

Interview – Jason Pack

Written by E-International Relations

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Jason Pack is the founder of the consultancy firm Libya-Analysis LLC, Senior Analyst for Emerging Challenges at the NATO Defence College Foundation in Rome, and Associate Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society in London. He is the Founder and Director of the NATO & the Global Enduring Project, which produces a range of content (including the forthcoming podcast 'Disorder') that investigates the unique features of our current era of geopolitics. Pack lived in Tripoli in the late-Gaddafi period and has visited most years since then. He has held senior positions at the Middle East Institute, the U.S.-Libya Business Association, and the American Chamber of Commerce in Libya, all of which focused on helping Western governments, think tanks, and corporations understand and operate in the Libyan environment. He holds degrees from Williams College, the American University in Cairo, and Oxford University. He was a Fulbright Fellow in Damascus in 2004-5 and a PhD student in History at Cambridge University from 2011-2015. Pack's most recent book is *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder*. You can follow Pack on Twitter here.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

There is a growing consensus in the community of Western policymakers, the world of think tank fellows, the academic political science field, and among pundits that the last few years of international affairs were fundamentally different to what has come before. For many, this era constitutes a new historical epoch that is structurally distinct from the post-Cold War era. Many have contextualized the broad outlines of this moment as the decline of American hegemony and the rise of China, but I profoundly disagree with this framing of our historical moment.

I support the camp of historians and International Relations scholars who have begun analysing this era as characterized by 'Disorder'. I started using this concept long before Russia's February 2022 re-invasion of Ukraine and even prior to Trump's ascendancy to the White House. My small contribution to this line of analysis centres around the idea that we are living through an era of Global Enduring Disorder (GED) – i.e. a period of planetary disorder that is self-reinforcing and can only end when enough political will is generated by 'the forces of order' to overcome this centripetal pull. I use the GED concept to convey that the traditional phase of multipolarity – or restoration of the balance of power, or even a struggle among rival ordering systems – has been skipped. Instead, the superpowers have all, at times, sought to promote the GED, which is marked by a rise in neo-populist leaders (i.e. Trump, Putin, Bibi, and Orban), collective action failures on climate change and tax havens, increasing societal fissures and security challenges emanating from unregulated cyberspace, "neo-mercantilism," an ongoing struggle for global leadership, and other factors I discuss in *Libya & the Global Enduring Disorder*.

I've taken part in panel discussions with other scholars who are thinking about Disorder in interesting ways, and while we don't always agree on how the current Disorder came about, who is seeking to benefit from it, and where it is heading, we as a community seem to be finally recognising that the current geopolitical moment is unique and are attempting to contextualise what makes it different. Only if we accurately diagnose the malady can we prescribe the correct medicine and advocate for democratic countries to work together to order the world. To my mind, these efforts are currently the most exciting developments in International Relations, think tanks, and policymaking.

I want to live in a world where a global coalition can order international affairs, and I advocate for such actions in my writings and forthcoming podcast. Conversely, some people believe that Russia and China are actively trying to order

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the world in their images and that the current disorder is a transitory phase, whereas I believe that Russia and China are actively encouraging global disorder so as to create a more fragmented world without coherent collective action or dialogue. It is our role as pundits, scholars, and policymakers to put complex developments into contextualizable terms that everyday voters, students, and donors can understand and then present those core constituencies with the implications of different possible choices. I am a Hobbesian at heart; I believe most citizens of global democracies (even non-Western democracies) would choose an imperfect order over a disordered world and hence we need to frame the current struggles in those terms.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

First and foremost, it has been my work in the policy trenches on Libya (rather than my time living in Syria, Palestine or Libya) which has changed how I view the world. When I was wet behind the ears, I used to think that major Western corporate players wanted to increase their quarterly profits and that major Western governments wanted to help their companies make money. Therefore I had thought that the primary flaws in the post-Cold War, neo-liberal, America-centric global order had to do with the lack of regulation of externalities emerging from the capitalistic profit motive of major multinational corporations. Now, having spent more than ten years helping Western firms try to make a buck — or more frequently recuperate back payments, — in Libya, I realise that the profit motive is not really what has driven so much dysfunction in the world – it is the failure to coordinate for mutually beneficial outcomes that require multiparty compromises. In the West, it is coordination failures rather than corruption or greed that is the antecedent problem. Coordination failures among a range of political, media and corporate actors led to the rise of neo-populists, which then engendered further corruption. Seen holistically, corruption is certainly one of the results, but it isn't really the profit motive that drives the dysfunction, it is incumbent psychology, paranoia, short-sightedness, desires for secrecy, control and ego benefits.

