

**Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order:
Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity**

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Are rising authoritarian powers such as China and Russia converging towards or challenging the normative structures of the liberal international order? This article argues that scholarship on norm contestation provides a fruitful theoretical avenue for addressing this question. It finds, however, that this literature has problematically tended to either overlook or externalize power dynamics from norm contestation. The article therefore proposes and develops a power political approach to norm contestation that, informed by a realpolitik sensibility, more explicitly and consistently makes power central to the analysis. A power political perspective conceptualizes norm contestation as the expression of battles for influence in world politics that take place at the ideational level and through symbolic instruments. It understands these struggles as occurring in the context of an international system profoundly marked by conflicting interests, cultural pluralism, hierarchical structures, and power asymmetries. This power political lens is then used to identify four modes of contestation Russian and Chinese actors are engaged in: liberal performance, liberal mimicry, civilizational essentialization, and counter-norm entrepreneurship. It empirically explores how these contestatory practices express themselves at different intensity levels – applicatory, meaning, and validity – and display specific power political logics – fragmenting and integrative – with the goal of undermining the ideational hegemony of liberal Western-based actors and structures in world politics, and advancing alternative non-liberal visions of domestic and international order. Along with contributing to the literature on norms, this paper also makes a broader intervention in current debates about rising powers and the future of the liberal international order

Liberal International Order, Norm Contestation, Power Politics, Rising Powers, Russia, China

Are authoritarian rising powers such as Russia and China adapting (Ikenberry 2011a) and being socialized (Fukuyama 2006, Manners 2002) into the norms and identities that define the Western-based liberal international order, or are they challenging and undermining them instead (Gat 2007, Mead 2014, Mearsheimer 2014, 2010)? This question animates many of the most pressing and contentious debates in international relations (IR) on the crisis and future prospects of today's international order (Dunne and Flockhart 2013, Gat et al. 2009, Ikenberry, Parmar, and Stokes 2018). This paper addresses this puzzle through an engagement with recent Constructivist scholarship emphasizing the central role that ideational and cultural factors, including norms and identities, play in structuring or transforming world orders (Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf 2018, Reus-Smit 2017). In particular, it suggests that the burgeoning literature on norm contestation in IR constitutes a valuable conceptual lens for exploring in depth the mechanisms and processes of socialization or resistance to the ideas and identities constitutive of the liberal international order.

Contestation has been broadly conceptualized as involving discourses and practices that “express disapproval of norms” (Wiener 2014, 1). More specifically contestation occurs as “actors – usually the supposed recipients or followers of the norms in question – dispute the validity, the meaning or the application of norms” (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016, 518). While importantly highlighting the politics surrounding the diffusion of and resistance to global norms, this scholarship appears rather divided on what it conceptualizes the main drivers of contestation to be. Finding that current perspectives do not go far enough in their consideration of norms and identities as an arena of power relations, we develop a distinctive ‘power political’ approach underpinned by a particular *realpolitik* sensibility. Such an approach extends and combines insights from existing scholarship on norm contestation with the analytically eclectic framework on the ‘dynamics of global power politics’ proposed by Stacey Goddard and Daniel Nexon (2016). We conceptualize norm contestation as part of the enduring battles for power and influence in world politics that, rather than occurring at the level of material capabilities, take place through the ideational realm. The intention is to develop a deeper appreciation of how norm dynamics in general and processes of contestation in particular constitute a specific site through which influence is exercised and wider power struggles play out on the world stage.

The power political lens developed here generates important empirical payoffs. It allows us to bring to light and connect a range of disparate and apparently contradictory Russian and

Chinese contestatory practices of liberal norms and identities, which have so far largely been either overlooked or explored separately in the literature. We conceptualize these practices as constituting four parallel and mutually reinforcing modes of normative contestation: liberal performance, liberal mimicry, civilizational essentialization, and counter-norm entrepreneurship. We show how each of these modes vary in terms of their *intensity* level (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016) – whether they contest the application, meaning, or validity of (liberal) norms – and the *power political logic* (Goddard and Nexon 2016) they embody – whether they follow a fragmenting and/or integrative logic. The first two modes of contestation are deployed by Russia and China with the objective of challenging the West’s monopoly over the application and meaning of liberal principles in world politics and in the process undermining the influence of liberal structures. The latter two modes instead contest the universal validity of liberal conceptions of domestic and international order by articulating alternative non-liberal identities and normative frameworks that are intended to generate and mobilize support for Chinese and Russian values and interests at home and abroad.

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the norms literature unpacking how certain assumptions about power have colored its understanding of the drivers of contestation. The section that follows develops the theoretical contours of a power political approach to norm contestation. We then deploy this power political lens to conceptualize, and empirically illustrate, Russian and Chinese engagement in four distinct modes of norm contestation. The conclusion sketches out the implications of our argument for the future of the liberal international order and identifies two main areas for further research.

Norm Dynamics, Contestation and Power

Ever since Constructivism made its first inroads in IR in the 1980s, scholars have been exploring the role of norms in world politics (Kratochwil 1989, Onuf 1989). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s research was largely defined by a concern with how norms emerged and diffused globally. This interest produced a thriving literature exploring how world politics was being transformed by the onward march of liberal values and institutions, including: the global diffusion of human rights norms (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999); the spread and

thickening of international regimes designed to prosecute war criminals (Sikkink 2011) and limit the use of particular weaponry (Price 1998, 1995); or the widening and deepening of global governance institutions (Checkel 2005, Fierke and Wiener 1999, Risse 2000). Along the way, we argue, this literature captured in theoretically and empirically nuanced ways an important world historical development: the globalization, especially since the end of the Cold War, of the liberal international order from its Western core across the globe (Ikenberry 2011b, Dunne and Flockhart 2013).

This wave of scholarship has been complemented more recently by a growing focus on norm contestation. Compared to earlier models that tended to conceptualize norms rather statically, as ‘stable intersubjective structures’ constituting ‘shared understandings’, contestation scholarship theorizes instead norms as in constant ‘flux’ or ‘motion’, continuously in the midst of processes of interpretation, interrogation, endorsement, rejection, and change (Krook and True 2012, Sandholtz 2007, Wiener 2014). For some, like Antje Wiener (2007, 49), norms have a dual quality, “while stable over particular periods, they always remain flexible by definition”. Others have gone further, conceptualizing them contested ‘all the way down’ (Niemann and Schillinger 2017). Along with rethinking the ontology of norms, this literature has cast doubts on the implicit linear view of history that often underpinned earlier research which tended to portray a world progressively converging towards liberal models of domestic and international order thanks to the entrepreneurship of mostly Western-based agents. Greater attention has thus been given to (liberal) norm regress and decay (McKeown 2009, Panke and Petersohn 2012); clashes between radically different sets of norms and entrepreneurs (Adamson 2005, Bloomfield 2016, Bob 2012); and non-Western agency’s capacity to either resist and re-articulate international norms locally (Acharya 2004), or act as global norm-makers themselves (Acharya 2011, Bettiza and Dionigi 2015). Overall, to bring the discussion back to world ordering dynamics, scholarship on contestation has shown that, as Jonas Wolff and Lisbeth Zimmermann (2016, 513) pithily put it, the universal spread of liberalism can no longer “be taken for granted”.¹

¹ It must be said that early scholarship on norms did not ignore contestation altogether (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 897, Checkel 1999, 93, Wiener 2003). Research was however principally concerned with explaining how norms ultimately became uncontested, as they diffused through mechanisms of socialization, internalization or institutionalization. In some models contestation was even seen as a productive step towards the successful diffusion of (liberal) norms through mechanisms of ‘rhetorical entrapment’ (Risse and Sikkink 1999, Schimmelfennig 2001).

