Civil Wars & the Post–Cold War International Order

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Abstract: By the standards of prosperity and peace, the post–Cold War international order has been an unparalleled success. Over the last thirty years, there has been more creation of wealth and a greater reduction of poverty, disease, and food insecurity than in all of previous history. During the same period, the numbers and lethality of wars have decreased. These facts have not deterred an alternative assessment that civil violence, terrorism, failed states, and numbers of refugees are at unprecedentedly high levels. But there is no global crisis of failed states and endemic civil war, no global crisis of refugees and migration, and no global crisis of disorder. Instead, what we have seen is a particular historical crisis unfold in the greater Middle East, which has collapsed order within that region and has fed the biggest threat to international order: populism in the United States and Europe.

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Civil wars and their relationship to international order differ dramatically by historical era. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the great powers treated national rebellions as threats to international order and sometimes cooperated in suppressing them. During the Cold War, the superpowers viewed civil wars as proxy competitions, and armed and financed client governments or rebels in order to prevent them from losing. The post–Cold War order, by contrast, devoted substantial effort to the treatment, mitigation, and resolution of civil wars, usually with the cooperation and consent of great powers. At the same time, those same great powers were often unable to reach agreement on when and how military force should be used for humanitarian purposes in civil wars.

The effects of civil wars on international orders also differ across historical eras. Civil wars may be fought over principles that undermine the norms and rules that undergird an international order. Civil wars may tempt intervention by great powers,

doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00457

who must learn prudence lest their involvement lead to direct military confrontation. The spillover of civil wars can ripple across borders and undermine regional balances of power. When those regions are of great-power interest, the containment of civil wars becomes an imperative for international order.

Much has been asserted about the relationship between civil war and the post–Cold War international order. During the last twenty-five years, pundits have repeatedly argued that the mere occurrence of particular wars, such as Somalia and Bosnia in the 1990s or Libya and Syria more recently, prove that international order is weak and tenuous. Civil wars have played an outsized role in a popular narrative of international disorder. According to this narrative, civil violence, terrorism, failed states, and the number of refugees are at unprecedentedly high levels. The world is falling apart, most people are worse off than they were thirty years ago, and globalization is to blame.

By almost every measure, this narrative is empirically incorrect. Over the last thirty years, there has been more creation of wealth and a greater reduction of poverty, disease, and food insecurity than in all of previous history.[1] During the same period, the numbers and lethality of wars have decreased.[2] The success of the post–Cold War era in managing civil wars – bringing multiple wars to an end and ameliorating several others – has contributed to a more peaceful world. Great-power confrontations have been few and great-power war a distant memory. As measured by increased trade and reductions of arms expenditures as a percentage of GDP, international cooperation has risen to unprecedented levels.[3] Indeed, international cooperation has been a fundamental characteristic of the international order since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, the post–Cold War international order is currently under substantial pressure, and in some areas, progress has reversed. The Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine signals a return to a militaristic approach to its border with Eastern Europe, while China's aggressive policies in the South China Sea promise that its relations with its neighbors will be tense and dangerous. And after a fifteen-year historic reduction in the numbers of civil wars, there has been a recent, major spike, mostly centered in the Middle East. Russian intervention in Syria and Saudi Arabian intervention in Yemen, and their indiscriminate use of force, run counter to the way the United Nations and its member states have managed civil wars over the past twenty-five years. The paralysis of the UN Security Council in responding to the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria conjures up memories of the Cold War, when proxy competition was the predominant response to civil wars.

None of these threats by themselves is enough to unravel the current international order. But there is one existential threat to the post–Cold War international order: the rise of nationalist-populist politics in the United States and Europe and the crumbling of domestic support for the international economic and security cooperation that has undergirded the post–Cold War order. While that order still maintains important strengths, the election of Donald Trump, the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe, and the British vote to leave the European Union have thrown the order into crisis.

