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Article

Relational Order, Harmonizing Power and Effective Leadership

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Abstract

Two types of order exist in society, relational and rational. Much of the mainstream IR literature shows a "rational order" bias, focusing almost exclusively on the latter at the expense of the former. Relational order, rooted more in the reason of nature than human rationality, is spontaneous and more natural in societies, constituting the primary order while rational order, human-designed and made, is secondary, underlain by relational order. Relational order is a dynamic process of continuously harmonizing relations, generated bottom-up, with little external imposition and out of daily practices of ordinary societal members. Its original state is harmony defined in terms of general cooperation. Relational order needs maintenance, for it is never total and the relational process may deviate and go astray. Its maintenance, however, is not to impose an artificial construct to replace its original naturalness. Rather it is to take the process back on track and restore its natural state of harmony. Accordingly, the power to maintain relational order is more "harmonizing power" than the types of power used for rational order, such as coercive, inducive or homogenizing power. Furthermore, since the two types of order are not mutually exclusive, measures and mechanisms of the latter work more successfully if the former functions smoothly. Once relational order goes astray, rational order often fails to operate well. Repairing relations and restoring trust in international society should therefore be the first to consider once the world order goes wrong. Effective leadership in a relational order exhibits the ability to harmonize relations in general and to reorient relations as they are going off track.

Introduction

The thirty years immediately after the end of the Cold War tend to attract particular attention when world politics is discussed. It is generally believed to be a period of peace and development. The tough struggle between the two confrontational camps was over, the world seemed no longer darkened with the threat of terror and socio-economic development became a general aspiration. Some argue that it was because of the American hegemony that exercised the power of a benign Leviathan, some argue that it was the strengthening of the international

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institutional rules that sustained an order needed by rational nation-states and also some argue that liberal norms worked as a uniting force for the Post-Cold War order. To some extent, all these factors worked more obviously than during the Cold War years. But, why have these factors, power, rules and norms, or all together, failed to work as effectively today?

Answers to this question vary. The waning of legitimacy of the hegemonic power, the weakening of international institutions and rules or/and the heterogeneity of normative values and identity—all are taken as causal factors.[1] I argue that these discussions neglect an underlying factor: relation. It is more the underlying relations which developed and worked in the thirty years after the end of the Cold War that have been going astray. During those three decades, the overall relationships among almost all international actors, especially the major ones, were more harmonious and a general willingness to cooperate highlighted the then international relations. It is not to say that there was no conflict of interest or dissonance of values, but the overall atmosphere was one that favored cooperation. I further argue therefore that it was the underlying relational order, an order built around relations, perhaps much more congenial and cooperative during those years than any time since the end of WWII, that provided a foundation for power to work more positively, for rules to function more effectively and for norms to be more inclusive. It is therefore not the hegemonic power, the institutional rules or the leading ideology that counted alone for a world order. Rather it is the relational order marked by the overall cooperation among members of the international community that enabled power, rules and norms to work better. Without a healthy relational order, power loses its legitimacy, rules are contested and norms become intensely controversial. In short, it is relation that goes before power, institutions and norms.

Two Types of Order

Human, as well as non-human, society needs order. In international society, order is also a key word, for it is largely believed that the anarchical nature of such a society does not mean an orderless jungle. Rather it is a society with important societal features such as rules and norms that bind nations together despite the conflict and fight.[2] However, we perhaps need to understand order in a clearer way and ask first all what kinds of order exist, develop and last. I propose here that there are two types of order in society: relational and rational. Both of them exist and work for a society to function. Relational order is more natural and exists as the primary order, while rational order is human-made, artificially created as the secondary order in society.

Relational order is an order developed spontaneously out of and around relations among members of a society. It is therefore more natural. Natural order exists and endures, unplanned and unstructured. It is an order that is generated bottom-up and out of daily practices of the members of a society. It is, as an internally developed order and goes inseparably with society. To relate and be related is a spontaneous propensity of all, human and nonhuman, on earth and beyond, and relational order hence tends to be more natural. Moreover, society is of and by relations, no matter what society it is. In other words, where there is society, there is natural order where relations develop spontaneously bottom-up. It constitutes thus the primary order in society. International Relations theorists often argue that there is no order in a natural setting where disorder rules unless a Leviathan appears and rules by its superior power. Gradually, however, we have come to be marveled by the reason of nature. The order created by it, perhaps

[1] G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal International Order," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2009), pp. 71–87.

[2] Hedly Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Barry Buzan, "From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School," *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (1993), pp. 327–52.

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invisible or incomprehensible by the humble human mind, is real indeed, much more complex, comprehensive and inclusive.

Rational order is an artificial order constructed by human-made apparatuses out of human rationality. It is termed as such because it believes in human rationality by which the best order can be created. Since the world entered the era of modernity, the self-confidence of the human has grown to the extent that the rational human beings can solve all problems, natural and social, for the humanity is an extraordinary masterpiece, a noble rationality and the universe essence, like a deity in the wisdom and an angle in the behavior, as Shakespeare said. The key elements of rational order are human-made and its overall structures human-designed. Furthermore, these human designed factors are imposed on members of society in the hope that a certain kind of social order should be maintained and social goals realized. Compared with relational order, rational order is developed top-down and externally imposed, intending to interfere with societal life. Since it is an artificial order, designed and made to work by humans, it is a secondary order.

These two types of order are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they both exist and are related in society. Both matter. The primary order provides a foundation for society while the secondary order builds up on this foundation so as to make it for better (or for worse). Going back to the question raised at the beginning, we may provide a brief answer here. Power, institutional rules and international norms worked better during the period immediately after the end of the Cold War largely because the underlying relational order then was more harmonious and cooperation among nations prevailed. The call for fighting against terrorism worldwide, for establishing G20 and for cooperation to address the financial crisis were readily accepted by almost all major players, in words and in deeds. Nowadays, however, competition for self-interest has become much more intensified, struggle for strategic advantage fiercer and the overall pattern of relations among major players much more conflictual. All these human behaviors are damaging the relational order that worked in the decades following the end of the Cold War. As a result, power becomes increasingly weaponized and self-interest increasingly exclusive with much enlarged and ever greedy egoism. Logically, rules are less followed and norms more challenged.

The underlying relational order, therefore, is of crucial importance and shows a significant positive correlation with rational order. Negligence of either would lead to a biased observation and conceptualization of order in society, resulting in exclusive attention to one order at the expense of the other. The literature on international order provided by mainstream International Relations (IR), especially the most influential ones such as neorealism, neoliberalism and constructivism, are almost all about rational order. The key elements they have included, such as power, rules and norms, are largely artificially made by rational minds and human designers. This exclusive emphasis on rational order, backgrounded by a firm belief in human superiority, undervalues and even denies the ever existence and great potential of the more naturally developed relational order.