Yet, what drives norm contestation in general and the growing contestation of liberal norms in the international system today in particular, tends to remain under-specified in this literature. If contestation “express[es] an objection to norms” (Wiener 2017, 117), then the fundamental role that power plays in driving this objection is likewise, and problematically, weakly understood and theorized. Literature on norm contestation – similarly to earlier Constructivist literature (Hopf 1998, esp. 177-180) – has certainly not been oblivious to questions of power.² In most cases, however, power enters the analysis not as located in and constituted through the ideational and inter-subjective realm, but mostly beyond it. We argue, instead, that power needs to be placed more centrally and explicitly in the analysis for us to better explain key dynamics of norm contestation taking place in the international system at the present historical juncture.

One view of contestation, which we call ‘interest contestation’, adopts the longstanding dichotomy between ideas/principles vs. material interests/power of mainstream norm research.³ This literature certainly does appreciate the power of norms in shaping practices and bringing about international change whether through a logic of argumentation or appropriateness, or by constituting identities and interests themselves. Yet it also tends to assume that norms, by virtue of their inter-subjective character, transcend particularist interests and curb power political practices. Thus contestation is prevalently represented as driven by actors that seek to pursue their specific interests unconstrained by – rather than through – global norms (e.g. Bower 2019, Price 2019, Schmidt and Sikkink 2019). Although uncertainty remains as to whether contestation leads to the weakening or strengthening of existing norms, a sense that ‘good’ liberal norms are imperiled by ‘bad’ illiberal transgressors generally permeates this approach.

A second perspective, which we call ‘diversity contestation’, views contestation as driven by cultural and value pluralism. “Due to the diversity of individual background experiences which come into play in an inter-cultural encounter,” Wiener (2017, 114) contends, “the shared recognition of norms becomes less likely and, accordingly, clashes about norms are to be

² Epstein (2012a, 301) suggests that different conceptions of power have been at the root of the early distinction between conventional Constructivism – which saw norms as transcending power – and more critical variants – which considered power central in shaping normative orders.

³ See for example Finnemore (1996), Risse (2000), Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999), Tannenwald (2005).

expected.” Compared to Wiener, who concentrates on contestation within the same Western (liberal) normative community, it is in Amitav Acharya’s (2016, 2014b, a, 2011, 2004) scholarship, and the broader Global IR program, where these insights are cashed out more fully. To be sure, influenced by critical-theoretical and post-colonial approaches, scholarship here is not oblivious to power imbalances between the West and the Rest and how these affect norm dynamics. Yet, power is mostly understood as being reflected in, not constituted through, the normative realm. It is more about *whose*, rather than *how*, norms matter (Acharya 2004). Compared to the previous perspective, contestation is understood positively here as a progressive and reformist dialogical practice. One that allows a plurality of often excluded voices to be heard, productively increasing the legitimacy of (liberal) norms by enhancing their shared character (Wiener 2014) and that of the current (liberal) order by making it more democratic and less Western-centric (Acharya 2014a).⁴

Zimmermann and colleagues, who have sought to develop an analytical framework that avoids *a priori* judgements over the regressive or progressive character of contestation, have highlighted the necessity of integrating power considerations more consistently (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019, Wolff and Zimmermann 2016). Their understanding of what drives contestatory practices, however, remains remarkably close to that of the ‘diversity contestation’ perspective. Wolff and Zimmermann (2016, 529-533), for instance, stress how contestation needs to be thought as a “battle” and “counter-power” force which undermines, not just as a dialogical and corrective force that reforms, existing liberal norms and order. Yet they also end up suggesting that such conflicts are driven primarily by “fundamental differences over the validity of norms” (Wolff and Zimmermann 2016, 527) rather than efforts to expand one’s power through ideational means. More recently Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019, 9-12) acknowledge the importance of power asymmetries at the “actor-level”, but overlook power considerations when discussing the “structural” and “process” factors that condition norm robustness.

A third perspective informed by post-structural and post-colonial theories, which we call ‘emancipatory contestation’, has approached norms not prevalently as a site that transcends (contra ‘interest contestation’) or that reflects (contra ‘diversity contestation’) power, but one

⁴ For a similar critique, see Epstein (2012a), Wolff and Zimmermann (2016).

where ideas and identities are conceptualized as a medium and site of power relations themselves. Charlotte Epstein (2012a, 300-01), for instance, argues that thinking should shift away from the a-political notion of “norms” being diffused from the West, to unpack instead the power-laden disciplinary mechanisms of “normalisation” of the Rest such processes entail (see also Zarakol 2014). Ultimately, the socialization of non-Western local actors into Western-based liberal subjects, in so far as it “involves loosing [*sic.*] an identity to acquire another,” Epstein (2012b, 143) suggests, should not be understood exclusively as a neutral or positive experience, but as a form of domination that involves substantial costs and violence (see also Mattern 2005). Attention then shifts towards recovering the agency of marginalized and oppressed local non-Western actors as they seek to undo the existing “world worked up by monistic universalism” (Blaney and Tickner 2017, 10), and create an alternative “pluriverse” (Blaney and Tickner 2017, 18). Contestation is here understood to be driven, not so much by the assertion of particular interests over universal principles or socio-cultural diversity, but rather by counter-hegemonic impulses expressed through the global shaping of norms and identities.

While ‘emancipatory contestation’ perspectives do place power squarely at the center of norm dynamics and identity changes, certain value commitments limit their analytical strength in two key ways. First, they tend to focus on the most marginalized voices in post-colonial spaces, overlooking that “challenges by major states or powerful groups” are likely, as Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019, 10) point out, to “undermine the robustness of norms more than contestations by other groups”.⁵ As Andrew Hurrell (2006, 2) similarly argues, “challenges to the legitimacy of international order have rarely resulted from the protests of the weak”, but from powerful states “with the capacity and political organization to demand a revision of the established order and of its dominant norms in ways that reflect their own interests, concerns and values”.⁶

⁵ The reasons are complex, including reduced vulnerability to material and social sanctions for non-complying with norms, greater autonomy for pursuing goals unilaterally rather than multilaterally, and confidence that weaker actors will bandwagon or be easily bribed or persuaded (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019, 10).

