

# Realist-Liberal Divide? Power & Progress in a World in Transition

Written by Jack Snyder

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JACK SNYDER, MAY 21 2012

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When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, triumphalists exulted in what seemed a double revolution: the arrival of America's "unipolar moment," and liberal democracy's victory over its twentieth-century authoritarian ideological competitors, first fascism and then communism, in what was hailed as "the end of history."<sup>[i]</sup> These events were momentous, whether judged from the standpoint of either realism or liberalism, the two dominant paradigms used by both scholars and pundits for thinking about international affairs.

It is now evident that both revolutions were only partial: despite unipolarity, semi-triumphant liberalism still faces stiff competition from illiberal ethnic nationalism, politicized religion, and thriving new forms of undemocratic capitalism. Half of humanity still lives in states that are too poor, too backward, too corrupt, or too lacking in administrative and legal capacity for the consolidation of liberal democracy. Liberalism depends on full-fledged modernity, which has not yet arrived in these neighborhoods. In this setting, the liberal unipole faces no foreseeable threat of a traditional balancing military alliance of peer competitors, but it encounters severe limits to its ability to impose a political order on the less-than-fully-modern half of the globe. Even under unipolarity, the international system remains a socially diverse anarchy, though with altered incentives and constraints.

To understand the current geopolitical equipoise between liberal and illiberal forces, scholars and public commentators need to integrate the insights of the realist logic of struggle for domination and security—the logic of power—with the liberal logic of political development and change—the logic of progress. Since 1990, I have been writing a series of articles and essays on themes that explore these intertwined logics, both as theoretical topics and as applications to contemporary political problems. These essays are broadly realist in their view of the material power and interest of political actors, yet broadly liberal (though not idealist) in their view of the social and institutional pathways to political progress. Taken as a whole, these writings extend and apply the theory of "defensive realism" and the domestic sources of strategic ideas that I first published in *Myths of Empire* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

The linchpin argument of these pieces is that, while mature democracies can transcend violent security competition among themselves, the tortuous road of political change from autocracy toward complete democracy increases the risk of violent, illiberal mass politics in states that lack favorable conditions to consolidate democracy. The current historical period is one of incomplete, turbulent transition in two respects. First, many states are struggling internally with the fraught political consequences of partial democratization. Second, the international system as a whole remains a hybrid in which most of the militarily and economically strongest states are fully modern democracies, but important rising powers as well as many lesser states are still passing through the stage of uneven economic development and incompletely democratic mass politics.

This partially democratized unipolar system is an anarchy that has no global balance of power. It has a subset of democratic states that have escaped from the logic of anarchy among themselves, yet it contains incompletely modernized regions where behavior is made aggressive both by the logic of anarchy and by the populist ideologies that thrive where mass politics coexists with weak institutions.

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No single logic trumps in this setting. In a world of mature democracies, perhaps only liberal theory would be needed. In an anarchy populated by pure autocracies, realism might suffice. But any anarchical system that includes incompletely modernized states requires the integration of both kinds of theory to understand the outcomes that international relations theory tries to explain: patterns of war, peace, empire, alliance, economic relations, and states' strategies, as well as international trends of democratization and human rights. Navigating through the dangers of this kind of hybrid international system requires an understanding of power politics within and between states.

## Three challenges of today's hybrid international system

Three central questions loom over contemporary international politics at this juncture, and the ideas in this book speak to each of them. First, how will the political institutions of China and other incompletely modernized powers such as Russia and India develop, and how will they fit into the international order that is dominated by liberal democracies? Liberals hope that these rising powers will integrate smoothly into a well institutionalized international economic order that will foster democratization backed by their expanding middle classes. The chapter on "Averting Anarchy in the New Europe" (originally published in 1990) lays out the logic of this optimistic scenario as applied prospectively to Eastern Europe's transition to democracy and the market. Realists, in contrast, worry that the rising powers' economic boom will simply make them rivals of the US and the established democracies.[ii] My own worries, expressed in the pieces on "Turbulent Transitions" (2007) and "Russian Backwardness and the Future of Europe" (1994), are different: that uneven economic modernization and incomplete democratization in potentially powerful countries like China and Russia will lead, as they have elsewhere, to political instability, rising nationalism, and friction with the outside world. The arguments and evidence presented in this collection of essays cannot resolve this debate, but they provide a distinctive and well supported set of concepts for thinking about the issue.

Second, how will regions with weak or brittle political institutions and rising demand for mass political participation, including much of the Islamic world, pass through the current stage of their transition to modernity? Liberal, secular, capitalist, civic nationalist democracy served as the model that underpinned economic and political modernization in Western Europe and North America, and it has now spread successfully to Central and Eastern Europe, Japan, and parts of the global South. However, this model has for the most part failed to sustain economic and political modernization in the Near East and other less developed states, where the post-colonial boundaries of states were mismatched with the boundaries of cultural identities, and where natural resource wealth allowed states to rule through repression and patronage rather than through civic bargains with their citizens. In the face of this perceived failure of the liberal model of modernity in such societies, popular movements have fallen back on religious sectarian and ethnic cultural resources in seeking different, illiberal methods to build a state—or to resist and evade control by the state.[iii] The chapters on "Democratization and Civil War" (2008), "Civil War and the Security Dilemma" (1999), and "Prone to Violence: The Paradox of the Democratic Peace" (2005/2006) examine the dire consequences that can occur when the demand for mass political participation outstrips the institutional carrying capacity for those demands.[iv]

Third, how will the US and its liberal democratic allies respond to the dangers and opportunities of leadership in an unevenly modernized unipolar system? The arguments in *Myths of Empire* (1991) about imperial temptations turned out to be all too relevant to understanding the response of the United States to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, as laid out here in "Myths of Empire and Strategies of Hegemony" (2006) and in "Free Hand Abroad, Divide and Rule at Home" (2009). These essays explain the tension between the tendency of all great powers to seek security through expansion and the countervailing tendency of democratic powers to learn fairly quickly to pull back from strategic overstretch. I return to these dilemmas of contemporary foreign policy choices in the conclusion.

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[i] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs, America and the World* 1990/91, Vol. 70. No. 1, pp. 23-33; Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18.

[ii] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 396-402.

[iii] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Michael Mousseau, "Market Civilization and Its Clash with Terror," *International Security*, Vol. 27, no. 3 (winter 2002/3), 5-29; Jack Snyder, "Nationalism and the Crisis of the Post-Soviet State," *Survival*, Vol. 35, no. 1 (spring 1993), 5-26.

[iv] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).