A full analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the current international order is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, in line with the thrust of this volume and the companion issue that follows, we seek to understand the role that civil wars play in the current international order. We argue that the breakdown in international support for globalization is largely a result of the impressive success of the cooperative

order. The economic consequences of free trade, the integration of Western economies into global supply chains, the growing integration of democracies into supranational governance in Europe, and the social consequences of migration have fed a powerful antiglobalization nationalist and populist backlash in Europe and the United States. While globalization created billions of winners, it concentrated the losers and relative losers in the working classes of Europe and the United States, and has been a powerful factor in the polarization of politics and demise of party systems in Western democracies.

It is against this backdrop that the contribution of civil wars to current international disorder must be weighed. We argue that there is no global crisis of failed states and civil wars, and no global crisis of refugees and migration. Instead, what we have seen is the unfolding of a historical crisis in the greater Middle East, which has collapsed order within that region and has had three repercussions for today's international order. The first involves those civilians who sought to escape the violence and the failure of international humanitarian cooperation to manage their plight, resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking asylum in Europe, where immigration politics had already fed the rise of rightist national parties and created a cleavage between them and center parties. The second involves ISIS and its success in conquering parts of Syria and Iraq, its ability to metastasize in cells in countries far away from the fighting, and its capacity to inspire terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States, all of which amplify the ongoing demonization of Muslims, migrants, and refugees. The third involves the failure of the great powers and international institutions to manage the conflicts, and the decline to barbarism as external actors intervene militarily and engage in indiscriminate wars of attrition.

The civil wars of the Middle East and the failure of the international order to manage them have contributed to a narrative of overall disorder and failing global cooperation. That narrative is not the cause of the domestic political backlash in the United States and Europe against the international cooperative order, but does help to fuel it.

The international system is anarchic and, because there is no global government, states must rely on self-help strategies to survive. Order is a central problem in a self-help system in which some states may be predatory and state death is possible. Order is also an explanatory variable in why, despite the lack of global government, some historical periods are more peaceful and prosperous than others.

International order, much like international community or security, is a term that defies precise meaning. Within the discourse of international relations theorists, international order can refer to the distribution of power or it can refer to norms and principles that are supposed to regulate state behavior and provide predictability to the daily relations among and between nations.[4] Some scholars add institutions to the conversation and others substitute the metaphor of architecture, which implies order is a building project involving design and construction.[5] For others, international order is a normative concept that may be in tension with social goods like justice.[6] In common usage, international order seems little more than a marker for popular perceptions of whether the world is more secure and prosperous than in previous eras, and is thus ripe for rosy retrospection.

Such a cacophony makes for difficult conversations, both within scholarly circles and between foreign policy practitioners, politicians, and citizens. For example, imprecision can be found in one of the more straightforward connotations

of order: how power is distributed in the world and how that structures international relations. The period from 1945 to about 1989 is referred to as the Cold War. It implies that the bipolar distribution of power between the United States and the Soviet Union structured relations and behavior among and between states during that period. And certainly the superpower competition did have real ramifications in terms of the creation of competitive alliances in Europe, the search for clients in the rest of the world, and the paralysis of collective security because of the veto in the UN Security Council. But this gloss ignores key parts of the story of international order during those forty-five years: the Sino-Soviet split and the rise of China as an independent power, the German policy of *détente*, and the slow but steady integration of Western Europe.

If order is solely the distribution of power, then by definition, international disorder is the product of uncertainty about the distribution of power, either because great powers may be declining and potential challengers rising or because power may be changing in ways that lead to uncertainties in how to measure its distribution. Uncertainty about the distribution of power can raise the insecurity of the great powers and provoke temptations for preventive war.