⁶ This is not to suggest, however, that important – and at times successful – challenges to international norms and order have not come from the ‘weak’, including decolonization, the revolutions of 1989, or more recently from transnational Islamist movements. In such cases, it is often these actors’ very lack of power which grants them legitimacy and influence. We thank one of the reviewers for pushing us to clarify this point.

Second, such approaches understand contestation as an emancipatory and revolutionary practice. This value-commitment, on the one hand, side-steps that actors outside the West may be just as much involved in articulating indigenous ‘illiberal’ elite authoritarian projects as they are in advancing egalitarian proposals (Lewis 2017, Morozov 2015); and, on the other hand, interprets conflicts over norms as a temporary phase towards a better world beyond contestation, rather than a constitutive feature of international relations as such (Niemann and Schillinger 2017, 43)

Overall, while openings towards integrating power considerations in the analysis of the contestation of norms and the liberal order exist, each has its limitations. We therefore propose an approach which considers contestation more explicitly through a *power political* lens. This approach complements but also extends what has been done so far. Like post-colonial perspectives it considers that power asymmetries and struggles do not express themselves solely through material means but also through norms and over identities. Yet, and this brings us a closer to the work of Zimmermann and colleagues, it appreciates that power at the actor level matters and remains agnostic about whether contestation is a progressive or regressive endeavor. Specifically, we develop a distinctive *realpolitik* understanding of norm and identity dynamics which integrates insights developed by the contestation literature, with the analytically eclectic ‘dynamics of global power politics’ framework proposed by Stacey Goddard and Daniel Nexon (2016).

Towards a Power Political Approach to Norm Contestation

We define power politics, following Goddard and Nexon (2016, 2), as “the politics of collective mobilization in the context of the struggle for influence among political communities”.⁷ Goddard and Nexon conceptualize power political dynamics as an analytically distinctive mode of political activity that shares important assumptions with, but simultaneously also transcends, Realist thinking. What is Realist about the framework they propose is an understanding of global

⁷ More broadly, we understand power both as an attribute of actors – for example as military capabilities, economic resources, or cultural capital – and in relational terms – defined as the “production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate” (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 42). While conceptually distinct, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive understandings of power.

politics as a site marked by enduring ‘struggles for power’; a skepticism about the potential for a ‘durable harmony of interests’ among international actors; and an impulse to reveal the workings of *realpolitik* – of power and domination – in the actions of actors (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 5). The power political approach to norm contestation we propose shares these assumptions and, we would add, also adopts Realism’s skepticism towards identifying “the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe” (Morgenthau 1948/1993, 13). In other words, the values of a political community are understood to be hardly ever universally shared but rather always particular and context specific.⁸

Despite these affinities, Goddard and Nexon label their framework “post-realist” since it embeds three key assumptions that are not shared by Realism, which we also draw upon to develop the power political approach to norm contestation proposed here. First, standard Realist theories are transcended to the extent that power political maneuvers are conceptualized as taking place not only through military competition, but also through the deployment of non-material means. These include, among others, “symbolic instruments” such as “propaganda, persuasion, and other elements of meaning” (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 11). As analytical eclectic scholarship on power has shown, the ideational realm of beliefs, discourses, norms, rules, and identities constitutes an independent field where power is operative and wielded along its three key dimensions: ‘winning conflicts’, ‘limiting alternatives,’ and ‘shaping normality’ (Berenskoetter 2007, also Barnett and Duvall 2005). Such a perspective leads to an appreciation that – *contra*, this time, mainstream Constructivist and Liberal Institutional theorizing – “international organizations, international law, norms, rules” are *not* “‘alternatives’ to a power-political model of global politics”, but rather constitute important “means, medium, subjects, and objects in the struggle for influence” (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 6, also Mattern 2005, 610-11).

Since ideas and identities are sites of power relations, struggles in the form of normative contestation are to be expected. We suggest that the degree of the challenge posed to existing norms, and related identities, by contestatory practices vary along two key dimensions. The first relates to what Wolff and Zimmermann (2016, 531) define as the *intensity* of contestation. The

⁸ Scholarship reconciling different facets of Constructivism with Realist sensibilities has taken multiple forms, including broader reflections on the analytical and normative overlaps between the two paradigms (Barkin 2010, Guzzini 2013, Steele 2007, Williams 2004); or more circumscribed explorations into the coercive power of norms and discourses (Bob 2019, Krebs and Jackson 2007).

intensity of contestation ranges from (i) disagreements over whether and how a norm should apply in a given context (i.e. lowest intensity), which Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2018) identify as ‘applicatory’ contestation; (ii) conflicts over the meaning and interpretation of a given norm, which we characterize as ‘meaning’ contestation; and (iii) clashes over the validity, and hence also the righteousness, of the very norm itself (i.e. highest intensity), which Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2018) identify as ‘validity’ contestation. Whether contestation occurs at an applicatory, meaning, or validity level of intensity, it will influence the extent to which a norm is weakened or strengthened in the process. Recent literature concludes that higher intensity forms of contestation are more likely, under certain conditions, to erode the robustness of existing norms (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018).⁹

Whether contestation at any one level of intensity may, or may not, lead to the weakening of existing norms, we argue, is connected to a second dimension which a power political approach illuminates. Namely, the *power political logic* at play when norm contestation takes place. Power political maneuvers generally involve some combination of two overarching logics: either fragmentation or integration. A logic of fragmentation encompasses efforts by an agent to “disrupt”, “prevent”, “breaking apart”, “inhibiting”, and ultimately “interfere” with the ability of others to pursue joint action (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 8). A logic of integration instead includes efforts by an actor to “collectively mobilize” and to “maintain and expand joint action” in the pursuit of influence (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 8). While power political maneuvers may follow either a fragmenting or integrating logic, in many cases boundaries are fuzzy and both logics could be operating simultaneously.

Bringing this discussion back to norm dynamics entails some conceptual adjustments. When contestation takes place this can be directed either at agents, that is the norm-makers, or at structures, that is the intersubjective norms themselves. When targeting agents, power political fragmentation strategies seek to undermine the ability of dominant rival actors to exert influence

⁹ Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2018) suggest that validity contestation, which questions the norm itself, is more likely to weaken a norm than applicatory contestation, which may even strengthen a norm by accepting its validity to begin with. They nonetheless also note that validity contestation does not automatically lead to the erosion or change of norms, with actor-level and structural factors having an important role to play too. Conversely, if applicatory (and we would add meaning) contestation is continual, the temporary stabilization of norm meanings becomes much harder and therefore these are likely to lose robustness.

by governing the appropriate application and meaning of existing norms or by proposing and diffusing novel ones. Such strategies may also involve attempts at eroding the structural power of existing norms themselves, with the aim of undermining their capacity to constitute identities and interests and to enable and constrain action in ways that favor dominant norm-makers. Conversely, integrative power political maneuvers are intended to expand one's agency and collective mobilization capacity through the articulation of different interpretations of existing norms or the generation of alternative collectively shared identities and principles that more closely align with one's values and interests. Ultimately, when applicatory, meaning, or validity contestation takes place, we suggest that the strength of the challenge posed to dominant norm-makers and ideational structures will likely depend on the power political logic at play in a particular contestatory move.