Due to such a prejudiced but deep-rooted belief, rational order has become the only type of order to think about and even think from. Accordingly, efforts have made almost exclusively to build, structure and improve such an order, especially when global order faces challenges and witnesses turbulent transformation. Progress has been made but failure has repeatedly occurred. In fact, since we pay little attention to the underlying relational order and since human rationality tends to be bounded and is often faulty, quite a lot of deviations are caused by human interference, many of the efforts address apparent symptoms but not root causes and some even turn out to be disastrous in the longer term.

It is, therefore, necessary to draw our attention to the primary order, the order that develops internally, bottom-up, spontaneously out of daily practices and reflecting life experiences in general. I argue that relational order is an important category of the primary order and the

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focus of this article is therefore on relational order as a type of natural order. In the following sections, I will discuss the bias of the mainstream IR's study on order, conceptualize relational order from the perspective of deeper relationalism and discuss the indispensable power and effective leadership in such an order.

The "Rational Order" Bias

Mainstream IR theories, i.e. neorealism, neoliberalism and constructivism, have an obvious "rational order" bias, which tends to focus on human-made or artificially designed order while neglecting natural and spontaneous order. The presumption is that humans are rational and their rationality enables them to design good order. Power-based, rule-based or/and identity/norm-based international order are the three discussed most.

Power-Based Order

The realist worship of power makes it inevitable to take power as the pivotal factor in building and sustaining a world order. Classic realists like E. H. Carr and Hans John Morgenthau both place power at the core of international order. Carr criticizes the League of Nations as a utopian project and believes that utopianism is dangerous, mainly due to its disregard of power. Material power, military and economic, is indispensable both for a nation to stand and for an international order to work.[3] Morgenthau defines international politics as the struggle for power among nations. Of the six principles for his scientific theory of political realism, two of which are directly about power, arguing that national interests are defined in terms of power and that it is an objective category universally applicable.[4] He makes a clear line between power and morality, denying the existence of universal morality and advocating the balance of power as the workable international order,[5] which may help the coexistence of nations, facilitate diplomacy and avoid major wars.

The power theme is a hallmark of almost all strands of realism. To move from state power to power distribution in the international system is what structural realism has accomplished, especially through Kenneth Waltz.[6] Two forms of international order have been developed, both stressing the systemic distribution of power. One is the hegemonic stability theory, for which hegemony, i.e., a highly imbalance of power in the international system, is a stable international order,[7] while the other is the balance of power theory, holding that balance, either bipolarity or multipolarity, may well help maintain a stable order.[8]

The hegemonic stability theory provides a structural scheme for power-based order. It argues that there should be a benign hegemon who is willing and able to build an order for the whole world. Because of its emphasis on the role of the single hegemon, this order is well labelled the hegemonic order. Since the international system is anarchical in nature with a high probability of all fighting against all, there must be a powerful Levitan to predominate for maintaining order, using coercive force when and where necessary. The hegemon builds this order and its power enables this order to work. The balance of power theory provides a classical proposition for world order based on power distribution in the international system. Since struggle for power is an objective fact, only a balance of power among nations, especially those major states, can

[3] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1964), pp. 97–130.

[4] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), pp. 4–10.

[5] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 167–220.

[6] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Readings: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[7] A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[8] Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

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effectively prevent anyone from making an aggressive war. Balance of power as an international order at least may maintain an unstable peace and make room for nations to carry out effective diplomacy. It maintains, arguably, that a multipolar order existed among European nations for a hundred years from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the beginning of the First World War. A bipolar order was structured during the Cold War years, an order of cold peace sustained by the balance of power and of terror between the two superpowers.

It is necessary to make it clear that for the power-based order power refers mainly to material and coercive power. It is the ability to make others do what they would otherwise not do,[9] for a rational human being knows what to do when pointed at by a gun. In an international system, analogous to the jungle, only the Leviathan's teeth and fists have the final say for maintaining order. Power is to conquer the other and overcome obstacles, human, national or natural. Such an order can be made by rational human actors, designed and practiced almost exclusively by major powers in the international system.

Rule-Based Order

Rule-based order is an important form of order, domestic and international. Woodrow Wilson's plan for a new world order immediately after the First World War envisaged a world ruled mainly by rules and the League of Nations was an international institution that would uphold the principle of collective security, abandon the balance of power strategy and thus ensure peace for the whole world.[10] The United Nations as its successor has continued to follow largely this rational blueprint and further strengthen its institutional building, hoping to create "a stable, articulate and institutionalized international environment."[11]

Theoretically, it is neoliberal institutionalism that places institutional rules at the core of a cooperative and more stable world order. The intensive discussion over international regimes in the 1980s reflected at least two concerns.[12] Firstly, the hegemonic order might not last because of the widespread worry about the weakening of the US military power after the Vietnam War and the decline of the US economic strength indicated particularly by the decoupling of the US dollar from gold. The post-WWII world order sustained by the US-led international institutions seemed to be collapsing. Once the US power was inadequate to sustain the world order, an overall disorder, something like the great depression in the economic field, would follow. Secondly, what could be done if such a situation became the reality the world had to face?

Neoliberal institutionalism provided a timely and optimistic answer.[13] Among the heated debate over the American power decline and discussion on international regimes, Robert Keohane argued that it was not necessary to worry so much about the decline of a hegemonic power, because the institutions and institutional rules would continue to work. Even though the establishment of these institutions needed the overwhelming power of the United States due to the extreme expensiveness for institution building, institutional rules gained their own life and would continue to work absent the hegemonic power. After hegemony, rules rule.

Rules are designed by rational human minds, so well designed that they are needed by nations in the international system who, featured by their instrumental rationality, want to cooperate in order to gain. Rules facilitate benefit-gaining cooperation and therefore are able to

[9] Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1957), pp. 201–15.
[10] G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1990), pp. 295–9.
[11] Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0," p. 78.
[12] Stephen D. Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).
[13] Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

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induce them to follow. For rational nation-states, self-interest is always what they pursue and international cooperation is a must to realize this goal. When nations want to cooperate in an anarchical international system, interest-oriented and competitive, what they are afraid most is cheating. Rules, as contracts among them, provide the best guarantee for nations to prevent cheating and free-riding, just as firms in a competitive market. Order rests on cooperation, self-interest leads rational actors to cooperate and cooperation requires effective rules to guide and bind. The rule-based order works and lasts because it is needed by rational actors for self-gains.

Identity/Norm-Based Order

Identity is taken as the most important factor in politics by constructivism.[14] Different though related, identity works more sophisticated than power or rules in creating a lasting order. If order requires compliance, power-based order is coercive, forcing others to obey; rule-based order is inducive, guiding others to conform through beneficial temptation; and identity-based order is homogenizing, making all develop a like identity so that compliance eventually becomes an effortless behavior.

