authority relations for the enforcement of agreed rules and constraints, and established mechanisms for the management of collective action problems.

Conceiving international politics in terms of foundational bargains challenges the Waltzian perspective in three fundamental ways. First, it means that the logic of self-help applies only situationally, rather than as a general characteristic of international politics. To the extent that states are able to achieve security through foundational bargains, self-help becomes less significant as a determinant of state actions. Second, it means that substantial role differentiation among states may develop. In defining authority relations among states and establishing certain states as leaders and others as followers, foundational bargains may enable the emergence of a considerable degree of functional specialization and division of labor among states (Lake 2009). For example, under the post-1945 liberal bargain the United States assumed primary responsibility for the military defense of the West, whereas its former adversaries Germany and Japan evolved into what Hanns Maull (1990/91) has called "civilian powers." Third, the far-reaching impact of foundational bargains means that the essential character of international politics may vary considerably from one historical setting to another. There is less "similarity and repetition of international outcomes" across historical eras than Waltz asserts (1979, 67).

## IR Knowledge as Presented in Textbooks

Given the centrality of international order to the functioning of international politics, it is striking that conventional IR textbooks largely disregard the subject. For example, of the twelve textbooks examined for this study, only one (*MCM*) includes a glossary entry for “order” or “international order.” Although the phrase “international order” appears here and there in a majority of the textbooks, in most cases it is employed casually and without explicit definition. All of the textbooks devote substantial space to discussing institutional manifestations of international order such as international organizations and international law. But they do not link these institutions to the underlying foundational bargains that enable the institutions to function effectively. In other words, they overlook the political process that gives rise to international order in the first place. None of the textbooks discusses foundational bargains as a primary source of orderly relations among states.

If foundational bargains and the international orders associated with them are central to international politics, how can we account for the fact that conventional IR textbooks mostly ignore them? The answer appears to be that IR textbook writers (or at least, those writing for the US market) have adopted core elements of Waltz’s conception of international politics. The fact of international anarchy is assumed to impose a self-help imperative, preventing meaningful role differentiation among states. The logic of international politics is treated as transhistorical rather than as varying on the basis of particular foundational bargains. In other words, conventional textbooks adopt an approach to IR that largely sidelines questions about the nature and operation of purposive international order.

An examination of how conventional textbooks present IR theory provides insight into why they have so little to say about international order. All of the textbooks examined for this study devote one or more full chapters to an explicit discussion of theory. This discussion is located near the beginning of the book and comprises, on average, about ten percent of the book’s total pages. All but one of the books organize their discussion of theory around what are said to be the chief theoretical traditions in IR, which are identified in most of the books as realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, and feminism. Realism and liberalism, billed as the most influential traditions, typically receive the most extensive coverage, followed by constructivism. Marxism and feminism receive the least detailed treatment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, see also Matthews and Callaway (2015) and Berenskoetter (2018).

What does the treatment of theory reveal about how the books conceptualize international order? The following section surveys how the problem of international order is addressed—or not addressed—in what the books say about realism, liberalism, and constructivism. These theoretical traditions, because of their positivist epistemology, might be expected to offer explanatory insight into the origins and nature of international political order. By contrast, the post-positivist orientation of the Marxist and feminist traditions means that they are generally not concerned with the problem of international order as defined here.

*Realism.* The textbooks are quite similar to each other in their presentation of the assumptions and logic of the realist tradition. In noting realism's lengthy historical pedigree, all but one of the textbooks cite Thucydides as an early realist thinker, and Machiavelli and Hobbes each receive mention in a majority of the books. Nearly all of the books distinguish among various strains of realism, noting the differences among classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism and between offensive and defensive realism. But despite nodding to the diversity and historical richness of realist thought, by and large the textbooks offer an essentially Waltzian portrayal of contemporary realist theory. In this portrayal, anarchy is the defining feature of the international realm and international politics operates according to the self-help imperative. We are told that according to realism, "states can only rely on themselves" (*MM*, 71); that "the anarchic structure of the international system makes self-help a core motivation" (*SCD*, 23); that states "have to rely on self-help to defend themselves" (*N*, 35); that they are forced to "provide for their own security from external threats" (*MCM*, 4.2<sup>5</sup>); that "[a]bsent any central governing authority in the global system, states are locked in a self-help relationship with one another" (*BHB*, 228); that "international anarchy leads even well-intentioned leaders to practice self-help" (*BK*, 24); that under anarchy, states must "rely on self-help" (*PG*, 46); that "states take measures of their own accord to protect themselves" (*GIM*, 79); that "every state must first and foremost look out for its own survival and security" (*FLS*, xxxv); that "[r]ealists see a 'self-help world'" (*D*, 61); that "essentially, all realists subscribe to the [imperative of] self-help" (*LMB*, 81); and that states "react to the situation of global anarchy by relying on their own resources" (*SZ*, 81).