Incumbent psychology's attraction for CEOs, lobbyists, trade associations and politicians has not been treated sufficiently in existing literature, unlike the detailed scrutiny given to the corrosive effects of bankers' bonuses being tied to short-term performance targets. Popular books about the dangers of the oil industry to global geopolitics and human well-being, such as Rachel Maddow's *Blowout* and academic ones like Thane Gustafson's *Wheel of Fortune: The Battle for Oil and Power in Russia* and Mikhail Zygar's *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* all assume that Western multinational energy companies are coherently pursuing shareholder values and long-term profits rationally in their dealings with unsavoury autocrats and broken semi-sovereign institutions. Those authors' perceptions are devoid of democratic oversight, so Western citizens face the externalities caused by their companies' rational pursuit of profits. When I was younger, I was more of a liberal capitalist, thinking that greater regulation was needed to temper ascendent neo-liberalism into something like an idealised version of Scandinavian capitalism (now, I think the primary dysfunctions are far deeper and mere regulations won't be enough – we need global institutions to which states delegate parts of their sovereignty). We don't live in a world where genuine free markets reign supreme. The problem is not too much capitalism but too little. We need governments to make sure we have open, competitive markets. A deep investigation of the situation in Sweden showcases this. It turns out Sweden is beset by even more of the neo-liberal problems of market capture, crony privatisation, and outsourcing than pretty much any other Western society. All the good intentions in the world have not prevented Sweden's drift towards first coordination failures, then crony privatisations, later the weakening of genuine market competition and now ascendant neo-populism and neo-liberalism. Binding regulations and coherent institutions were required.

Having worked in close quarters with the major corporates of the Libya space when I was Executive Director at the U.S.-Libya Business Association, I view the major American firms like ConocoPhillips, Hess, or Marathon that I represented more from a Freudian or Polybian perspective than a Hayekian, Adam Smithian, or Leninist one. What I witnessed is that CEOs and lobbyists of major multinationals were operating under their own delusional myths, rather than an obsession with the quarterly earnings reports as is traditionally assumed. Marathon and Hess sold off their choicest Libyan assets at fire-sale prices. TotalEnergies scooped them up for a song and is sitting pretty. The profit motive can't explain the psychological dimensions of fear and incumbency that motivated their decisions.

Multinational companies frequently choose suboptimal decisions that harm their long-term interests. So do

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governments and individuals. Adam Smith's invisible hand only works when actors understand what will make them money and what will not. The psychological component here is profound and cannot be explained away by charts and graphs of expected earnings. Top dogs invariably prefer the status quo and cannot easily envision alternatives. They may be fearful of losing their spot in the pecking order and hence are predisposed to fight unwinnable rear-guard actions, rather than preparing for the economy or politics of the future. They may be terribly scared of risk or negative optics. Additionally, at the lower levels of a giant multi-billion-dollar organisation, where fear of bucking 'the system' is most pronounced, it may just be easier for the DC lobbyists and government affairs professionals to get their promotions to the Houston office if some semblance of the status quo is maintained and perceived risk is minimised. These dynamics have driven us to live in a "neo-mercantilist" world rather than a free trade world of functional markets.

Your book *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder* is based on the premise that the post-Cold War US-led international order has given way to an 'enduring disorder'. What were some of the events which first led you to this observation?

Inspired by the failure to coordinate, rigid silo-fication and the obsession with status quo thinking that I saw at play within Libyan entities, Western government departments and major multinational corporations operating in the Libyan sphere, I began my work sketching out the paradigm of the Global Enduring Disorder. I speculated that what I witnessed in exaggerated form in Libya was playing out across the world globally. Then after much research, I found that these drivers are at play in how American or British policymakers also choose to maintain the status quo rather than plan for the inevitable complexities of the future.