The creation of the European Union and the economic rise of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) gave rise to speculation that we were transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar world. For at least the last ten years, however, reports of the death of American dominance have been greatly exaggerated. Although U.S. power and influence diminished after the self-inflicted wound of Iraq, thirteen years later, the United States remains central to the provision of international security and international cooperation for global public goods.[7] And during that time, the star power of the BRICs dulled dramatically. At least some of the narrative power of world disorder comes from the sense that we are in a power transition with no clear end point. But the mere fact that we don't know what the structure of international power will look like in thirty years should not blind us to the fact that the United States still enjoys a preponderance of power and influence in the international system, and is thus the key player in maintaining order – or in choosing to disrupt it.

The distribution of power is said to determine the distribution of benefits within the international system. The great powers set the rules and create institutions to enhance their security and prosperity and guide the behavior of other states. When some scholars refer to international order they are not speaking about the distribution of power, but the rules and institutions of the great powers. Thus, the period of the Cold War is also referred to as a time of a liberal world order, or the American liberal world order. The United States was essential in creating international institutions to guide the behavior of states in war and peace, trade, and finance. One can see the immediate problem here: how could this be a world order when the world was divided into two blocs of competing alliances and trading partners?

The answer is that such orders are aspirational and partial.[8] During the Cold War, each superpower created institutions that it hoped would structure cooperation among allies and increase its influence. The American liberal international order rested on openness of trade and markets, and the promotion and protection of human rights and democracy, albeit selectively. It pertained to key alliance partners in Europe and Asia, but less so for other parts of the world, where liberal norms often took second place to considerations of military and political stability.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States became the world's sole su-

perpower, dominant economically and militarily. The period that followed has been called a liberal international order, though this is an imprecise and confusing term. More accurately, the period has been a cooperative, trade-driven order. Cooperation on openness of trade, financial flows, and movements of people became a pillar of the post–Cold War international order and held out a bargain to states outside of American alliances. The implicit offer to China, Russia, and other countries was that if they met the conditions for joining the World Trade Organization and restructured their economics and rule of law for incorporation into the global economy, their reward would be economic growth and greater prosperity for their peoples, and therefore greater political legitimacy for their state. And although the United States became more pronounced in including human rights and democracy into its foreign policy, these ideals have been pursued selectively at best.

International cooperation also became more pronounced in security issues. During the Cold War, the United Nations was limited in its role in international security. Security Council vetoes, both threatened and exercised, circumscribed Council activism. Military interventions during the Cold War were more frequently unilateral than multilateral. When the superpowers talked of collective security, they referred to their alliances, not the United Nations. With important exceptions, such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, or during crises between the superpowers that threatened to escalate, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the superpowers avoided internationalization of security issues in the United Nations.

In the post–Cold War order, there has been extensive international cooperation on security, whether nonproliferation, counterterrorism, counterpiracy, or ending civil wars. Nonetheless, there exists an important difference between the economic and security pillars of the current order. The economic pillar relies on institutions that are theoretically universal: that is, any country that qualified based on membership requirements can join. Moreover, there was an attempt to reform international financial and trade institutions to reflect changes in global power. In the security realm, there has been greater use and reliance on the United Nations, but key alliances from the Cold War continue to structure security and balance power. The European order that emerged in 1989 extended Cold War security arrangements from Western Europe to Eastern Europe but failed to include Russia, which remains a problem to this day. In Asia, China eagerly bought into the cooperative economic order, and has become an increasingly important contributor to cooperative security through the United Nations, but Asia's security order has yet to find an arrangement that includes a richer, more powerful China.

From a global security perspective, the Middle East has been the hardest test for the cooperative international order, and for at least twenty years, it has failed. The United States embraced the United Nations in its response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the results seemed to vindicate a hope for collective security in the post–Cold War era. By the end of the 1990s, however, questions of how to enforce resolutions against Iraq and Saddam Hussein divided the Security Council. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the signal failure of international order in the last three decades, and its reverberations are still felt in the region. By collapsing the state during the invasion and immediate occupation, the United States created a power vacuum in Iraq, which has since experienced nonstop civil war.