Thus, even though neither logic nor history supports the inference that an anarchic system is necessarily a self-help system, conventional IR textbooks follow Waltz in

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<sup>5</sup> The textbook by McDonald, Chapman, and Moser (*MCM*) exists only in a non-paginated digital format. The book is comprised of 35 modules, with each module divided into numbered sections. Thus, references to *MCM* in this article will be given in the form of module and section rather than page number. For example, "10.3" refers to Module 10, Section 3.

identifying self-help as a central tenet of contemporary realist theory. In doing so, they largely foreclose the possibility of using realist theory to explain or even recognize the existence of international order. (Again, by “international order” I refer to *purposive* political order constructed on the basis of foundational bargains.) A realist perspective that takes the self-help imperative as a given will interpret international politics as a timeless power struggle defined by strategic competition, security dilemmas, alliance formation, and armed conflict. And indeed, every one of the textbooks portrays these phenomena as the key implications of realist theory. By contrast, an “international order” perspective would highlight foundational bargains among states rather than self-help, and would be attentive to changes in international political dynamics arising from changes in foundational bargains.

To the extent that the textbooks draw a connection between realist thought and purposive international order, they do so mainly in the context of hegemonic stability theory. Several of the books explicitly link hegemonic stability theory to realist logic. Most of the books include at least a brief discussion of hegemonic stability theory, noting its argument that the presence of a hegemonic power can dampen violent conflict among states, promote trade liberalization, and solve collective action problems. But, consistent with Waltzian realism, the role of “hegemon” is defined in such a way as to abstract it from historical context and render it as yet another manifestation of a timeless power struggle among states. Several of the textbooks, with slight variations in wording, define a hegemon simply as a dominant power (*D, FLS, GIM, MCM, N, SCD, SZ*), while others provide a more detailed definition specifying that a hegemon is both able and willing to impose rules on the behavior of other states in the system (*BK, BHB, LMB, MM, PG*). None of the books addresses the considerable literature that conceives of hegemony as a negotiated role based on a bargained compact between a high-capability state and other states (Clark 2011; Cronin 2001; Goh 2013; Goh 2019; Ikenberry 1989; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Lake 2009; Lebow and Valentino 2009). Nor do the books discuss the variations among hegemonic orders that arise from differences in the ideology and preferences of one hegemonic power compared with those of another (Kupchan 2014). In other words, the textbooks use the concept of hegemony in a way that ignores foundational bargains and preserves the self-help assumption: if international rules exist, it is because the hegemon imposes them rather than because they have been negotiated. This approach implies that the substantive content of a hegemonic order is of little interest and need not be discussed, because it is little more than an expression of the distribution of power.

*Liberalism.* The textbooks are less uniform in their portrayal of liberal IR theory than in their portrayal of realism. As one textbook notes, “[l]iberalism is a much more diverse body of theories than realism ... and is therefore more difficult to summarize

coherently” (*D*, 71). As another says, “liberal theory tends ... to be more fragmented [than realism] because it directs our attention to many more factors in world politics” (*SCD*, 64). Even so, some common themes and elements are apparent. According to all of the books, liberal theory sees greater potential for positive-sum cooperation among states than realist theory does. In explaining why liberal theory is more “optimistic” than realism about the prospects for cooperation, the books generally point to some combination of the following arguments: 1) Domestic interest groups that stand to gain from international cooperation—for example, export-oriented producers that wish to gain access to foreign markets—may pressure their government to reach cooperative deals with other states; 2) International institutions facilitate cooperation among states by reducing the transaction costs involved in reaching agreements and by providing verification and enforcement mechanisms to support the agreements; 3) Reciprocity creates powerful ongoing incentives for cooperation; 4) Complex interdependence enables states to deemphasize the relative-gains concerns that might otherwise stand in the way of cooperative action.