The European Union (EU) is often taken as an example to illustrate a security community, which abandons use of force to promote self-interest and solve conflict.[15] Europe used to be a place of fire and blood, with the two World Wars both having broken out there. Having gone through all the ups and downs, it has since the end of WWII gradually formed a security community and developed practices that enable members to maintain an order that promotes diplomacy and follows the primary rules and norms. It is indeed true that the EU common identity has clear characteristics, such as democracy and market economy, which are often seen as necessary conditions for a peaceful and sustainable order.

An identity-based order requires that all nations in the world should develop a similar identity for an emerging world order that is somewhat like the EU. However, such an identity does not grow spontaneously. It requires purposeful socialization through education. The most important factor that creates a common identity in the world is international norms and a certain ideational or normative structure helps cultivate a certain identity. A study points out that European nations have gone through several stages to internalize common norms, from "strategic calculation," through "role playing," to "norm suasion."[16] It is further suggested that teaching others "nice norms" is an important way for developing similar identity, for example, the identity of a liberal democratic state.[17] Through such teaching, mainly by rational individuals, advanced nations or international organizations, states in the world would share a lot in many respects, political, economic, social, etc. and are eventually socialized into a homogeneous we-ness. For nurturing and developing such an identity, norms are crucial. An identity-based order, therefore, is fundamentally a norm-based order.

The Liberal International Order

Power-, rule-, and identity/norm-based order provides us in general with three kinds of world order. Theorists tend to place emphasis on one factor they believe to be the most important

[14] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 224–33.

[15] Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, *Security Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Emanuel Adler, "Europe as a Civilizational Community of Practice," in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Civilizations in World Politics: Plural and Pluralistic Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 67–90.

[16] Jeffrey Checkel, "International Institutions and Socialization in Europe," *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2005), pp. 801–26.

[17] Alexander Gheciu, "Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization: NATO and the New Europe," *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2005), pp. 973–1012.

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while practitioners and strategists consider more real-world situations and therefore include more factors for constructing a workable order. A common approach is to combine these theoretical categories and define order accordingly. Henry Kissinger, for example, identifies two components of world order, power and rules. Power, mainly balance of power, helps maintain peace, especially among major states, while rules regulate states' behavior and contribute to the prevention of violent conflict. Between the two, balance of power is of primary importance, as he says, it "enforces restraint where rules break down . . . "[18].

John Ikenberry's blueprint on world order is a typical example that sees order from more a practical strategist's point of view. He combines the above three and unfolds his discussion around the liberal international order (LIO).[19] His particular interest is in the America-led liberal order, or the era of American liberal hegemony,[20] which started immediately after WWII and reached its peak when the unipolar moment came with the collapse of the Soviet Union, leaving the United States as the sole superpower. His triangulation of order, with power, rule/institutions, and value/identity as the three pillars, characterizes LIO. It does emphasize power, believing that the power of a victor after a major war is the most important factor that helps build order, such as the United States after the Second World War and the Cold War.[21] With the overwhelming power in hand, it is able to establish and sustain LIO and make it work well. Institutions and rules, sustained and made effective by the hegemonic power, provide the mechanisms to maintain the order. With a particular emphasis on rules, he argues that rules determine the operation of the order.[22] Identity is another indispensable factor for LIO, for " . . . rule based on might is enhanced by rule based on right."[23] LIO itself was marked by its exclusive membership: Its most successful period is during the Cold War years when it was composed completely of liberal democracies and constituted as a western club with members of the like mind and similar identity.

Once the material and often coercive power establishes the order, the hegemon should socialize other states into its norm and value system so that the order can perpetuate and the hegemonic authority can gain legitimacy. In fact, "American liberal hegemony was essentially a western order built around 'free world' social purposes."[24] As he analyzes the crisis LIO faces today, the decline of American power and therefore the lack of authority,[25] the weakened legitimacy of the rules and institutions and the loss of the identity as a western security community, or a " . . . homogeneous group of western states,"[26] are the main causal variables. Thus, in this LIO, power or hegemonic power is the sustaining keystone, rules are the operating mechanisms and identity constitutes the durable cohesive forces.

I argue that these projects and narratives on world order have an obvious "rational order" bias because they firmly believe that human rationality is able to design, make and build up world order. No matter which of the factors, power, rules or identity, is the most important, it is what humans design and develop with the overall confidence that human rationality is superior to the reason of nature. Power-based order pivots round power, believing that power, whether hegemony or balance of power, is the key to world order. Rule-based order stresses the indispensable role of rules in world order, arguing that rules and institutions may well serve to keep order

18 Kissinger, *World Order*, p. 9.
19 Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0," p.71.
20 G. John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), p. 14.
21 G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).
22 G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crisis of Global Order* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 43.
23 Ikenberry and Kupchan, "Socialization and Hegemonic Power," p.286.
24 Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?", p. 9.
25 Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0," p. 80.
26 Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?", p. 19.

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for cooperation among egoist actors. Identity-based order posits that homogeneous identity provides the lasting guarantee for order and international norms, through their socialization, enable such homogeneity to become true.

Furthermore, the "rational order bias" implies that major powers in international society are more likely to design and make world order perhaps mainly because they own more means to materialize their rationality in order-designing, building and maintaining. It is therefore a top-down approach, with the designers, makers and maintainers high above in or even over international society. What they do not even think about, and perhaps never think from, is the spontaneous or natural order that develops bottom-up and that provides the foundation for a society to stay and work.

Relational Order

Relational order refers to a continuous process of cooperative relations, specifically defined here in terms of a dynamic process of which relations are maintained, balanced and kept in motion to develop a harmonious life ecosystem where human (and non-human) goals in society are best realized. It differs from other kinds of order discussed above in that it focuses on relation and takes it as the pivot of order. As such, it reflects the core assumptions of deeper relationalism as a worldview and a theoretical construct. Specifically, the following provide these assumptions.

Assumptions of Deeper Relationalism

Relationalism as a theoretical family includes various strands.[27] To make clearer the approach used in this article, I especially put forward what can be termed "deeper relationalism," which further sharpens my own understanding of relationalism and deepens some key assumptions developed in various relational theories.[28] Its core assumptions both inform the conceptualization of relational order and distinguish deeper relationalism from substantialism and partial relationalism.

First, the world is a space of relations. Deeper relationalism holds an uncompromised relational ontology and rejects the viewpoint that the world is composed of atomic units or material substances. It sees the world as a space of complex entanglement of relations and marked by correlativity, where relations are all ways around. The deepness of relationality posits that to relate and be related is a natural phenomenon and all are born relators in relational webs. It is reflected by the perspective that the world, or the universe beyond the world, or the universes beyond the universe—all are of and by relations. A relational world, however, does not mean that individuals do not exist. They exist simultaneously together with relations. All around are relations that dynamize individuals as well as are dynamized by them. Mutuality makes them an inseparable wholeness. It is relations that enliven the being of the individual and it is relations in motion that provide the world with dynamism. A relational world is a dynamic complexity of flowing relations rather than static existence of discrete substances. In such a world, relation is not the background and appendix of substances, but constitutes with substances the life of the world. A world without relations is a dead world and substances without relations are lifeless.