With the Arab Spring, a second wave of political instability led to another round of

failed international cooperation in the region. The UN Security Council agreed on invoking the responsibility to protect (R2P) to mandate humanitarian intervention in Libya, but failed to prevent civil war and state collapse after the overthrow of Gaddafi. In Syria, the Security Council eschewed humanitarian force, and instead authorized mediation and diplomacy to search for a political solution. Successive mediators felt hamstrung by the divergent interests and strategies of Russia and the United States, and proved ineffective in the face of escalating violence. Since Russia's decision to intervene militarily in support of the Assad regime in Syria, there has been the potential for escalatory conflict between Russia and the United States, which has small numbers of troops in Syria and Iraq to fight ISIS and train anti-Assad rebels. Outside actors, notably Iran, the key Gulf states, and Turkey, have also intervened through financing rebels or other groups, providing weapons, and, in the case of Iran and Turkey, putting "boots on the ground." In Yemen, a carefully mediated agreement to the political crisis disintegrated in the face of rebel violence and American-supported Saudi military intervention. In both Syria and Yemen, outside forces have used indiscriminate military force in wars of attrition. In Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the humanitarian management of the consequences of war broke down due to insufficient funding and attention, leading to a generalized refugee crisis in the region and across the seas in Europe. In the Middle East, we appear to be back in a regime of proxy warfare, very distinct from the cooperative regime that has governed the treatment of civil wars for much of the past quarter-century.

The numbers of civil wars and their lethality have declined remarkably over the last twenty-five years as the current order has brought more than a dozen civil wars to a close and contained or limited the spread of others. For two decades, civil violence declined in every major area of the world, but in 2011, this trend reversed in one region, the Middle East.

The wars of Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria have been humanitarian catastrophes. They have been part of an external and internal dismantling of regional order in the Middle East. They have spawned and fostered ISIS, a grotesque transnational terrorist group that glorifies violence and incites its followers to attack innocents around the world. These wars have also laid bare the weakest filament in the ability of the current international order to manage conflict: that when great powers disagree about the desired outcome of a civil war, the collective response stalls and the war escalates. Much depends on whether these wars and the international failure to manage them are an exception, or whether they are a harbinger of things to come.

Several arguments have been made about the relationship between the Middle Eastern wars – Syria above all – and international order.

Externalities: refugees, terrorism, and regional instability. One commonplace assertion about these wars is that their refugees have fundamentally threatened the security of Europe, overwhelmed Europe's social fabric, and therefore contributed to international disorder. We find these claims preposterous.

To start with, politicians, journalists, and humanitarian workers have all routinely exaggerated the scale of the flow of refugees. To take but one point: pundits commonly referred to the one million refugees that flooded into Europe in 2015 as the largest refugee crisis in history. This likely came as a shock to the 1.1 million refugees who flooded into then Zaire (population forty-three million) in 1994 or the one million Cambodian refugees who fled to Thailand in 1979 –

1980 to escape genocide or the more than three million Afghan refugees who escaped into Pakistan in the 1980s. None of this is to diminish the plight of the Syrians who escaped the horror of war, but it is to expose the paucity of the European claim that it faced an unprecedented disaster.

The million – by now, perhaps million-and-a-half – refugees who entered Europe traveled to a region of over five-hundred million people that was, at the time, the largest economic bloc in the world (with a total economy just over $17 trillion). To assert that the economic, political, or social costs of absorbing one million refugees into that bloc was a central cause of disorder is absurd.

The wars of the Middle East have contributed to the rise of nationalism in Western Europe, but they are not the cause of that rise. The influx of refugees to Europe in 2015 exacerbated but did not create popular disaffection with immigration, and the poor performance of the European Union in addressing the crisis contributed to an already inchoate sense that cooperative European or international approaches were broken and that nations again had to seize control of their borders. And the wars of the Middle East did add a security element beyond the economic effects of globalization, as terrorist attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany provoked fear and anxiety beyond the common trope of immigrants stealing jobs and welfare. But the wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya were not primary drivers of European popular disaffection with the contemporary international order. Differential economic growth and growing disaffection with immigration due to EU expansion, as well as economic hardship caused by the financial crisis of 2007 – 2009, produced a resurgent national populist backlash against globalization and international cooperation well before the civil wars of the Middle East broke out.