The second post-realist premise of Goddard and Nexon's (2016, 5) framework is to approach "the centrality of states to power politics as variable". In other words, their framework allows for appreciating how a multiplicity of actors beyond the state – including multinational firms, transnational social movements, terrorist organizations – can and do engage in power political maneuvers globally. Goddard and Nexon's insight is in lockstep with the norms literature, which has long explored the international agency of non-state actors. However, while the state is not treated as an ontological prior, it nonetheless remains of undoubted importance given its "superior collective-mobilization capacity" (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 5), as it is able to deploy multiple and considerable military, economic, and symbolic instruments in the pursuit of influence. Building on this, we maintain that the *realpolitik* sensibility of a power political approach to norm contestation should direct the analytical gaze towards great powers, especially towards authoritarian ones like Russia and China which are among the main and most powerful challengers of existing liberal norms and order.¹⁰ Yet, as we shall see, in line with a view that a multiplicity of agents beyond the state engage in power politics, when thinking about Russia and China we should not think of these simply in terms of a unified state, but rather as constituted by a composite range of state and non-state actors (Hameiri and Jones 2016).

¹⁰ This also follows findings by Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019, 10), who suggest that the capabilities of an actor matter considerably – although not exclusively or sufficiently – to the success of contestatory practices.

Finally, Goddard and Nexon's (2016, 6) third post-realist proposition is to reject the view that "anarchy drives global power politics". They, along with others (Mattern and Zarakol 2016), start from the premise that global politics takes place in an international system that is structured for the most part hierarchically around relations and conditions of super- and sub-ordination. Indeed the liberal international order can be understood as a hierarchical system centered on American and more generally Western power, whose economic, political, institutional and normative structures have positional consequences – namely they "constrain or influence agent choices, behavior, and perceptions" (Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 641) – as well as productive force – that is they constitute "both the actors and the space of world politics in which they act" (Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 641). While hierarchies in general and those constituting the liberal international order in particular do not eliminate global power politics, we should expect them to shape how struggles for influence through norms are carried out as they provide actors with different capabilities, pathways, and strategies for collective mobilization (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 12-13).

To sum up. A power political perspective conceptualizes norm contestation as the expression of enduring battles for influence in world politics that, rather than occurring at the level of material capabilities, take place over meanings and through symbolic instruments. These struggles occur in the context of an international system profoundly marked by conflicting interests and deep value pluralism, as well as hierarchical structures and power asymmetries among actors. A power political reading of norm dynamics, furthermore colors in three particular ways how contestation is approached. First, contestation is of particular analytical interest for its conflictual, rather than dialogical, dimension. Contestatory practices corresponding to different intensity levels – applicatory, meaning, and validity – and following different power political logics – fragmenting and/or integrative – can pose a major challenge to existing (liberal) norms and international order, rather than potentially re-legitimizing or reforming these. Second, while a power political approach to norm contestation remains open to considering the agency of a multiplicity of actors, it nonetheless suggests paying special attention to the most powerful among these. Third, it is agnostic about the progressive or regressive nature of processes of norm diffusion and contestation. If a value-position should be staked at all, it is one skeptical towards the possibility of advancing norms and identities presented as universal without inviting some kind of counter-power/anti-hegemonic reaction. Having outlined the key axioms of a power

political approach to norm contestation, we now employ this framework to explain some of the most puzzling yet also consequential contestatory practices employed by major authoritarian powers like Russia and China in the liberal international order.

Authoritarian Powers and Modes of Power Political Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order

In terms of the distribution of ideational power, the post-Cold War order has been largely defined by the hegemony of liberal ideas and identities (Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf 2018). This is an order where as ever more independent countries came to participate in world politics following processes of decolonization, the international system experienced a parallel move away – Hurrell (2006, 4) poignantly remarks – from a “pluralist view of international society to one characterized by greater solidarism”. This solidarism which is based on liberal principles has been re-defining sovereignty by making it increasingly conditional on the respect of human rights and a growing range of global governance arrangements. Such an order also grants greater status and authority to states that follow certain modern ‘standards of civilization’ (*Millennium* 2014), in terms of domestic governance (i.e. democratic) and social relations (i.e. gender, racial, religious, and sexual freedom and equality).

For its advocates, the liberal international order is seen as promoting the well-being of all its stakeholders along with constraining the most powerful among these (Ikenberry 2011b, also Bower 2016). Yet to many non-Western actors this order appears as a hierarchical system dominated by the US, and its European allies, which primarily reproduces the values, reinforces the identities, and promotes the interests of Western liberal states and non-state actors. In such a context, Russia and China appear to be particularly “frustrated sovereigns” (Epstein, Lindemann, and Sending 2018). These experience the rules and norms of a Western-dominated liberal world order not only as delegitimizing their status, but also as curtailing their ability to mobilize ideational resources to ‘win conflicts’, ‘limit alternatives,’ and ‘shape normality’ globally, thus ultimately constraining their capacity to act as fully-fledged sovereign agents. Moreover, the current order can lead China and Russia to experience a range of insecurities. Physical security is perceived to be threatened by the expansion of multilateral institutions anchored to the West and embedded within the liberal international order, like NATO and the EU (Mearsheimer 2014).

Regime security is perceived to be threatened by popular unrest or political opposition inspired by democratic ideals (Koesel and Bunce 2013). And finally ontological security – the need to maintain a stable and continuous sense of self (Mitzen 2006) – appears constantly threatened by forces seeking that Russia and China change identities and institutions to conform to liberal standards.

Such a state of affairs is generating multiple practices of ideational counter-balancing and power political maneuvers in the form of norm contestation. We identify four distinct modes of contestation that major authoritarian powers such as China and Russia are engaging in: liberal performance, liberal mimicry, civilizational essentialization, and counter-norm entrepreneurship. These modes of contestation – which are expressed through non-violent practices including discourses, diplomatic initiatives, advocacy activities, or processes of institution building – have been deployed in parallel and overlapping ways over the past two decades. As we shall see, each of these modes varies in terms of their *intensity* level – whether what is being contested is the application, meaning, or validity of (liberal) norms – and the *power political logic* they largely embody – whether fragmenting and/or integrative

Consistent with the assumption that hierarchies do not eliminate, but shape power political dynamics, the practices we identify Russia and China being engaged in reveal how these are conditioned by the liberal character of the international system they contest. Indeed, as we shall see, the liberal norms and identities that constitute the West and the wider international order act as the main frame of reference for authoritarian powers and their modes of contestation. On the one hand, liberal performance and mimicry reproduce the same liberal logics they seek to challenge. On the other hand, even if civilizational essentialization and counter-norm entrepreneurship seek to advance alternative identities and norms, these modes of contestation nonetheless remain articulated in relation and opposition to a liberal other.