[27] Astrid Nordin et al., "Towards Global Relational Theorizing: A Dialogue Between Sinophone and Anglophone Scholarship on Relationalism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2019), pp. 570–81. For detailed discussion on the family of relationalism, see the essays in the above special issue as well as in the special issue of *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022).

[28] Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018);Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Relations before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1999), pp. 291–332.

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Second, deeper relationalism denies any form of dualism. It holds that interacting, or rather intra-acting, terms are two sides of the same whole, inclusive of each other. Ontologically, every self is simultaneously in the other and vice versa. This is the "I-in-you and you-in-I" logic.[29] By the same logic, any whole embodies and is embodied by its component parts.[30] The whole and the two polar terms constitute a relational complexity represented by a perfect trinity: one depends on its counterpart for life and all parts constitute the whole that simultaneously constitutes the parts. They are indivisible, for without any of them the life system collapses. Substantialism stresses one part over the other, asking who is the subject and who the subjected;[31] and partial relationalism tends to take the whole over the parts, insisting that relations come before actors.[32] The whole is thus made separable from the parts, just as relations from relators. For deeper relationalism, neither of the parts comes first and neither the whole nor the parts take ontological priority, for they are all of one. Deeper relationalism therefore does not accept the substantialist argument that actors come before relations nor the partial relationalist proposition that relations come before actors, for both immediately give rise to a dualist structure that distinguishes between the material and the non-material, the subject and the object and the maker and the made. The deepness of the relational ontology lies in the indivisibility of relation and the inseparability of relations and relators.

Third, the original state of relation is harmony. All relations are represented by the yin-yang relationship, the two fish-like halves in the cosmological diagram, which I termed elsewhere the meta-relationship.[33] The whole is composed of yin and yang and these two parts simultaneously constitute the whole. The whole and yin and yang are always together: Together they form a system of life and without any one of them the life itself does not exist. Yin and yang or the two poles are inclusively entangled and engaged in continuous intra-action, which provides dynamism to the life system. This intra-action is not to eliminate and replace each other, but to empower each other so that life continues with vitality. Since they are in fact two parts of the one and their intra-action is to keep each other empowered, their relationship is naturally harmonious; and since the yin-yang movement represents all movements and their relationship typifies all relationships in universes, the state of nature is harmony. I particularly define harmony in terms of cooperation and harmony reaches the highest when there is maximum cooperation.

Fourth, deeper relationalism emphasizes processuality.[34] Process is defined in terms of flowing relations and is itself dynamic rather than static, which helps to distinguish process from structure. Deeper relationalism defines process as relations in motion, indicating that relations move dynamically on if the process is not broken. Cooperative relationships constitute

[29] I have used the word "intra-action" instead of interaction to reflect the internal mutuality. "Interaction" assumes the prior independence of actors, thus separating actors as well as actors and relations and constructing a dualistic structure. It violates the principle of inseparability.

[30] To some extent, holographic quantum theory also holds that the whole and parts are one, with the former embodying the latter and the latter reflecting some features of the former. But it does not clearly express the relationship among parts. It thus implies that the whole is ontologically superior to the parts. Deeper relationalism argues that the whole and parts are all in one life system and in fact they are one. See Chengxin Pan, "Enfolding Wholes in Parts: Quantum Holography and International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26 (SI), (2020), pp. 14–38.

[31] Stafeno Guzzini, "Relationalism(s) Unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin's Theory of World Politics," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 187–205.

[32] Jackson and Nexon, "Relations before States"; Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Reclaiming the Social: Relationalism in Anglophone International Studies," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2019), pp. 582–3.

[33] Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, pp. 169–92.

[34] Much of the IR literature take structure as the key factor that shapes and even determines actor behavior. Structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism all assume a synchronic structure in terms of capabilities, institutions or ideas and then focus on how the structure affects the behavior of the actor. A diachronic structure, like some of the English School literature, pays more attention to the historical evolution of rules, norms and institutions, but their particular interest is on how these social factors influence actor behavior and thus social order. The commonality of all strands of structuralism is "structures rule."

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a progressive process that shows both the state of nature and a general trend for harmonious development. If this process runs on, cooperation continues. Harmony is the original state of relational order, but it does not mean that there is no discord and that refusal to cooperation is quite a common phenomenon. Deeper relationalism recognizes conflict, but does not believe that conflict is of ontological priority and significance. Rather, they are deviations from the original state of relations. To keep the process going on without breaking down, therefore, is to enable cooperation to continue and further develop.

Fifth, the basic unit in society is relation. Individual actors or atomic units do not live without relation. It is relations, rather than the atomic units, either individuals in society or nation-states in international society, that are building blocks, refusing to be further divided, reduced and removed. Relation, as the basic unit, is thus marked by its inseparability, irreducibility and irremovability. It is inseparable, because it cannot be artificially separated from anything involved. It is irreducible because it is the beginning of life that refuses to be further broken down. It is irremovable because it is not the mere background or stage where actors play and interplay as discrete individuals and which can be readily removed and changed. Relation itself is where any play or interplay unfolds. We focus on relation when we observe the social world, so do we as we observe the physical world and the universe or universes beyond.

These assumptions express an underlying logic for order, that is, order rests on relation. It also means that relation is both the indivisible building block of the world and the irreducible unit for order building and maintaining. Attention merely to atomic units does not reveal the roots of order or disorder. In short, it leads us to a special attention to a different type of order, that is, relational order as a spontaneously and naturally developed social order, both human and nonhuman.

Features of Relational Order: Dynamisms, Mechanisms and Goals

It is inferred from the above assumptions that relational order is the primary order in society. Since the world is composed of and by relations, ontologically significant, irreducible and indivisible, order is therefore first of all built with and around relations. Relational order is naturally generated in society as life experiences and spontaneously develops among its members as daily practices. It is the primary order because it is not externally imposed in the first place. In general, it refers to a dynamic process of which relations develop and evolve to sustain harmony in terms of cooperation. It is natural and spontaneous, able to nurture a healthy life system where social goals can be better realized. Such a conceptualization of order may include at least the following elements: dynamisms, mechanisms and goals.

Dynamisms

Relational order is processual and its dynamism comes from within the process defined as relations in motion. Process refers to flowing relations that involve and relate all on earth and beyond. Processuality as a distinct feature of relational order means that order is constructed in process, which by definition is not static, certain and perfectly and even probabilistically predictable. Although external forces are also needed from time to time, relational order obtains its dynamism mainly from within the ongoing process of relations.