A few of the textbooks distinguish between what might be called “inside-out” and “outside-in” versions of liberal theory. The “outside-in” version, commonly known as neoliberal institutionalism, largely accepts the core assumptions of Waltzian neorealism, including the notion that states are driven by a self-help imperative arising from systemic anarchy. This version of liberal theory differs from neorealism mainly in emphasizing the importance of international institutions in promoting reciprocity and helping states overcome mistrust that would otherwise impede mutually beneficial cooperation. Because of its Waltzian starting-point, the logic of neoliberal institutionalism does not point in the direction of foundational bargains or role differentiation among states. By contrast, the “inside-out” version of liberal theory views domestic processes, rather than a systemically imposed self-help imperative, as the primary source of states’ foreign policy choices. This version of liberal theory, because it is not shackled by the limiting assumptions of Waltzian neorealism, would seem at least in principle to be compatible with the study of purposive international order. But of the few textbooks that explicitly discuss the “inside-out” version of liberal theory (*GIM* 92–94; *MCM*, 4.3–4.4; *MM* 79–82), none spells out a connection between the domestic formulation of policy choices and the establishment of foundational bargains among states.

*Constructivism.* The textbooks are quite uniform in their characterization of constructivist theory. Constructivism, we are told, views ideational processes as more fundamental than material ones. States’ interests and goals take shape through social interaction, rather than being determined by material factors. Constructivists explore the social sources of identities rather than taking identities as given. They emphasize the importance of socially constructed norms in regulating relations among states.

In some ways, the constructivist tradition might seem to offer a ready-made opportunity for IR textbooks to address the question of purposive international order. Constructivism, like the study of international order, emphasizes agency and contingency in international politics. More than half of the textbooks quote Alexander Wendt's famous dictum that "anarchy is what states make of it." On this point, the constructivist tradition would appear to be in close alignment with an international order perspective. But as portrayed in the textbooks, constructivism appears to have little to say about the foundational bargains at the heart of international order. According to the textbooks, constructivism views change in international politics as arising through processes of socialization, learning, and norm diffusion that alter the identities and preferences of states. This portrayal, although it envisages the possibility of fundamental change in international politics, is largely silent on the practical question of how changes in states' identities and preferences might then lead to the remaking of the foundational bargains that structure international order. In focusing on how social processes can bring about international change, constructivism largely ignores bargaining as a source of change and implicitly treats states as undifferentiated units.

I turn next to a discussion of what conventional IR textbooks say about international history. From an international order perspective, international history merits a central place in the study of IR, including at the introductory level. History illuminates the problem of order by enabling us to compare the international orders of different eras and different historical contexts (e.g., Kocs 2019). Such comparisons "denaturalize" the present-day order by calling attention to the specific circumstances that gave rise to it and the ways in which its substantive content differs from that of previous international orders. Comparing the present-day order to past orders also makes it possible to identify long-term directional trends in the character of international governance. In addition, examining the rise and fall of past orders helps us to understand how international orders are created, how they are sustained, and why they break down. Thus, comparative historical analysis is a primary method for studying international order.

How is the problem of international order addressed in the parts of conventional IR textbooks that deal with international history? As with their treatment of IR theory, conventional textbooks treat international history in a way that largely overlooks questions involving purposive international order. Nearly all of the books include at least one chapter devoted to international history, but in general they do not use the chapter to illuminate differences between the present-day international order and past orders or to identify long-term changes in the character of international order. Instead, they use the chapter for other purposes: to provide basic background information, to introduce various IR concepts, to suggest historical lessons and analogies for present-day consideration, to highlight recurring patterns, and to provide data for evaluating

theoretical propositions. None of the textbooks draws explicit comparisons between international orders in different historical periods.