This relationship stands out in the Brexit vote, the first tectonic domestic challenge to the international order. Some of the biggest voting districts for Leave were areas in the United Kingdom that had major job losses because of trade with China.[9] Immigration from within the European Union, not migration or refugees from the wars of the Middle East, was a significant concern of the Leavers.[10] The United Kingdom admitted few refugees or asylum seekers from Syria or Libya compared with the rest of Europe. The wars in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere in the Middle East figured little in the rhetoric of the Leavers.

The refugee crisis did contribute to a weakening of international order because some EU countries violated international obligations to refugees, and the European Union as a whole actively ignored its obligations and entered into expedient agreements to export the problem elsewhere.[11] But this rightly puts the explanatory weight on the dismal response of the European Union, rather than on the wars of the Middle East.

The failure to uphold principles of order. Some analysts have argued that the wars in the Middle East involved key principles of the international order, and the failure of the great powers to uphold those principles contributed to larger international disorder. There are three variations on this theme. The first invokes the international failure to stop mass atrocities in Syria and the lack of commitment to R2P. The second involves the international failure to confront and stop violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention. The third concerns the failure of the United States to enforce its own red lines in the war.

The argument that the failure to prevent atrocities in Syria represented a breakdown of international norms overstates the centrality of R2P or humanitarian intervention to the post–Cold War order. As Richard Gowan and Stephen Stedman

point out in their contribution to the next volume, militarized humanitarianism has been ascendant over the last twenty-five years.[12] During that time, there have been many more collective humanitarian interventions than in the previous half-century. And there has been frequent public pressure, mostly in the United States, to use military force for humanitarian purposes. Most humanitarian action and mandates have been ad hoc and nonstrategic, and thus nonpredictable. And no stable international consensus has emerged over when and how humanitarian interventions should be deployed. Precisely because they are unpredictable, humanitarian interventions run counter to the establishment of shared expectations of behavior on which order is predicated.

In this vein, it is possible to interpret R2P as a way to make humanitarian action predictable, and therefore supportive of international order.[13] However, governments, including in the West, were exceedingly partial in their interest in and commitment to R2P when it was adopted, and have been wholly inconsistent even in arguing for its application, let alone undertaking R2P interventions.

For example, in the aftermath of invoking R2P in Libya, the Security Council deadlocked on Syria. Yet the Council also drew on R2P to authorize a military intervention in Côte D'Ivoire. The intervention, carried out by UN peacekeepers backed up by French airpower, enforced compliance with outcomes of a democratic election, arrested the former head of state, and sent him to the International Criminal Tribunal. We cite this example to suggest that the failure to act upon R2P in Syria is not evidence of a complete abandonment of the principle, but rather proof that great-power support for the principle is conditional.

A more compelling case about Syria and the undermining of principles of international order involves the use of chemical weapons by the Assad government. Central to any international order that relies on cooperative security is the question of enforcement. To the extent that the international order aspires to be grounded in international law, the authority for enforcing security treaties, weapons conventions, and Security Council mandates rests with the Security Council. If the Council cannot cohere behind enforcement due to great-power antagonism or a clash of interests, then violations of treaties, conventions, and mandates will go unanswered. This is a perennial challenge for any international order that relies on international law and collective security. In the post–Cold War order, the challenge has arisen regarding the compliance of Saddam Hussein with Council mandates after the First Gulf War, the compliance of Iran and North Korea with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations, and, most recently, with the Russian invasion and seizure of Crimea in Ukraine.

In the face of Council inaction, upholding order has fallen selectively on the great powers, and disproportionately on the hegemon and leading international power, the United States. Some have argued that the key principle for international order in the Syrian Civil War was a willingness of the hegemon to follow through on its threats. When a hegemon does not enforce its red lines (threats regarding particular actions), it signals a wider retreat from its willingness to enforce the rules of order anywhere.