Finally, in line with a view that does not take the state as an ontological prior, we tie Russian and Chinese agency to a multiplicity of state and non-state actors. These include, first and foremost, political elites and institutions that formally represent these countries, such as heads of state or foreign ministries. Russian and Chinese actorhood can be furthermore traced at supra- and sub-national levels. Above the state, this includes regional multilateral organizations that represent and act to promote Russian and Chinese interests in international relations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). At the

societal level, we also consider the agency of business and cultural elites – which fund and populate universities, news outlets, think tanks, and foundations – often officially or unofficially tied to governmental structures.

Liberal Performance

We define liberal performance as the practice whereby authoritarian states and elites faithfully adopt and reproduce – both in *form* and *content* – liberal discourses and practices, to contest American and European actors’ non-compliance with the liberal ideas and identities they claim to abide by and champion globally. It is an applicatory form of contestation, whereby the authoritarian agent performs the role of the liberal activist and watchdog on the world stage.

For example, both Russia and China have published reports that detail allegations of political and civil rights abuses by Western governments, which reproduce the genre of human rights reports drafted by the US Department of State or the European External Action Service. In 2015 China’s State Council Information Office published a report claiming that “the US was haunted by spreading guns and frequent occurrence of violent crimes, which threatened citizens’ civil rights” (*The Guardian* 2015). It went on to argue that the US “violated human rights in other countries in a more brazen manner, and was given more ‘red cards’ in the international human rights field” (*The Guardian* 2015). A 2017 report criticized, among other things, US military actions in Syria and Iraq, the torture of prisoners in Afghanistan, and racial discrimination inside the US (*Xinhuanet* 2017).

In 2011, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its own *Report on the Situation with Human Rights in Certain States*. The report attacked the US government for applying “a variety of methods of controlling society and interfering in the private lives of the American people” (MFA 2011). “The situation of non-citizens in the Baltic countries, Roma people, migrants and refugees, and manifestations of racism and xenophobia”, the report continued this time turning its gaze to Europe, “are particularly troublesome human rights issues in the EU” (MFA 2011). Similar modes of liberal performance are also central, for instance, to the coverage by Russia’s English-language RT channel of US and UK politics (Rawnsley 2015).

These are puzzling practices. Why would authoritarian states take on the role of the liberal watchdog? We argue that liberal performance constitutes a power political fragmenting

strategy that, by contesting the West's non- or mis-application of liberal norms, seeks to weaken the influence of the West and liberal norms themselves. This may occur in two ways. First, liberal performance contributes to exposing and framing Western-based actors – in particular the US and European states – as 'hypocritical' (Finnemore 2009, Glaser 2006). Americans and Europeans are shamed for 'selectively appropriating' liberal norms or acting according to 'double standards'. This may undermine trust, credibility, and deference to particular Western actors, leading to more concrete effects such as withdrawal of support – whether refusal to endorse, cooperate, or contribute – to a Western actor's proposed policy, as was evident with the widespread opposition to the United States' 2003 war to 'democratize' Iraq. Hypocrisy furthermore erodes the rules-making and agenda-setting capacity of Western agents, who are no longer trusted with setting up new international standards which they will expect others to follow but likely flaunt themselves. Lastly, perceptions of continued hypocrisy can also undermine respect and deference for the very same liberal norms and values Western actors draw on to legitimize themselves and their actions.

Second, liberal performance can also be a form of what Janice Bially Mattern (2005) defines as 'representational force.' Representational force does not produce physical harm, but rather threatens the ontological security of the targeted political actor. By exposing the West as not abiding by the liberal standards it claims to uphold or for not being as liberal as it claims to be, liberal performance highlights inconsistencies and can sow doubt in American and European publics about their communities and states' often-claimed liberal identities. A more ontologically insecure West, with a less stable sense of itself as liberal, can erode Americans and Europeans' willingness to speak out in defense or capacity to act in the name of liberal norms globally (e.g. Tierney 2017).

Liberal Mimicry

Liberal mimicry is a type of meaning contestation which consists in adopting the *form* of liberal discourses and practices, while simultaneously giving these a non-liberal *content*. Our understanding of mimicry is similar to L.H.M. Ling's (2002) notion of 'substantive mimicry'. For Ling 'substantive mimicry' is not just mere copying, but a "copying which is re-articulated with local flavors which is framed as competitor to the liberal original" (Ling 2002, 117). In our *realpolitik* reading, and in contrast to Ling's post-colonial one, the competitor project to the

liberal original is not necessarily emancipatory, but can easily contribute to the norms and practices of authoritarian politics.

For instance, senior Russian officials have reinterpreted the concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) both to legitimize Russia's own interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, and also to contest the current meaning of R2P as an emerging global norm (Allison 2013, Kurowska 2014). In this reworking, R2P is not grounded in universalist humanitarian norms, but in an identity-politics ethics which focuses on ethnic Russians or Russian-speakers in former Soviet states. Similarly, the Chinese government and Chinese scholars have advanced their own understandings of 'good governance' (Keping 2008). Chinese actors have rearticulated a norm generally embedded within liberal principles of transparent, accountable, and non-arbitrary government, as one instead centered on effective public administration, but within a one-party state which explicitly does not contemplate genuine democratic politics (Wang and Guo 2015, Zhenglai and Guo 2011).

Liberal mimicry is furthermore noticeable in the proliferation of election monitors from the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) increasingly dispatched to post-Soviet countries. Reports from SCO and CIS monitors regularly contradict those by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), whose observers have often concluded that post-Soviet elections are flawed or unfair (Ambrosio 2009). Alexander Cooley (2015, 55) labels these election monitors "zombie monitors", who "look like democratic observers, but serve autocratic purposes by pretending that clearly flawed elections deserve clean bills of health."

Liberal mimicry follows principally, although not exclusively, a fragmenting power political logic intent on frustrating Western normative agency and weakening the universal appeal of liberal norms. This occurs along two dimensions. First, as post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1984, 129) emphasize, mimicry challenges colonial power by disrupting its authority to produce fixed meanings. Liberal mimicry undermines and unsettles the monopoly – and thus also the 'productive power' (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 55-57) – of Western-based actors over the interpretation of liberal norms globally. Through this mode of contestation, Russia and China seek to destabilize and delegitimize attempts by the West to fix the meaning of international liberal norms and practices. Liberal mimicry can help to "confuse and distract", as Cooley argues (2015, 55) in his discussion of zombie monitors, and thus "sow uncertainty".

Second, liberal mimicry contributes to relativizing the West's ethical position in world politics, denying the universality of the West's construction of values and assertion of norms. Similarly to Erna Burai's (2016, 67) notion of 'parody', liberal mimicry has the effect "to disclose the original normative discourse as just one possible "reality-making script"". If the non-liberal subject mimics liberalism by reinterpreting liberal norms according to its interests and values, then it opens up the possibility that apparently universalistic norms do not represent universalist claims after all, but are merely the projection of particularist European or American worldviews and interests.