On the whole, the historical coverage in the textbooks tends to portray the character of international politics as remaining largely unchanged over the past several centuries. Most of the textbooks offer a version of what de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson (2011) have called the “myth of 1648”—the idea that the 1648 Peace of Westphalia established the modern state system comprised of sovereign states interacting under anarchy. We are told, for example, that the Westphalian settlement “is widely recognized by scholars as the birth of the modern nation-state system” (*BHB*, 11); that it “ushered in the contemporary international system by establishing the principle of sovereignty” (*LMB*, 36); that it “established ... the practice of sovereignty” (N, 14); that it “began the modern state system” (*SCD*, 24); that it “formally recognized” the “revolutionary principle of sovereignty” (*SZ*, 40); that it “embraced the notion of sovereignty” (*MM*, 21); that it “established the basic rules that have defined the international system ever since—the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states as equal and independent members of an international system” (*PG*, 55).

Setting aside the factually questionable nature of these statements (Croxtan 1999; Osiander 2001), the myth of 1648 is problematic because it obscures processes of change in international politics. In the words of de Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson, the myth “effects an ahistorical temporalist sleight of hand, wherein 1648 marks the boundary of an endless and synchronic present” (2011, 756). The myth thereby deflects attention away from the problem of international order. After all, why bother to compare the structure of international order in different historical periods if the essential nature of international politics is unchanging? The presence of the Westphalian myth helps explain why the historical chapter in several of the textbooks comes across as little more than a recital of endlessly recurring strategic rivalries, arms races, and wars. In their coverage of international history, as in their coverage of IR theory, conventional IR textbooks tend to remain largely within the Waltzian framework. This framework shapes both the selection and the interpretation of the historical material. For example, although nearly all of the textbooks devote multiple pages to discussing the two World Wars, they typically say little if anything about the new foundational bargains that arose after those wars. From an international order perspective, the foundational bargains that emerge in the wake of systemic conflicts such as the World Wars are of crucial significance, because they reshape the fundamental character of international order (Ikenberry 2001; Kocs 2019; Lascurettes 2020). But of the textbooks examined for this study, only *MCM* (16.4) explicitly addresses this point.

## Implications

In ignoring the existence of foundational bargains among states, conventional IR textbooks offer a constricted and misleading portrayal of how international politics works in the modern world. The failure to consider foundational bargains is especially significant in two respects. First, it gives rise to a faulty analysis of the causes of war and peace among states. A core function of foundational bargains is to reduce (or in some cases, foreclose) the possibility of war between the states participating in the bargain. If foundational bargains are often the single most important factor in determining the likelihood of war, then discussions that fail to take account of such bargains are inherently flawed. Second, the failure to consider foundational bargains gives rise to problematic or superficial analyses of international change. A core function of foundational bargains is to define the stakes of interaction between participating countries. Thus, analyses that fail to take account of foundational bargains are likely to do a poor job of specifying what is at stake in processes of international political change.

One of the main reasons why states enter into foundational bargains is to reduce the likelihood of being drawn into wars they would prefer to avoid. For example, a powerful state may offer a security guarantee to a less powerful state as a way of pacifying the less powerful state and limiting its strategic options (Schroeder 2004; Pressman 2008). This was a central purpose of the security guarantees provided by the United States during the Cold War to West Germany and Japan (Joffe 1984; Cha 2016). More broadly, a key goal of the dozens of alliance and client state relationships established by the United States with less powerful states since 1945 has been to suppress security competition among those states and reduce the possibility that they might initiate wars with states outside the US alliance/client network (Rosato 2003, 600). By the same token, a primary purpose of foundational bargains between major-power rivals is to enable the participants to secure their core interests by means short of war with each other.

Thus, the proper starting point for explaining patterns of international peace and conflict in the contemporary world is an analysis of foundational bargains. What bargains exist? How, and to what extent, do they inhibit armed conflict among the participating states? For example, in accounting for the stability of peaceful relations among liberal democracies since 1945, the hegemonic bargain between the United States and its Western allies looms large. Because hegemonic bargains are a component of international system structure, they take analytical priority over causal explanations that assume states to be fully independent units operating in a self-help environment (McDonald 2015).