I've looked at studies of empires, IR theory and history to understand how and why what is happening now is different from what has happened before. Realist IR theory has broadly suggested that the decline of one empire leads to a restoration in the balance of power, via a struggle among rival systems of order. According to this way of thinking Pax Britannica led to Pax Americana, albeit with a brief interlude of multipolar global conflict and uncertainty in between, but even then the 'rising powers' were seeking to bring about some sort of order in their spheres of influence. So, what happens if while one hegemon is declining, other powers are not striving to – or not capable of – developing the capabilities to fill the vacuum or are not concerned with providing order? Welcome to the Global Enduring Disorder.

One feature of the 'enduring disorder' is the fraying of existing alliances, notably with France and Italy having supported opposing sides in Libya. How, if at all, is it in these countries' interests to compete in this way?

Tragically, after the death of my friend and colleague Ambassador Chris Stevens on September 12, 2011, the United States overtly withdrew from Libyan affairs. They ceded it to be vehemently contested by Italy and France, but also Russia, Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf states and the UN. The ensuing wars of post-Gaddafi succession allowed France and Italy to grant critical diplomatic support to opposite sides of the conflict as the UN, EU and NATO – normally consensus builders for collective action– were largely absent on the ground or unable to build consensus without the power of the United States behind them.

In certain Italian administrations, such as that of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, the Interior Ministry dominated Libya policy and quashed interagency rivals. In other Italian administrations, the portfolio was led by the Prime Minister's Office, as happened under Silvio Berlusconi, or the Foreign Ministry, as was the case under Paolo Gentiloni. In France, the President's Office and certain key individuals such as Jean-Yves Le Drian have taken turns side-lining the permanent staff of the Quai d'Orsay in the formulation of Libya policy.

Interestingly, the EU perceives its core interests as fundamentally threatened by developments in Libya, but it has been unable to coordinate its internal disagreements sufficiently to formulate a coherent response. I do view the EU's lack of consensus building as responsible for Italy and France taking opposing sides so vehemently – the EU simply lacks a mechanism to force the French to adopt the Italians' preferred policy or vice versa, it does not even have the right to demand that efforts be undertaken to formulate, let alone implement, a compromise policy. The EU cannot

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even force Malta to compromise with other EU members, and Malta is the EU's smallest member state. How then can the Italian focus on migration be reconciled with the French focus on counter-terrorism and a neo-Gaullist approach to all of North Africa? Within France and Italy, there have been myriad tussles among the security services, the interior ministries, appointee ministers and civil servants. Libya-related issues are just perceived as too important and too much of a hot potato to be left to the experts. Failing to coordinate for the common good, even when each side of a feud has 90% or more in common with the other, is a core feature of the Enduring Disorder.

To further increase the complexity, America's French and Italian allies were also constantly feuding with each other over Libya, each with their own specific business, migration, counter-terrorism and security interests. Conversely, the British, who traditionally attempted to harmonise otherwise divergent Western approaches towards the Middle East, had largely absented themselves from non-European foreign policy issues as Brexit negotiations sucked up most of their government capacity. At various times, certain American positions dovetailed with one of its top allies' stated goals, but at other times undermined them. The tussles between France and Italy and within French and Italian administrations to set policy on Libya is a representative microcosm of the Enduring Disorder.

You have argued that despite the current disintegration of the existing global order, no clear alternative orders have presented themselves. Do you foresee any actors formulating coherent alternatives in the future? And if so, do they realistically have the means to implement them?

The prevailing paradigm within academic IR theory is also the one which underpins most governmental scenario planning – Realism. It has long maintained that with the gradual decline of American hegemony we are in a period of increasing multipolarity leading to an inevitable contestation for global dominance – which will likely at some future point result in a durable balance of power or be won by the Chinese and their allies who would step into a hegemonic ordering role. During periods of multipolarity, the different poles compete to spread their own form of order. That was the global pattern during the late nineteenth century, early twentieth century and interwar period. It was a period of deep multipolarity. The British and French empires, Wilhelmine and later Nazi Germany, the rising Japanese Empire and the United States cultivated spheres of influence in which they imposed and policed order. This is dissimilar to the pattern we see today. America, Russia, the EU and China do not necessarily represent alternative poles of order or international standards, each competing to expand their sphere of influence and rules. They have not meaningfully collaborated with their allies on major challenges like global warming, public health and arms proliferation. In fact, coordination seems to be coming undone (as one would imagine in an interregnum of order) rather than being reconfigured (as one would imagine in a period of multipolarity) or restored (as one would imagine if the balance of power was reasserting itself after a period of lopsided American hegemony).