This may seem to go against both the common sense and the conceptualization in mainstream IR literature. Usually, order is seen as a static state. It provides stability, which in turn implies certainty and predictability. Order constructed on unpredictability and uncertainty is often unthinkable. The balance of power theory depicts an almost ideal order in terms of

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equilibrium of capabilities, with no one able to lunch an aggressive war at will. The hegemonic stability theory, with particular emphasis also on power, believes that imbalance of power makes and maintains order in the international system because the overwhelming power enables the hegemon both as a rule-maker and an effective police chief.[35] Institutional or ideational structures are also examples of the human preference for and insistence on certainty in their search for order: They need something substantially stable and structurally tangible to make themselves assured, despite the fact that such assurance often proves illusory and produces the placebo effect.

Hedley Bull's systematic study of order in an anarchical society switches the focus from a mere international system like a billiard board to an international society, but for him, order is still largely a static state and his pursuit for certainty is little less than those structuralists who worship human power. He states explicitly that order is a situation or state in which three primary goals of life, security, truth and property are promoted and takes international order as "patterns of dispositions of human activity that sustain the elementary or primary goals of social life among mankind as a whole."[36] He thus rests his understanding of order on rational certainty that life is safe, contracts are honored and property gets protected. It is exactly because of this he turns to rules and norms for stressing the social characteristics of international order.

Such rationality narratives construct order as a static state. Since the static state cannot generate dynamism from within, it turns to external forces for the driving force. Human interference, rational and intelligent, provides the handy gripper. By deeper relationalism, however, order is neither a seemingly stable structure nor a static state. Rather it is a dynamic process. As process is relations in motion, order is relations moving with a general propensity for cooperation. Taking order as process points to its dynamic existence and the dynamism comes internally from the constant motion and natural mobility of relations. Structural relationalists, while recognizing relations as the most important factor in social settings, often conceptualize a relational network as a static structure of nodes and links, artificially stabilizing it so as to locate the nodes and identify the various links among them in hope that power, centrality, positioning and the behavior of specially selected nodes, usually major players, in such a network become certain and clear.[37] Such relationalism is at best a partial one, for its conscious or subconscious search out of the belief for certainty and predictability results in rigidifying a relational web into a static structure, just as making spreading ripples into solid ice-rocks. As soon as relation is made static, it becomes a dried mummy and loses its dynamism.

Deeper relationalism therefore argues that relation is, by definition, in constant movement. Just as the trinity expressed in the cosmological diagram, the two halves, yin and yang, are in continuous intra-action so as to empower each other to form together the round-shaped whole, which represents a perfect life system. This is clearly seen when the diagram is spinning rapidly and all the three merge into one. Relations shape relators, who simultaneously shape relations. Processes of relations are always flowing with relations and relators together constituting and reconstituting each other and changing each other wherever and whenever its natural flows go. The fluidity and changeability indicate the underlying uncertainty and at the same time provide the relational process with dynamism, possibility and potentiality.

Understandably, modernist scientists, as well as rational humans, favor certainty over uncertainty, trying their best to change uncertainty into certainty. But the world is featured by uncertainties, as quantum physics tells us through repeated experiments.[38] Deeper relationalism

[35] Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

[36] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 7, 19.

[37] Emilie Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler, and Alexander Montgomery, "Network Analysis for International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2009), pp. 559–92; Miles Kahler, ed., *Network Politics: Agency, Power, and Governance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

[38] Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Uncertainty and Its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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believes that the world and the universe are full of uncertainties, for relations themselves are in constant movements. It is exactly because of this uncertain characteristic of relations that processes of relations, as well as of life, are full of opportunities. Moreover, the most important thing is not to artificially turn uncertainty to certainty and rationalize everything out of human programming, but to follow the natural way and let order develop out of uncertainty with its own inner dynamism and potential creativity.

Mechanisms

Then how? The key word here is harmonization: Continuous harmonization of relations is what sustains relational order. Harmonization as action largely lies in nature itself. In other words, harmonizing mechanisms that maintain relational order and enable it to work lie largely in the natural development of relations in society. Just as we have found at last the incompetence of human rationality in dealing with problems in our habitat and realized that solutions lie in nature, it is perhaps wiser to respect most of the time the reason of nature and the spontaneity of relational order, which generates mechanisms of harmonization for its own preservation, maintenance and evolution.

It is true that the original state is harmony and that the mutuality of the dynamic poles works together to keep the whole life system on. However, it does not mean the absence of discord. In fact, conflict and confrontation are seen from time to time in society. Humans often unconsciously or out of good intentions, create such deviations from the original state and, moreover, may provoke on purpose tough struggles and clashes. If relations are going off the natural track, the process will appear non-cooperative and move toward discord. As order faces the danger of collapse and disharmony may even dominate, it is necessary to introduce appropriate outside interference.

Such interference includes human-designed mechanisms. For the above discussed rational orders, power, rules and norms play the role of maintaining order through, respectively, coercion, inducement and the homogenization of identity. Behind this is the firm belief that humans create the best order through their rational designing. The long practice of binary reasoning structures human order and natural order in a dichotomous way and prioritizes the former over the latter in terms of superiority and significance. Even though we have gradually realized the reason of nature thanks to repeated failures in human history, this tradition of human superiority lingers stubbornly on. All the human-made orders thus contain mechanisms exclusively made by humans for sustaining such orders. Accordingly, human-invented mechanisms are used to change individual members of society, oftentimes against their natural dispositions, to integrate them into the artificial order, believed to be the best possible. Power forces people to do what they do not want to, rules induce people to obey for profits and norms construct and reconstruct, often by osmosis, the very people themselves. Such mechanisms, in the final analysis, are to change people according to the requirement of the artificial order and to make sure that human-created order is to replace natural order exactly because of its superior rationality.

The relational order argument does not devaluate the importance of human-made mechanisms and believes that it is necessary to employ appropriate interference to prevent cooperative relations from going astray. Power, rules and norms are all relevant for order maintaining. But the relational order argument differs fundamentally from the rational order claim in that the use of any mechanism is to get the off-going process of cooperative relations back onto track. It is to straighten up the deviations and restore the natural order rather than to replace it with a more rational human-made order, for it never believes that human rationality is superior to the reason of nature. In short, human-made mechanisms are to assist the development of natural order and to support the empowering mutuality of all on earth and beyond.

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Harmonization constitutes therefore the general mechanism that tries to keep the cooperative process dynamically on. For relational order, harmonization is not merely to coordinate the actions of various actors or the policies of different nation-states, but to adjust and smoothen relationships among them in the first place. Important mechanisms of relational order are therefore those that keep on harmonizing relationships as a constant and ongoing process. Compared with rational order, harmonization of relations prefers to employ those mechanisms that are to unify rather than to overcome, to include rather than exclude and to be more informal than formal. Specifically, negotiation, coordination and bargaining are often seen in relational order where diversity, whether it is about opinions, interests and identities, is fully respected and where friendship provides a reliable basis for trustful cooperation and sustainable order.