All of the textbooks examined for this study devote substantial space—at least two full chapters, in the majority of cases—to the topic of armed conflict and military security. In most of the books, this material includes discussion of both the causes of interstate war and the strategies that states may pursue in their quest for security. A few of the books also include an explicit discussion of the causes of peace. But conspicuously missing from these discussions is an exploration of how patterns of war and peace are affected by the existence of foundational bargains.

In explaining why interstate wars occur, many of the textbooks (*BK*, 196–210; *BHB*, 198–202; *D*, 210–19; *GIM*, 210–24; *PG*, 141–43; *SCD*, 131–37) approach the topic using a “levels of analysis” framework, focusing sequentially on causes at the individual level, the state level, and the systemic level. In these books, the systemic causes of war are interpreted primarily through a Waltzian lens. Anarchy is identified as the decisive permissive cause of interstate war, while power transitions are highlighted as crucial proximate causes of war. (In a nod to neoliberal institutionalism, a few of the books mention economic interdependence as a systemic variable that may also affect patterns of war and peace.) In adopting Waltz’s characterization of system structure as being defined by anarchy and the international distribution of power, these books overlook the structural impact of foundational bargains, which shape patterns of international war and peace by reducing the possibility of a resort to military force among the states participating in the bargains.

Two of the textbooks (*MCM*, Modules 8–10, and *FLS*, 100–35) explain the occurrence of armed conflict mainly in terms of the rational-choice “bargaining model” of war (Fearon 1995). In this model, the decision for war typically results from factors—private information, indivisible goods, commitment problems—that prevent states from reaching a bargain that preserves peace, even though states would normally prefer such a bargain to the costs and risks of a war. Implicitly, the bargaining model begins from the Waltzian self-help assumption. As such, it too fails to account for the impact of foundational bargains. Foundational bargains affect overall patterns of international war and peace precisely because they structure relationships among participating states on a basis *other* than self-help. In other words, the existence of a foundational bargain among a particular pair or group of states would typically prevent the rational-choice bargaining model of war from coming into play in the first place, because the foundational bargain removes war as a normal policy option in relations among those states.

Most of the textbooks situate their examination of the causes of war within a broader discussion of international security. Depending on the textbook, this discussion may also include an overview of strategies used by states to bolster their security or an

analysis of the causes of international peace. Here as well, the books typically overlook the existence and impact of foundational bargains. For example, in examining the routes available to states for strengthening their security and preventing war, the books discuss a variety of competitive and cooperative strategies. The competitive strategies, often explicitly labeled as “realist,” include arms buildups, balancing, deterrence, the acquisition of allies, and selective uses of force. The cooperative strategies, often explicitly labeled as “liberal,” include disarmament, arms control, collective security, democracy promotion, economic interdependence, and reliance on international law. Some of the books also discuss “constructivist” security strategies including the strengthening of global norms of peaceful interaction and the reshaping of relational friend/foe identities.

Generally absent from these analyses is discussion of how states use foundational bargains to strengthen their security. For example, most of the textbooks make no mention of bargains in which a powerful state provides a security guarantee to a less powerful state in exchange for the ability to restrain the less powerful state from engaging in actions damaging to the powerful state’s interests. None of the books includes a glossary entry or index entry for “security guarantee.” In the twelve books collectively, only a few isolated mentions of security guarantees can be found. These include a brief discussion in *MCM* (9.4 and 11.3) of the 1955 bargain in which West Germany gained membership in NATO (together with the associated security guarantee) in exchange for accepting limits on its rearmament and its ability to pursue territorial revisions, and some discussion in *SZ* (106, 168, 170) of security guarantees as a factor in preserving international stability. And although all the textbooks identify nuclear proliferation as an international security concern, only two (*FLS*, 625–26; *MCM*, 14.5) mention that the United States has used security guarantees as a key instrument for dissuading friendly states from developing nuclear weapons (Gavin 2015).