This argument had its adherents in the Washington policy community after President Obama's retreat from declaring that the use of chemical weapons in Syria was a red line that would prompt a forceful American response. The argument gained wider adherence when Russia intervened militarily in defense of Assad, marking the first return of Russian hard power to the region since the Eisenhower presidency.

The problem with this interpretation is that it does not address the counterfactu-

al. Had the United States acted militarily in Syria and become entrapped in a failed intervention, this would have prompted concerns about American recklessness, lack of strategy, and lack of predictability, the very traits that shook international relations after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Nonetheless, the argument about American inaction in upholding its red line in Syria holds a kernel of truth. The inability or unwillingness to act in Syria in ways that could mitigate the consequences for Europe or prevent openings for Russia likely contributed to perceptions of a loss of American influence and leadership in the Middle East. In isolation, this might not have been particularly significant, but it came on the back of a series of decisions in Iraq that saw American forces withdraw in a manner that facilitated a return to violence and the (understandable) American withdrawal of support for long-time ally President Mubarak of Egypt. Taken together, these episodes called into question President Obama's commitment to the use of American hard power in defense of order. While it is not easy to parse exactly how much Syria contributed to this, our judgment is that it is an exaggeration to portray inaction or weak action in Syria as triggering wider disorder.

From a perspective of rules and expectations of the post–Cold War order, the most acute point concerning the great powers and the war in Syria is not that they did not intervene militarily to stop it, but that they did not invest resources and make the tough choices that would have been required to forge a diplomatic solution to the war. In 2012, when the war was at its ripest for a negotiated settlement, the United States did not want to engage Iran, one of Assad's patrons, in Syria talks to avoid complicating its nuclear negotiations with Iran. At the same time, American demands that Assad had to step down as part of any settlement made a negotiated settlement unlikely. Indeed, some Washington watchers believed that American diplomatic diffidence stemmed from overconfidence that the continuing war would drain Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran, and there was thus no urgency to compromise as part of any settlement.

Proxy war and potential for escalation. A third argument posits that Syria contributed to international disorder because it marked a significant retreat away from great-power cooperation to solve civil wars toward great-power proxy conflict within civil wars. Unlike the majority of civil wars of the post–Cold War period, in which outside support to combatants was limited to regional backers (usually with modest diplomatic and military capacity themselves), Syria has seen the military intervention of the United States (covertly, and admittedly somewhat ineptly) and Russia (overtly, and with more decisive results), as well as Turkey, the Gulf Arab states, and Hezbollah.

As Gowan and Stedman make clear, the post–Cold War order has been highly interventionist in civil wars.[14] With the exception of Kosovo in 1999, the major powers have avoided direct military confrontation. In that case, NATO and Russian forces briefly risked skirmishing as they both attempted to occupy Pristina airport following Serbia's withdrawal of its forces. This brief crisis was quickly resolved as Russia and NATO agreed to parallel patrols in different parts of Kosovo, under an overall UN Security Council agreement.

Syria marks the first major episode since 1990 of sustained competing great-power intervention in a civil war. As of now, it remains an outlier, though a significant one. During the same period of Russian intervention in Syria, the Russians consented in the Security Council to a joint French-led EU-UN military intervention in Mali. And although Russia has not supported American action against ISIS in Iraq, it has neither blocked it nor interfered with it.

Russia and the United States have not worked out arrangements to avoid a direct

military confrontation in Syria. During the Cold War, despite the almost constant superpower patronage to contending warring parties, Russia and the United States constructed rules of prudence to avoid direct hostilities.[15] Because the superpower competition played out over decades in multiple civil wars, there was ample opportunity for Russia and the United States to learn how not to escalate in peripheral conflicts. Given their recent lack of experience with proxy conflict amidst growing rivalry and mistrust, the potential grows for direct violence between Russia and the United States in Syria. Despite several incidents of near misses by both sides, the two powers have not agreed upon a process for avoiding direct conflict or de-escalating their involvement in the war.