Thus, returning to nature, rather than replacing natural order with an artificial one, is the soul of relational order. It is not only a refreshing way of individual life as Henry Thoreau and Tao Yuanming[39] lived or imagined. The fact that Thoreau depicts a genial scene of human-nature relationships and Tao Yuanming dreamed a natural panorama of friendly human-human and human-nature relationships in fact points to an indispensable approach to lasting order of harmony, for the state of nature is harmony, harmony as a process of cooperative relations with all under heaven and beyond. Thus, harmonization means first of all keeping the process of cooperative relations on. If cooperative relations are maintained and form a general propensity, a healthier order develops, human-designed mechanisms function more positively and social goals are better realized.

Goals

Since relational order develops spontaneously, it does not have pre-planned goals, which are often a must for rational order though. Bull emphasizes the goals of order, taking security against violence, honoring of agreements and stability of possession as important goals of order in general.[40] The fact that he equates goals with order itself shows his firm belief in human intelligence for designing order with clear objectives. In fact, such intelligence is far less potent than humans have imagined and much less significant than natural wisdom. Relational order, though not having pre-designed goals, is able to nurture an ecosystem facilitating human (and non-human) goals. In other words, human goals are better realized in a healthy and cooperative relational order. Three important social goals can be identified in the global setting, i.e., peace, prosperity and progress.

For order in any society, peace is of utmost significance. The minimum level of harmony is absence of war, or at least actors manage to cooperate in order not to go into war. To some extent, there is no order without peace, for war puts an end to any cooperative relationship and destroys the very foundation of order. The First and Second World Wars destroyed peace completely and threw most of the nations into fire and blood. As they broke peace, they destroyed order in international society. Both the League of Nations after the First World War and the United Nations after the Second aimed first of all at preventing the humankind from the scourge of war and restoring order in our world.

Prosperity is another important goal of order, for once war is absent, people's desire for good life should be satisfied and socio-economic development tends to become a top priority. Of course, peace and prosperity are closely linked and no prosperity is realized as war is going on. The phoenix effect shows itself in roughly one generation's time after the end of a war that has almost completely destroyed the whole nation.[41] Germany and Japan after the Second

[39] Tao Yuanming (Chinese writer, 365–427 BC), describes in his prose *The Land of Peach Blossom* a dreamland where all live in a natural way, harmonious, happy and free of worries.

[40] Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 4.

[41] Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*, pp. 142–4.

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World War are examples of national restoration and socioeconomic development. China's rapid economic growth since the end of the Great Cultural Revolution provides a telling case, too. However, prosperity does not mean mere economic growth, for an exclusive pursuit of growth may also lead to deviation from the natural state of harmony and cause disastrous discord.

Progress refers to the overall betterment of the life system. It means progress toward an increasingly open system, political, economic and social; toward an increasingly democratic community, domestic, international and global; and toward an increasingly inclusive and respectful mindset for all lives. The order that had been restored after the First and Second World Wars was basically an order absent major inter-state wars, reflecting a world based on the sovereignty principle established by the Westphalian Treaties. Progress however requires continued and enlarged openness, inclusiveness and respectfulness resting on trust and friendship.

It is worth pointing out here that these goals are relational themselves. Peace is relational and distorted relationships tend to develop before war. A generalized trust is a must before international institutions for peace and cooperation are built.[42] A nation's prosperity cannot materialize without cooperative relationships with other nations and "prosper and let prosper" is embedded in the reason of nature. It is also true of progress, which by definition is open and inclusive. Furthermore, relational order is natural and therefore is not limited to human society. With the development and evolution of a global society, the concept of order has been accordingly expanded. An international society in Bull's understanding, i.e. the society of states, exists now side by side with a world society membered by all human actors, states and non-states, and a global society including all, human and nonhuman, on earth. All are related and all deserve respect. In short, peace, prosperity and progress are goals for international, world and global societies and for all on and beyond earth, as we have been entering an era, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln's words, "of all, by all and for all."

Harmonizing Power and Effective Leadership

Rational order is a spontaneous order, but it does not mean that management and maintenance are unnecessary. A relational process may deviate from the original state of harmony and go astray toward conflict, confrontation and even disastrous war. Power therefore is needed to keep the process of cooperative relations going on without breaking down. Appropriate exercise of power to address the deviation and to keep the cooperative process on track is what maintenance and management of relational order need. I argue in this part that harmonizing power is the power most needed in relational order and that who possesses harmonizing power is more able to provide effective leadership.

Harmonizing Power

The power to sustain relational order practically and effectively is harmonizing power, which is the ability to coordinate appropriately complex relations and keep the cooperative process by hanging together various actors diverse in identity, interest and inclination. It harmonizes without homogenization, therefore it differs from the power exercised for rational order.

We have discussed several types of rational order. Power-based order requires coercive power, or the power to make others do what they otherwise would not do. The hegemonic order takes the most powerful state as the authoritative leader in the international system, playing the Leviathan role for maintaining the order. The balance-of-power order selects several most

[42] Brian C. Rathbun, "Before Hegemony: Generalized Trust and the Creation and Design of International Security Organizations," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2011), pp. 243–73.

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powerful states and designs an equilibrium of power among them to maintain the order. Rule-based order depends on inducive power. It takes institutional power as its sustaining pillar, which induces actors for cooperation through making use of their instrumental rationality. A world order in which rules rule is the most rational because the rational rules are made by rational humans to induce rational behavior. The identity/norm-based order places normative power at the core. In such an order, norms rule because it is international norms that define what is appropriate to do, help to create the sense of "we-ness" and subtly construct a community of like-minded actors through norm spreading, teaching and learning.[43] The effectiveness of normative power rests on normative rationality and nice norms are made by rational minds for developing similar and even homogeneous identity. Order that rests on like identity is believed as the most stable and endurable.

Whatever forms of power they are, coercive, inducive or normative, they sustain and manage a rationally designed order by changing the behavior or mind, or both, of those involved, artificially orienting, regulating or forcing them toward what the order requires. Such power always makes use of human rationality, instrumental and/or normative, to reach its purposes and maintain the order it aspires to. It is to standardize, discipline and control so that a rational order should be sustained and made to work.

Relational order requires a different form of power, which I prefer to term "harmonizing power" and of which nature provides the best model. It is the ability to guide and coordinate appropriately complex relations as much as to align them close to their original state and keep the process of cooperative relations on track and forward. It means first of all the ability to maintain and enhance the existing cooperative relationships and provides them with sustaining dynamism. Once the process continues, order moves on track. Also, it is the ability to unite. It needs to make all involved hang together and keeping their cooperative relationships unbroken. Identity/norm-based order wants to achieve the unity too, but it requires very much a homogeneous identity as a precondition and tries to use norms as the means to construct such an identity. Relational order, based on heterogeneous identities in the first place, needs the ability to relate actors with different identities and belief systems. If there should be a paramount norm, it must be the norm that makes them keep the cooperative process on without taking diverse identities as an insurmountable hurdle. Furthermore, it is the ability to empower. It is able to guide and unite because it empowers both the process so that the relations may gain dynamism for sustainable development and the individuals taking part in the process so that they gain from the cooperative relations and get stronger. If it loses its ability to empower, it loses its harmonizing characteristic and the order it helps to sustain may fall apart.