Liberal mimicry is partly, as well, an integrative power political strategy since it also involves an act of normative re-interpretation. Through mimicry, Russian and Chinese actors may succeed in gradually redefining the very meaning of the liberal norm in question, providing these states with useful 'legitimizing strategies' (Goddard 2009) to pursue their international interests. When it comes to R2P, Moscow's mimicry unsettles and provincializes this norm, while simultaneously reinterpreting it in ways that may mobilize domestic and international support for Russian objectives. The debate around good governance originating from China serves to decouple effective governance from liberal norms of democratization and civil and political rights, while contributing to legitimate Beijing's understanding of domestic order. Likewise, Cooley (2015, 56) finds that the meaning of outside election observation is being redefined by the deployment of CIS and SCO monitors from a "neutral activity that evaluates the quality of electoral processes objectively and openly, even if this might 'undermine' sovereignty", to a "sovereignty-enhancing" partnership instead between invited zombie observers and the authoritarian governments that summon them.

Civilizational Essentialization

Civilizational essentialization involves the articulation of particular types of domestic and regional identities, constituted by a set of cultural and normative features, which are presented as 'other' to and mobilized to contest the universal validity of liberal norms and identities. Civilizational essentialization involves what Peter Katzenstein (2010, 12) defines as "making civilizations primordial," understood as a "political project that aims at creating a taken-for-granted sense of reality that helps in distinguishing between self and other and right and wrong". Put differently, civilizational essentialization is a two-level process. On the one hand, it is

centered on the production of particular forms of civilizational identity that naturalize differences, harden boundaries, and eliminate a view of identity as multilayered, internally contested, evolving and contingent. On the other, this essentialized civilizational self is then represented as embodying a set of values which are posited as distinct from those of other civilizations in general and, in our case, a liberal West in particular.

This turn towards civilizational imaginaries, and attendant narratives of cultural uniqueness and value difference, has been – as Samuel Huntington’s (1993) (in)famous ‘clash of civilizations’ theory partly predicted – a striking feature of 21st century international politics (see also Bettiza 2014, Reus-Smit 2017, 873, 882). Russian and Chinese actors have very much taken an active part in this intellectual and political project (Cooley 2015, 51-52, Pabst 2019). The assertion of a discrete civilizational entity – embodying both ideas of Russian identity and sets of distinct values and norms – has a long history in Russian thought. In the contemporary period, civilizational thinking has gradually re-emerged in Russian official discourse following a process of intellectual disenchantment with the West (Linde 2016, Tsygankov 2016). Russia’s 2008 Foreign Policy Concept explained that for “the first time in contemporary history, global competition is acquiring a civilizational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems” (MFA 2008). In early 2012 Putin echoed this vision, arguing that Russia is “a state civilisation” (cited in Linde 2016, 22).

The geography of this ‘state-civilization’ is variable, expressed either as a Russo-centric, Slavic community – the so-called ‘Russian World’ (Feklyunina 2016, Sidorov 2006) – or as a more diverse space that includes non-Russian peoples of Central Asia – referred to as ‘Eurasia’ (Lukin 2014, see also Bassin, Glebov, and Laruelle 2013). These different conceptions align, however, in three important ways. First, the Russian state is at the heart of both of these spaces, not simply as a geopolitical power, but as a civilizational force. Second, the unity – and even the continued existence – of this civilizational entity is perceived to be threatened by the West and the liberal order. Third, this Russian-centered civilization is imbued with particular normative content, represented by a set of conservative moral and religious values and a prioritization of the state and the nation, which are situated in opposition to Western liberal secular values and a focus on individual rights.

Historically, Chinese elites considered China to be synonymous with civilization, prompting Lucian Pye’s (1990, 58) famous claim that: “China is a civilization pretending to be a

state.” Chinese civilization is understood as characterized by the common acceptance of a moral order markedly different from that outside the Chinese realm. Tu Wei-Ming writes that, “the state exemplifies the civilizational norms for the general public and the leadership assumes ideological and moral authority” (cited in Dynon 2014, 24). The content of this moral order has varied over time, from traditional Confucian values, through Maoist ideology, to contemporary variants of neo-Confucianism, but in each case it served to define a coherent Chinese identity. As William Callahan (2015) has argued, this identity was maintained through a civilizational discourse that distinguished Chinese culture from an external realm, demarcated through a clear historical dichotomy between ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’.

Under Xi Jinping there has been an attempt to develop an ideological program articulated within a Chinese civilizational discourse. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has led a mass public campaign to promote 12 Core Socialist Values under a national campaign called *Stressing Civilization, Building a New Culture* (Gow 2017). These “represent a distillation of the state’s vision for state–society–citizen relations” and “a crystallization of the CCP’s values in contrast to “western” liberal values” (Gow 2017, 100, 97). Many of the core values expounded mark a clear shift away from Maoist or Marxist ideals and a (re)turn to Confucian ethics (Feng 2015). Here the state and the community are prioritized over individuals and civil society, and norms of harmony and social obligations are elevated over contestation and civil and political rights – in ways that echo the ‘Asian values’ debate of the 1990s with its rejection of the universalist claims of human rights (Thompson 2015).

Civilizational essentialization in so far as it involves “activating and creating common identities and norms around relevant actors and social sites” (Goddard and Nexon 2016, 5), is predominantly an integrative power political maneuver. First, civilizational essentialization provides Russian and Chinese actors with a domestically constructed stable sense of collective selves across time and in relation/opposition to a liberal Western ‘other’ (see also Zarakol 2010). A stable identity and sense of self produce ontological security, which is itself necessary in order to “realize a sense of agency”, as Mitzen (2006, 342) explains. Ontological security “enables and motivates action and choice”; without it states find themselves instead in a “deep, incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e. how to get by in the world” (Mitzen 2006, 344, 345).

Second, civilizational essentialization expands Russian and Chinese autonomy in the international system by generating forms of what Peter Katzenstein (2014, 214) labels as “circulatory power”. Drawing on Foucault, Katzenstein conceptualizes circulatory power as the ability that agents have to produce alternative normalities – whether identities, modes of classification, or norms in world politics – which seek to resist, escape, or challenge dominant ones. Through civilizational essentialization, China and Russia are seeking to escape the socializing force and productive power of the liberal international order and its agents by carving out and normalizing particularistic notions of moral and political selves that are non-Western and non-liberal.

Third, civilizational essentialization allows Chinese and Russian elites to articulate their interests not simply in crude instrumentalist and material terms but also as an expression of their most authentic selves and ethical worldviews. It provides a discourse that Russian and Chinese elites can deploy to justify and legitimate, and thus generate consent for and undermine resistance to, a wide range of domestic and regional projects. For instance, domestic voices calling for a more liberal state and society in Russia and China, can be delegitimized as Western stooges who attempt to undermine not simply the regime or the national interest, but also specific civilizational values. Rather than framing regional projects solely as efforts to expand Russian and Chinese influence in their backyards, this mode of contestation allows to portray such initiatives – like the EAEU or the SCO – as attempts to keep the West and the liberal order at bay by bringing together countries presented as sharing a common civilizational identity and set of values.