The quality of different international orders is best judged by the peace and prosperity they bring. By this standard, the contemporary international order has been an unparalleled success. International cooperation in economics and security have brought unprecedented economic growth, and with it a dramatic reduction in poverty. Cooperation in science and health have raised living standards around the world and, with them, increased life expectancy and reduced infant, child, and maternal mortality rates. Cooperation in security has greatly reduced the numbers of civil wars and, with the ending of those wars, more people live in peace than at any time in recent history.

Despite its successes, indeed perhaps because of its successes, the post–Cold War international order faces an existential crisis created by a dramatic rise in national populism within the United States and Europe that has led to policy pronouncements and choices hostile to international cooperation on trade, finance, migration, and security essential for today's order. This rise in populism has been aided and abetted by Russia, a disgruntled, revisionist power in decline that has developed a sophisticated strategy of disinformation aimed at undermining trust in government, democratic institutions, civil society, and the media in democratic countries with the goal of destroying the domestic foundations for international cooperation in liberal democracies.

Civil wars have been a sideshow in this story. Arguments that their violence and spillovers have been principal causes of the decline in order fail to hold up under scrutiny. But, as the saying goes, past results are no guarantee of future success. As of now, the war in Syria is still an outlier, but an extremely dangerous one. In the absence of prudence and rules of proxy support, Syria remains ripe for escalation to violence between the great powers. Were that to happen, it would bring to an end the post–Cold War era. The great powers would have failed a basic challenge that civil wars pose to all international orders: the need to avoid great-power war in conflicts in which the stakes are marginal to their interests.

Domestic politics in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe will determine whether Western governments will continue to invest and protect the institutions and alliances that have formed the cooperative backbone of recent international order. Should they abandon those institutions and alliances, the ramifications for civil wars will be felt immediately. The post–Cold War order and its management of civil wars delivered important results. The steady decline in the numbers and severity of civil war during the past quarter-century is a testimony to what can be accomplished through sustained international cooperation, itself only possible in the context of an order that sustains a broad peace between the top powers.

If the great powers walk away from the management of civil wars, it will not be the result of the changing distribution of pow-

er in the world.[16] As we argued earlier, the world may be moving to a more multipolar international system, but by any measurement of hard power, the United States will be the dominant actor for years to come. Moreover, nothing per se in a multilateral system need militate against an international regime for managing civil wars. A multilateral system that values international cooperation is much different than a multilateral system that values nationalism and self-help, with great implications for the treatment of civil wars. Given that the United States will continue to be the most powerful actor in a protomultilateral system, its policies will matter. If the United States turns its back on NATO and the EU and does not invest in the United Nations, then that weak unipolar or protomultilateral system will prove disastrous for civil war management.

ENDNOTES

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[12] Richard Gowan and Stephen John Stedman, "The International Regime for Treating Civil War, 1988–2017," *Dædalus* 147 (1) (Winter 2018).

[13] Throughout the development of R2P, its founders never advocated for automaticity of application of the norm. Rather, part of the contribution of R2P was to give decision-makers, especially the UN Security Council, a set of questions that would guide and discipline the application of the norm, and hence make it more legitimate and less divisive and disruptive of order. See Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 128–156.

[14] Gowan and Stedman, "The International Regime for Treating Civil War, 1988–2017."

[15] Alexander L. George, "U.S.-Soviet Efforts to Cooperate in Crisis Management and Crisis Avoidance," in *U.S.-Soviet Security Cooperation: Achievements, Failures, Lessons*, ed. Alexander L. George, Phillip J. Farley, and Alexander Dallin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 583.

[16] Barry R. Posen, "Civil Wars & the Structure of World Power," *Dædalus* 146 (4) (Fall 2017).