Harmonizing power is thus expressed in an order that aligns appropriately entangled relationships among actors diverse in multiple aspects and enables the process of cooperation to move well on track and continually onward. To realize this, it is imperative that harmonizing power should be able to manage relational problems when they are arising and reorient the process of relations so that it is to go back to the right track. In other words, an indispensable dimension of harmonizing power is the ability to realign the relationships and reorient the process of relations back on track whenever the process faces the danger of moving off-track. Sometimes, conflict is so serious and no solution seems in sight. When such a situation occurs, enforcing power should be activated to keep the process at least from a complete breakdown even though no further cooperative actions take place for the time being. Once relations are completely broken down, its restoration is extremely difficult and the relational order collapses. In short, harmonizing power is the ability to guide complex relations so that the process of cooperative relations goes continuously on and the relational order itself is thus maintained.

[43] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1998), pp. 887–917.

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It is important to note that harmonizing power is used mainly to guide, align and manage relations rather than to regulate individuals, so it is necessary here to clarify what it is not. It is not the ability to control. In other words, it is not the ability to force others to do or not to do something, but the ability to adjust and coordinate relations among actors. Somewhat like the role of the anchor in a TV show, it is to lead and orient so that the whole performance is successfully unfolding. In some sense, it is like the role of the government in a free market economy: it is not to control the market but to ensure that the market works in its natural state, free and fair. Neither is it the ability to overcome obstacles as power is often defined in IR textbooks.[44] Use of power to overcome obstacles in the field of international security, for example, tends to create security dilemma, for the logic therein is that "Since you are strong as a rival, I should be even stronger." Harmonizing power functions more to guide, unite and harmonize rather than to overcome, conquer and dominate. Furthermore, it is not the ability aimed to change individuals' behavior and mind by imposing external pressure. No matter what type of power it is for rational order, it is externally imposed and aims to make actors change. Coercive and inducive power changes their behavior, while normative power their mind. Harmonizing power, rather, is the power to orient and smooth out relations in general. All relators involved are to be anchored appropriately so that the overall harmonious relationship among them will facilitate cooperation on specific issues rather than give rise to clash and conflict.

Effective Leadership

In relational order, it is of utmost importance for the leadership to have harmonizing power. It means that qualified leadership for a relational order should be able to guide and manage appropriately intricate relations, to unite participants for overall cooperation and to empower actors in the relational process. By no means does it deny the importance of coercive, inducive and normative power, all of which works in society, but since relational order is the primary order, it comes first, providing the foundation for other artificial and secondary orders to emerge, work and develop. Harmonizing power thus also anchors other types of power and enables them to function.

Accordingly, effective leadership with harmonizing power needs other types of power, too. They are never locked in an "either-or" configuration. Harmonizing power needs coercive power, especially when the process of cooperative relations is on the edge of collapsing. Also, it needs institutional and normative power to increase its ability to bring well into line the multifaceted relationships and maintain successfully the overall cooperative relations. Effective leadership for a relational order should be able to use all these power elements for enhancing healthy and cooperative relations as well as for realigning the relational process when it is going wrong.[45] Leaders in relational order are not necessarily the most powerful in terms of those other types of power. It should be, rather, the most able in terms of harmonizing power.

Let us take briefly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an example.[46] Southeast Asia is a region with great diversity, with multi-ethnicities, multi-religions and multi-socioeconomic systems. It is also a region with major powers around often competing with one another for influence and interest. However, it has managed to become largely a peaceful

[44] Bruce Russett, Harvey Starr, and David Todd Kinsella, *World Politics: The Menu for Choice*, 8th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006), p. 104.

[45] Nowadays, the world order seems highly problematic as the primary relational order is going wrong, competition becoming more malicious and effective leadership being absent.

[46] For a more detailed discussion of ASEAN's relational processes, see Yaqing Qin, "Rule, Rules, and Relations: Toward a Synthetic Approach to Governance," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2011), pp. 117–45; Yaqing Qin, "Transnational Governance and Multiple Multilateralisms" in Thomas Meyer, Jose Luis de Sales Marques, and Mario Telo, eds., *Regionalism and Multilateralism: Politics, Economics, Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 87–108; Han Zhili, "Understanding ASEAN as a Relational Community: A Study Focused on Political-security Aspects," *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2020), pp. 52–72.

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region, one of the most rapidly developing economies and a more tolerant and inclusive community. The ASEAN regionalism is even said to be a miracle. Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary-General once compared it to the European Union, saying, that much of the discussion on regional cooperation was devoted to the success of the European Union, "yet another regional organisation deserves our recognition: ASEAN. It is hard to overstate ASEAN's contributions to peace, prosperity and transnational cooperation across South East Asia. Its positive impact is felt by millions of peoples in what has traditionally been one of the more complex and divided regions."[47] Years have passed since Anna's comments, but it is still a reality.

Kofi Annan compared ASEAN to the EU mainly because he believed that both represent successful regional order. They are successful, but their success has been achieved through different ways. If the EU has built largely an institutional order, then ASEAN has managed to maintain more a relational order, with relational governance as its distinct characteristic. Its success relies to a great extent on its harmonizing power. It is true that the achievements of ASEAN have been made because of many factors, especially its elasticity and eclecticism, sometimes even seen as smoothing things over at the cost of principles. But such elasticity and eclecticism have played an indispensable role in maintaining good and workable relations with all, within and without. The ASEAN order is more a "relational order" because it pays extraordinary attention to building, governing and maintaining positive relationships all around. We can see clearly that it harmonizes appropriately relations at two levels.

First, it manages relationships appropriately among its members, or, "hanging together" well its member states.[48] It does not base its order on hegemony. No member of ASEAN is a hegemon that dominates the order and its decision-making is a process that manages to make everyone feel more at home. It does not mean that ASEAN cares little about institutional building; neither does it prefer to have no norms at all. But it does not require or work for homogeneity through imposing even rational rules and nice norms.[49] Once external rules and norms do not fit locally, they are not accepted.[50] Maintenance of good relations among members is of the utmost importance, sometimes even at the cost of institution building and norm spreading. Relationally oriented, it bases the regional order on management of the complex relations among the most diversified members in the region.

Second, it anchors relationships appropriately among external actors, especially major powers involved in the regional process. It has managed to weave relational webs that are concentric and multi-layered: The core is ASEAN, which plays the leading role and sits at the driving seat; the second layer is the Plus 3 dialogue partners, including China, Japan and South Korea, together with whom ASEAN established the $10+1$ process with each of them and $10+3$ process with all of them; then it expands to include India, Australia and New Zealand, with the United States and Russia joining in later; and finally is the world at large. It is very much like the ripple analogy,[51] geographically, politically and socially. The effectiveness of the ASEAN harmonizing power is especially expressed in the fact that all these powers have officially accept the leading role of ASEAN and stated repeatedly their recognition of ASEAN's centrality in regional affairs, even though most of them are far more materially powerful than ASEAN,

[47] Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffery Sng, *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017), endorsement.