Civilizational essentialization, as it asserts alternative non-liberal particularistic identities and moral orders for Russia and China, simultaneously undermines the global validity of liberal norms and identities. By doing so, this mode of contestation therefore also follows a fragmenting power political logic. Civilizational essentialization contributes to ‘provincializing’ liberal norms and identities, suggesting that these are the product of Western history, culture, and interests, and thus are context specific rather than universal. Democracy, human rights and the liberal order are delegitimized as products of and for the West. Along the way, the collective mobilization capacity of liberal arguments and actors is potentially weakened both in world politics in general as well as within the Russian and Chinese essentialized civilizational space in particular.

Counter-Norm Entrepreneurship

Counter-norm entrepreneurship is a validity form of contestation, which involves articulating and advancing globally a set of non-liberal (a) social and political norms and (b) visions of international order. These often draw on imaginaries and narratives of civilizational difference and uniqueness, while simultaneously being stripped of their thickest cultural references in order to resonate as widely as possible globally. Counter-norms are generally articulated in opposition to liberal projects. Yet this mode of contestation, we argue (*pace* Morozov 2015, especially ch.4), is not simply based on a negative rejection. Counter-norm entrepreneurship embodies an attempt to positively promote a coherent set of ‘illiberal’ ideas, institutions, and practices worldwide that reflect an ideological alternative to liberal forms of domestic and international order.

Russian actors have been particularly active counter-norm entrepreneurs, promoting globally two broad bundles of social and political norms: the so-called ‘traditional values’ agenda, and norms of ‘illiberal governance’ and ‘strong leaders’ (Keating and Kaczmarek 2019). Traditional values include an emphasis on the heterosexual family and the importance of procreation; support for traditional gender roles; opposition to LGBTQ rights; and respect for social hierarchies. Conservative activists and parliamentarians in Russia have prohibited ‘propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships’, promoted anti-blasphemy legislation, restrictions on obscene language in films, and controls on the Internet. Some of these initiatives have been reproduced in other former Soviet states (Sharafutdinova 2014), while Russian norm entrepreneurs have also sought to diffuse these values more widely around the world (Keating and Kaczmarek 2019).

Karaganov (2017) claims that ‘traditional values’ norms are not just a useful tool to contain Western ideological expansion, but are also “viable principles which are attractive for many people and countries” worldwide thus generating “soft power” resources for Russia itself. The Russian government, along with the Russian Orthodox Church and other conservative institutions, have been able to deploy the traditional values agenda to develop alliances and exacerbate existing cleavages within societies globally and between the West and the Rest on LGBTQ rights. In September 2012, for instance, Russia won a narrow majority to support a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council on the importance of traditional values, backed by countries such as India, Belarus, China, Kyrgyzstan, Syria, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (Horvath

2016, 887). Traditional values norms have also been mobilized to discourage countries in Russia's sphere of influence such as Armenia (Nikoghosyan 2016), but also further afield, from strengthening their ties with the West. When President Obama threatened in 2013 to cut aid to Uganda if an anti-homosexuality bill were to be passed, Ugandan President Museveni quickly replied that he would then "work with Russia" (Ayoub 2017, 86). While Russian influence should certainly not be exaggerated, Philip Ayoub (2017, 95) does find that Russia is increasingly succeeding in "making LGBT rights part of a geopolitics in which states coopt the values that align with "their" side".

Similarly, the prioritization of a particular understanding of statehood and governance produces a Russian discourse about political order that has wider global traction. "The prevalent social-political system of the future will not be Western European or American-style liberal democracy, which is in crisis almost everywhere," Karaganov (2015) contends, "but illiberal strongman democracy prevailing in the rising states of the non-West". From the very beginning of his presidency, Putin advocated a strong state as synonymous with sustainable political order. He asserted this position as an important principle of Russian foreign policy, most clearly in the rejection of Western policies leading to 'regime change', as in Ukraine, Libya and Egypt, and in unquestioning support for *status quo* state authorities, as in Syria. Such practices are still distinct from the idea of explicit 'autocracy promotion', of which Tansey (2016) finds little evidence. Nonetheless there are signs that Russia is supporting parties and movements around the world that advocate illiberal norms, both socially and politically. Russia has, for instance, funded meetings of far-right organizations from Europe and the US, grouped in the *International Russian Conservative Forum*, supported right-wing populists such as Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Norbert Hofer in Austria (Shekhovtsov 2017), and interfered to indirectly aid the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump (Muller Report 2019).

Finally, Russia is articulating counter-norms of international order that reject liberal forms of globalization in favor of a multipolar order based on civilizational spaces (Linde 2016, Lukin 2014, Tsygankov 2016). President Putin (2013) has argued that: "the 21st century promises to become the ... era of the formation of major geopolitical zones, as well as financial and economic, cultural, civilisational, and military and political areas". The Berlin-based Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute (DOC), a think tank funded by Vladimir Yakunin, a

former Russian government minister, seeks to promote “effective cooperation and partnership between civilisations”.¹¹ The idea of a multipolar, multi-civilizational world has become a central trope in Russian rhetoric, both as a counter-hegemonic idea and as a consensus-building norm to develop alliances in support of a new vision of post-liberal world order (see also Chebankova 2017).

China’s promotion of counter-norms has been less explicit. The idea of a ‘Beijing consensus’, a Chinese model of authoritarian state-led development underpinned by illiberal governance norms, was first identified by some Western scholars (Halper 2010). The concept was initially met with skepticism both in China and among Western critics (Suzuki 2009). Scholars argued that China lacked a coherent ideology and instead was guided primarily by economic and political pragmatism (Givens 2011). Under Xi Jinping, however, China has been increasingly assertive about its own ideas of political order and economic development. At the Chinese Communist Party’s 19th National Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping claimed that the Chinese socialist model offers “a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence” (cited in Gracie 2017). Commentators claimed that China’s president had “announced a veritable “civilizing mission” to compete in the world arena of philosophies of governance” (McCahill Jr. 2017).

In practical terms, China has funded extensive political training programs for government officials in many African countries, with states such as Ethiopia making particular aspects of the ‘Chinese model’ their own (Sun 2016). China takes ‘soft power’ seriously, funding extensive international educational exchanges, and developing a network of over 475 Confucius Institutes worldwide, through which it promotes not only a positive view of contemporary China, but by implication its authoritarian political system and governance norms (Albro 2015). The impact of these ‘soft power’ initiatives is disputed (Holyk 2011), but there is an increasing self-confidence in China’s attempts to promote alternative non-liberal principles.