A majority of the textbooks include some discussion of alliance formation as a security strategy. All of these discussions highlight capability aggregation, rather than the consolidation of international order, as the primary purpose for forming an alliance. Thus we are told that alliances “provide opportunities for enhancing a state’s power position in the system” (*BHB*, 229); that they “generally have the purpose of augmenting their members’ power by pooling capabilities” (*PG*, 57); that they “increase the military power of all their members by aggregating their military capabilities” (*MCM*, 11.3); that they enable states to “counter threats and increase strength” (*SCD*, 157) and that they “increase the likelihood that two states will cooperate militarily in the event of war” (*FLS*, 206). But when an alliance takes the form of a security guarantee by a powerful state to a less powerful state (as is typically the case with US alliances since 1945), much of its purpose involves solidifying international order by limiting the ability of the junior

alliance partner to initiate wars independently of the senior partner. Because the textbooks lack a conceptual framework for analyzing purposive international order, they typically overlook the order-maintenance function of alliances.

By the same token, there is virtually no mention in the textbooks of client state relationships, even though entering into client relationships is a prominent method used by both weak states (the clients) and powerful states (the patrons) to improve their security position (Carney 1989; Sylvan and Majeski 2009). None of the textbooks includes a glossary entry or index entry for “client state.” Client relationships, like security guarantees, are among the key instruments used by powerful states to exercise control beyond their borders and secure a favorable external environment. In that sense, security guarantees and client relationships function as modern-day analogs to the colonial possessions and protectorates of earlier historical eras.

In summary, conventional IR textbooks approach the topic of international security from a perspective heavily influenced by Waltzian assumptions. In explaining the causes of interstate war and peace, they typically treat states as fully independent actors motivated by a self-help imperative, rather than—more realistically—as constrained actors whose options for choosing war may be largely determined by existing foundational bargains.

The failure to take foundational bargains into account also contributes to problems of superficiality in the way conventional IR textbooks address the question of systemic change in international politics. Nearly all of the textbooks examined for this study grapple to at least some extent with the question of change. What types of systemic change are most likely to take place in coming years, given current trends and developments? How would these changes matter? In addressing this topic, the textbooks are handicapped by their lack of a conceptual framework for characterizing international order. In the absence of such a framework, they struggle to identify what is at stake in the change from one international order to another. To evaluate the significance of systemic change in international politics, it is necessary to be able to compare the current international order with a different order that might exist in the future. The starting point for such a comparison is to identify the substantive elements of the international order that exists today. But of the twelve textbooks, only two (*FLS*, 611–13; *MCM*, 35.5) make an explicit effort to do so.

The question of systemic change arises especially in regard to China’s emergence as a power with economic and military capabilities second only to those of the United States. How might China’s rise affect the rules, practices, and bargains that structure the existing international order? IR scholars have identified this as one of the most

consequential questions in international politics today, and have debated it at length (e.g., Beeson 2013; Callahan 2008; Chin and Thakur 2010; Ikenberry 2018; Ikenberry and Lim 2017; Johnston 2019; Jones 2018; Mazarr, Heath, and Cevallos 2018; Nathan 2016; Owen 2021; Rolland 2020; Tang 2018; Tobin 2020; Weiss and Wallace 2021; Wu 2018; Zhao 2016). Nearly all of the textbooks examined for this study point to the rise of China as a momentous development, but most of them have little to say about how China's rise might affect the character of international order. In effect, the textbooks appear to be limited by their implicit adoption of Waltz's conception of international politics as a realm governed by timeless self-help dynamics. This conception, which emphasizes continuity and recurrence in the pattern of relations among states, does not readily lend itself to an analysis of substantive change in those patterns. Thus, the textbooks tend to interpret the rise of China mainly through the lens of hegemonic stability theory (*D*, 66, 436), power transition theory (*FLS*, 636–44; *MCM*, 20.5; *N*, 182–84; *PG* 52, 74; *SCD*, 113), or a return to bipolarity (*GIM*, 513–16). A shortcoming of these approaches, of course, is that they focus mainly on shifts in the international distribution of power rather than on the question of how the substantive content of an international order led by China would differ from that of the existing LIO. A few of the books (*D*, 436; *FLS*, 641; *MM*, 112–13; *MCM*, 20.1) do raise this question, but none addresses it in detail.