[48] Yuen Foong Khong and Helen E. S. Nesadurai, "Hanging together, Institutional Design, and Cooperation in Southeast Asia: AFTA and the ARF," in Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston, eds., *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 32.

[49] Yoshitaka Miike, "Harmony without Uniformity: An Asiacentric Worldview and its Communicative Implications," in Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, and Edwin R. McDaniel, eds., *Intercultural Communication: A Reader* (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2012), pp. 65–80.

[50] Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asia Regionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 239–75.

[51] Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundation of Chinese Society* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012), p. 46.

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including the two largest economies in the world. ASEAN is able to cohere and anchor, largely because its harmonizing power enables its effective leadership in this relational order.[52]

The ASEAN case illustrates some important features of harmonizing power. It respects naturally developed relations and imposes little external pressure to force reluctant changes. The decision-making style of ASEAN reflects this practice clearly. It prefers not to simply use voting in making a decision, though voting is adopted almost everywhere in the world. What ASEAN practices is a complete and uncompromised unanimity, meaning that even only one participant is unwilling to accept a motion, it is renegotiated until everyone agrees. Serious concessions are made and sometimes even no decision is made because one of the participants does not agree with the proposal at the moment. The whole decision-making process follows strictly the "comfort level" principle: Only after everyone feels comfortable can a decision be taken. Otherwise, they prefer to delay, shelf or even give it up. It is believed that voting tends to impose a position on reluctant others and it is therefore usually not an ASEAN choice. It always values cohesion through appropriately coordinating relations rather than imposing pressure on its members.

This comfort-level principle seems to be the key to the ASEAN Way. Seemingly as something processual and even irrational sometimes, it reflects the valued practice to maintain and strengthen cooperative relations and keep such processes dynamically on track. It is quite a unique ASEAN practice, which seeks complete consensus by making every participant feel comfortable. It recognizes conflict of interests and disagreement of opinions as natural. Respect of different interests and opinions is a necessary condition for the sustainment and management of complex relations, thus an integral element of harmonizing power. Therefore, maintaining friendly relationships among all the participants and avoiding breaking up the cooperative processes seem to be more important than to achieve immediate and tangible results. More interestingly, it has been accepted by nations outside the region who have joined the regional process. As a time-honored practice developed within ASEAN first, the comfort-level principle is highly effective in hanging actors involved all together.

In addition, informal communications are often preferred to consolidate and enhance cooperative relationships. Informality tends to be more natural, thus more able to provide an easy and relaxing situation where a friendly relationship seems to develop unpretentiously. It is said by ASEAN insiders that peace in Southeast Asia is inseparable from "golfing" and many thorny issues are solved "after a happy round of golf that generated friendship and camaraderie." Golfing was important because it harmonizes, reducing tension and promoting friendly trust. They organized ASEAN golf matches at the weekend when ASEAN delegations were attending the annual UN Assembly, which "was a show of unity. Ministers' wives would come and shake people's hands—that was not seen in other regional organizations. There were memorable but simple gifts as well. Orchids would be given at the end of the reception. A lot of people would turn up, including the UN secretary-general."[53] It is thus interesting that informality seems at least as relevant as and sometimes even more effective than formal institutions in the practice of relational order.

Perhaps behind all of these features is the core of the harmonizing power, that is, "power to" than "power over," following the principle of "establish and let established" or mutual empowerment. Harmonizing power means to appropriately coordinate complex relations so that an environment can be built and everyone in it will be empowered. It is first of all to unite and to unite is preconditioned by the ability to empower. It rejects the conceptualization of power as "the ability to get what you want, to achieve a desired outcome through control of your social and physical environment."[54] Imagine a society where there is more taking from

[52] It would be a serious test of ASEAN's harmonizing power, within and without, if major powers in strategic competition should require it to choose sides or cause internal rupture. Over the past three decades or so, however, it has been quite successful.

[53] Mahbubani and Sgn, *The ASEAN Miracle*, pp. 50–1.

[54] Russett, Starr, and Kinsella, *World Politics*, p. 104.

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than giving to its members, or more de-powering than empowering them, social relations will have no anchor, cooperative processes break down sooner or later, and order eventually collapse. In this sense, harmonizing power is to empower, or to enhance the power of all the participants in the cooperative process rather than to make them obey some artificial forces so that a certain order with clear purposes is maintained. Harmonizing power, in short, is the ability to unite through empowering. Once the processes of cooperative relations are maintained, other types of power work more positively and effectively. After all, relations come before institutionalization and friendship before normative suasion.

Conclusion

Rational order is the order rational human minds pay almost exclusive attention to and try their best to make it ever more rational. Relational order is a spontaneous and therefore more natural order that always exists everywhere. I focus on the latter in this article because it is largely neglected by the arrogance of rationality. As I pointed out in the beginning, the two types of order coexist and both are needed for society. Furthermore, relational order is the primary order, providing a foundation for rational order to develop. Devoid of relations, rational order would have nowhere to land. Once there is healthier relational order, rational order will work better. Similarly, if relational order goes astray, the rational order may become problematic.

We are so used to rational order, scholars and practitioners alike. Much of our effort goes to the establishment of a rational order that would provide us with peace and security. Once the order does not perform well, we try to improve, reform and make it more rational so that our goals will be realized. Unfortunately, ever greater efforts have been incessantly made, but often to be found in vain. Back to the question raised at the beginning of this article, important factors such as power, institutional rules and international norms are all out there today, but they have failed to work as effectively and positively. They seem to be so fragile and may even become centrifugal forces that bring about disorder once the underlying relational order goes off course. Without a functional relational order, power tends to be coercive, rules are challenged and norms contested. They may have once worked as positive factors to sustain an order, but have turned out to be weapons to damage and even destroy a functional order.

When the existing order goes wrong, therefore, it is imperative to consider first seriously what problems have occurred with the primary order, or what centrifugal forces made the process of cooperative relations go wrong. If we should take it for granted that elements of the secondary order, such as power, rules and norms, are where we should address, we in fact put the cart before the horse. Such practice is to mistakenly reverse the cause and effect and would lead the world nowhere. The fact that today's world is in many respects problematic is first due to the problems of primary order. Repairing relations and restoring trust should therefore be considered first.

Furthermore, it is getting clearer as we are entering an era when three global societies exist and overlap: an international society among nation-states, a world society among governmental and non-governmental actors who together play important roles, and a planetary society that includes all on earth. Relational order exists in and across all these societies as the primary order where harmony, often invisible and intangible, reflects the reason of nature. If we continue to overvalue our rationality for designing and making order not only for the human society but also for all those societies and for all on earth and beyond, we will be heading nowhere.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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