Chinese intellectuals, scholars, and policy analysts have also advanced alternative visions of world order. Many of these rely on a reworking of the ancient Chinese concept of ‘*Tianxia*’, usually translated as ‘all under heaven’, a vision of a harmonious world that overcomes conflicts between nations (Callahan 2008, French 2017). In *Tianxia*, discourses of neo-Confucian

¹¹ <https://doc-research.org/en/about-us/> (accessed July 22, 2017)

harmony are deeply entangled with the re-emergence of Sinocentric civilizational discourses and hierarchical norms. William Callahan (2008, 758) concludes that: “*Tianxia* is a hierarchical system that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights”. Rather than representing “a post-hegemonic ideal”, notions of *Tianxia* order represent “a proposal for a new hegemony” (Callahan 2008, 758, also Ling 2010, 231-38). Although ideas of a non-liberal world order influenced by *Tianxia* have been most clearly articulated by intellectuals such as Tingyang Zhao (2006), some see traces of this thinking emerging in Xi Jinping’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Callahan 2016, French 2017). For Callahan (2016, 3), the BRI is part of an attempt “to build a Sinocentric “community of shared destiny” in Asia, which in turn will make China a normative power that sets the rules of the game for global governance”. Recently the idea of a world order based on the respect of civilizational diversity, has been explicitly endorsed and promoted by Xi Jinping at the 2019 *Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations*, held in the context of the BRI’s fifth pillar (people-to-people exchanges).

Counter-norm entrepreneurship is chiefly, although not exclusively, an integrating power political strategy. This mode of contestation turns Russian and Chinese actors into active norm-makers, which provides them with important forms of international influence by enabling them to exercise agenda setting and productive power. By proposing on the international stage alternative understandings of societal relations, domestic governance, and world order to liberal ones emanating from Western-based agents and multilateral institutions, Moscow and Beijing seek to coopt publics that already embrace or socialize novel actors into illiberal norms and identities in order to mobilize support globally for projects closer to Russian and Chinese values and interests. Religious traditionalists, far-right organizations, and right-wing populists in Western societies often voicing Eurosceptic ideas and supporting illiberal cultural, social, and political norms similar to those promoted by Russian elites, for instance, have increasingly looked favorably towards Moscow (Shekhovtsov 2017). China has been less successful at developing traction for its alternative governance norms in the West than in developing states, but its neo-Confucian ideals are beginning to gather a small but influential following (e.g. Bell 2016).

Counter-norm entrepreneurship generates parallel fragmenting power political dynamics. By challenging the universal validity of liberal norms this mode of contestation can lead to their

erosion in certain localities, thus undermining the power of liberal international organizations and Western-based agents to uniquely set the normative agenda and define what is normal/abnormal or thinkable/unthinkable globally. Moreover, this form of contestation can contribute to polarizing public opinion and generate political gridlock in democratic contexts both in Europe and North America. Overall, however, it is important to recognize that the force of counter-norm entrepreneurship as a mode of contestation rests on its ability to give Russia and China greater agency and collective mobilization capacity in the international system through the articulation of alternative meanings and ideas that goes beyond simply spoiler behavior or a rejection of the liberal status quo.

Conclusion

Going back to the question with which this article opened, we argue that the growing influence of authoritarian powers like Russia and China in world politics is likely to lead both to an international order which is less liberal, as well as to the global weakening of liberal social and political norms within states. We build on Constructivist scholarship that theorizes world orders not only as constituted by the distribution of material capabilities, but also by the ideas and identities that structure the (Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf 2018, Reus-Smit 2017). While these accounts have been important in conceptualizing how world orders in general and the liberal world order in particular hang together, they have paid little attention to the mechanisms and processes through which ideational change may come about.

This paper argued that the concept of normative contestation is a fruitful way to approach this issue. Finding, however, that the existing literature on contestation has tended to overlook, externalize, or undertheorize the role of power, the article developed a power political approach to norm contestation that more explicitly and consistently foregrounds power considerations in the analysis. Through such a lens we unpacked how the liberal international order constitutes a global ideological environment which can constrain and undermine Russian and Chinese status, security (physical, regime, and ontological), and ultimately agency. As a result a range of ideational-counter balancing moves by Russian and Chinese actors are to be expected. We conceptualized these moves as constituting four distinct modes of norm contestation: liberal

performance, liberal mimicry, civilizational essentialization, and counter-norm entrepreneurship. We then showed how liberal performance and liberal mimicry operate at a lower intensity level and are mostly fragmenting power political maneuvers; while civilizational essentialization and counter-norm entrepreneurship operate, instead, at a higher intensity level and are mostly integrating power political maneuvers (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table 1: Norm Contestation: Mode, Intensity Level and Power Political Logic

<i>Mode of Contestation</i>	<i>Intensity Level</i>	<i>Power Political Logic</i>
Liberal Performance	Applicatory	Fragmenting (at a global level)
Liberal Mimicry	Meaning	Predominantly fragmenting (at a global level), but also integrative (at a domestic/regional level)
Civilizational essentialization	Validity	Predominantly integrative (at a domestic/regional level), but also fragmenting (at a global level)
Counter-norm entrepreneurship	Validity	Predominantly integrative (at a global level), but also fragmenting (at a global level)

Areas for further research remain, particularly in two domains. First, our paper sought to provide the most parsimonious taxonomy of modes of contestation that captures the complex range of ways in which major authoritarian powers like China and Russia seek to increase their international power and influence through symbolic instruments in the liberal international order. Yet, we do not claim that these four modes of contestation exhaust all possible options Russian and Chinese actors have. Therefore, attention could be given to further investigating how comprehensive the taxonomy we provide is. This research may identify on-going modes of norm contestation by China and Russia that our taxonomy cannot fully capture, or new emerging ones which we have not foreseen.

The second area for further exploration centers on the effects and outcomes of the four modes of contestation. Ongoing debates exist on whether and under what conditions contestation leads to the weakening and replacement or the further consolidation and strengthening of existing norms (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018). We maintain that from a power political perspective, norm contestation is of interest to the extent that it occurs in an effort to undermine

and replace established norms and identities experienced as curtailing a particular actor's agency and influence. The higher the intensity of contestation in terms of questioning the validity of norms, and the more evidence of an integrative power political logic at play in a specific mode of contestation, the greater is the challenge posed by Russian and Chinese actors to liberal norms of domestic and international order. Civilizational essentialization and counter-norm entrepreneurship function precisely at this level. Yet, we have also attempted to show how liberal performance and liberal mimicking, despite operating at a lower intensity level, which involves applicatory and meaning types of contestation, are nonetheless deployed as a power political fragmenting strategy designed to undermine the legitimacy, stability, and interpretation – and therefore the influence – of liberal norms and their entrepreneurs. Hence, our conclusion above that ongoing practices of norm contestation by emerging authoritarian powers are likely to lead to a less liberal world order.

This said, we cannot be empirically certain about this outcome. In particular, it is still unclear how far civilizational essentialization and counter-norm entrepreneurship are able to go beyond a mirror negation of liberal norms and practices to provide instead genuine ideational alternatives. The seeds of an alternative are noticeable, to the extent that civilizational essentialization and illiberal counter-norm entrepreneurship stress values of stability, tradition, hierarchy, community, particularism, and cultural autonomy from the West, over supposed liberal disorder, change, anarchy, individualism, universalism, and cultural dependency/inferiority to the West. Yet, despite Vladimir Putin's recent assertion that liberalism is 'obsolete' (BBC 2019), it remains to be seen how far illiberal norms and projects provide viable and sustainable social and political models of domestic and international order that are capable of attracting and mobilizing an ever growing number of supporters globally.

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