## Conclusion

On the whole, the portrait of international politics that emerges from conventional IR textbooks strongly resembles the one offered by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*. In this portrayal, sovereign states function as essentially undifferentiated units, interacting with each other according to the timeless dynamics of a self-help imperative. This portrayal of international politics is an abstraction that differs in crucial ways from the world we actually inhabit—what might be called the “historical” world. In the historical world, powerful states seek actively to shape the international environment to manage the threats and uncertainties that emanate from beyond their borders. In pursuit of this objective, they typically attempt to reach foundational bargains with other states. Such bargains establish role differentiation among states and reduce the need for the participating states to pursue self-help strategies in their relations with each other. Because the substantive content of foundational bargains depends heavily on historically specific factors, the character of international politics may differ greatly from one historical setting to another.

None of the textbooks examined for this study discusses the role of foundational bargains in defining the content and functioning of international order. None examines the impact of foundational bargains on patterns of international war and peace. None shows how changes in foundational bargains correspond to changes in the stakes and

dynamics of relations among states. In these respects, conventional IR textbooks offer a significantly misleading and incomplete portrayal of how international politics works.

Having said this, it should be apparent from the analysis presented here that some textbooks address the problem of international order with more depth and sophistication than others. It is also worth noting that, of the textbooks examined for this study, *MCM* stands largely alone in its sustained focus on international order. The authors organize their book explicitly around the concept of order, and although the book does not refer to foundational bargains as such, its narrative often implicitly notes the structural impact of such bargains (e.g., 1.4, 9.4, 11.3, 14.5, 16.4, 20.1). But in important ways, even *MCM* seems to remain largely within the Waltzian framework. As noted earlier, the book's analysis of the causes of war employs a rational-choice approach that does not take account of foundational bargains. And its module on "Great Power Politics" (Module 20), which might have explored the bargaining process that establishes certain states as managers of international order, instead adheres to an essentially Waltzian focus on polarity and the international distribution of power.

One can imagine reasons why IR textbook authors might be reluctant to address the problem of international order. There is simplicity and theoretical elegance in portraying the international realm as being comprised of independent and functionally undifferentiated states, each motivated by a systemically imposed self-help imperative. Such a portrayal lends itself to concise explanation and creates the illusion of offering timeless insights into international political dynamics. Such a portrayal also makes it easy to draw distinctions among realist, liberal, and constructivist theoretical perspectives. By contrast, describing the international realm in terms of historically specific foundational bargains requires a more complicated explanation. Also, a focus on foundational bargains implicitly favors a holistic or synthetic analysis rather than an emphasis on the alternative interpretations generated by different theoretical "paradigms." Thus, fully engaging with the problem of international order would likely require a substantial reconceptualization of the conventional IR textbook. But if, as this article has argued, purposive international order is central to international politics, then its existence and impact should not be slighted—even in introductory textbooks.

## Appendix

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- BHB* Boyer, Mark A., Natalie F. Hudson, and Michael J. Butler. *Global Politics: Applying Theory to a Complex World*, First Edition. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- D* D'Anieri, Paul. *International Politics: Power and Purpose in Global Affairs*, Fifth Edition. Cengage, 2021.
- FLS* Frieden, Jeffry A., David A. Lake, and Kenneth A. Schultz. *World Politics: Interests, Interactions, Institutions*, Fifth Edition. W. W. Norton, 2022.
- GIM* Grieco, Joseph, G. John Ikenberry, and Michael Mastanduno. *Introduction to International Relations*, Second Edition. Red Globe Press, 2019.
- LMB* Lamy, Steven L., John S. Masker, John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens. *Introduction to Global Politics*, Sixth Edition. Oxford University Press, 2021.
- MCM* McDonald, Patrick J., Terrence L. Chapman, and Robert G. Moser, *An Introduction to International Relations: Opening the Global System*, First Edition. Pearson, 2021.
- MM* Mingst, Karen A., and Heather Elko McKibben. *Essentials of International Relations*, Ninth Edition. W. W. Norton, 2021.
- N* Nau, Henry R. *Perspectives on International Relations: Power, Institutions, Ideas*, Seventh Edition. CQ Press, 2021.
- PG* Pevehouse, Jon C., and Joshua S. Goldstein. *International Relations*, Twelfth Edition. Pearson, 2020.
- SCD* Scott, James M., Ralph G. Carter, and A. Cooper Drury. *IR: Seeking Security, Prosperity, and Quality of Life in a Changing World*, Fourth Edition. CQ Press, 2021.
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