As a betting man, I feel comfortable wagering big that the Enduring Disorder is here to stay. Smart forecasting indicates that neither the Biden administration nor subsequent leaderships of major governments from China, Russia, the EU or the US are likely to propose a radically new framework of multilateralism or forge new alliance structures fit to address the mid-twenty-first-century challenges of climate change, pandemics, migration, demographic shift, cyberwarfare, or proxy wars and state implosion in geostrategically and economically important theatres like Libya. To my mind, it will take major socio-cultural change and a bottom-up movement to demand such consensus change to the global order.

The current war in Ukraine appears to have rejuvenated a sense of western cohesion which was missing in response to various crises in the 2010s. How significant is this as a counter to the trend of the enduring disorder?

Part of the reason that Brexit, the COVID pandemic and Trumpism have had such destabilising effects is that policymakers, thinkers and businesspeople were caught wildly unprepared, with the Western democratic world lacking a unified and popularly legitimate response to them. The current war in Ukraine is totally dissimilar, in that popular opinion in the West is remarkably behind a consensus approach to arming Ukraine and the Biden Administration was not caught unprepared – quite the contrary, it predicted events and used that to sufficiently lay the groundwork to unite NATO allies and popular opinion.

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Hence, the war in Ukraine has seen the populaces of major Western countries inch closer to getting on the same page and understanding the need for all-encompassing global collective action. Therefore, despite it being an unlikely scenario, it is quite possible that with increasing popular clamour for collective action on climate change, cybercrime, social media manipulation and global public health, it will be easier for policymakers and global populaces to see conflicts like the Libyan, Syrian and Ukrainian ones as the collective action crises they really are. In the wake of such a realisation, it is not impossible to believe that electorates across the Global North will gradually reject the inward-looking, anti-expert ideologies currently in vogue and embrace a radically new form of expert-administered, consensus globalism.

What are some of the main obstacles to global consensus-building and collective action? How realistic is it to expect them to gain traction in future?

Of course, there are many hurdles, including deep psychological ones that could prove even more difficult to overcome than the structural ones. Advocates of libertarianism, identity politics and different strains of national exceptionalisms would have to sacrifice cherished narratives that stress the freedom of the individual or the unique destiny of their national, ethnic or religious sub-community. These ideologies all stress the rights and perspectives of individuals, communities, races, ethnicities, markets or nations above that of the global collective. As such, these cultural movements on the right and left are all inherently impediments to forging a global consensus for undertaking collective policymaking aimed at maximising overall utility rather than protecting the interests of specific segments.

At the beginning of this century, ideas surrounding the universal equality of individuals and their freedom to choose associations and lifestyles rapidly gained ground and achieved considerable policy successes. Yet by the mid-to-late twenty-first century, a reversal may come about. The concepts of the 'global collective', 'involuntary obligations' and 'collective responsibility' may become realities rather than buzzwords. Although this does not appear to be the direction of travel in the early 2020s, there is no way to forecast what will come next and where the tipping point might be. The Arab Spring, the rise of neo-populist nationalism throughout the West, and the concomitant backlashes against experts, global coordination and free trade were not predicted by mainstream political theorists, futurists, commodities traders or government scenario planners of the early post-Cold War period. So, there is no compelling reason to believe that even with increasingly advanced computing, we should be able to predict the next great ideological, sociological or geopolitical transformation.

What is the most important advice you could give to scholars of International Relations?

Languages, travel and theory are of course fascinating in their own rights, but don't be mistaken into assuming they alone will necessarily provide insights into how International Relations actually works. Seeing the messiness of policymaking in action does. Appreciating the discipline of International Relations and its theorists is not the same thing as believing that IR theory has any specific role in policymaking. Concepts which come from a library should be approached with a sceptical mind.

Become a doer. Only after you have real-world experience – living in a post-conflict society, working for an embassy, doing some consultancy for a shipping company, lobbying for some multinational companies, working for an NGO on the ground – only then should you be able to comment on the relevance of IR theory to the world we live in.