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On misperceptions and misunderstandings: rhetoric, global disorder, and the Global South

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ire**Sasikumar Sundaram** 

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Abstract

This article asks a fundamental question: why are policymakers, despite having substantial interest at stake in mitigating global disorder and resolving crisis of liberal internationalism, seemingly unable to address it? What structural factors account for the novel acceleration of global disorder and crisis in our world? In contrast to explanations focused on faltering American hegemony, this article answers that the problem lies in the circulation of rhetoric between the Global North and South. The article theorizes the problem through examining three rhetorical modalities available to policymakers, oriented respectively to the past (forensic), the present (epideictic), and the future (deliberative). In the face of crises, many Global North policymakers engage in different rhetorical performances for building order and averting disorder, each carrying distinctive procedural and substantive logics. However, the configuration and circulation of these different types of rhetoric generate misperceptions and misunderstandings among many Global South states, particularly on their substantive expectations of change. Global South policymakers frequently read top-dog rhetoric on the crisis as an opportunity for greater insertion into the system and for substantively changing international ordering practices. When this fails to materialize, the result is a general discontentment that becomes a structural problem. Using illustrations of American foreign policy rhetoric on order and disorder, its receptions and the rhetoric of Indian policymakers, the article also shows the usefulness of the theoretical point for diagnosing persistent tensions in India-US relations. Such theorizing opens avenues for further investigating how the circulation of rhetoric works in the deep-rooted material inequalities and in the expectations of change in the hierarchical international system.

Keywords

disorder, foreign policy, Global South, India, liberal internationalism, rhetoric

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Introduction

Today's world politics is in a state of disorder. Geopolitical tensions between the United States and China continue to intensify; wars in Ukraine, Gaza, South Sudan, and Iran, show no signs of abating; political actors engage in a callous disregard for international law in their use of force across the Middle East. Genocide and mass atrocity crimes unfold with near-total impunity. Territorial and maritime disputes in Asia are sharpening. Trade wars fracture the global economy. Authoritarianism spreads across regions alongside democratic backsliding, the rise of radical right, and increased surveillance of social movements. In Africa and Latin America, the exploitation of critical minerals sustains cycles of violence. Racial, gender, and economic inequalities deepen worldwide. Monopoly capitalism and rise of intangible capital concentrate power in a very few oligarchic hands. Beneath all of this lies an existential climate crisis without an adequate international response. The long crisis of liberal internationalism has today become global disorder.

In International Relations (IR) scholarship, order and ordering are structured pattern of exercising power by states for organizing norms, rules, and institutions to sustain the elementary goals of stability and cooperation in the society of states. Disorder as we witness today is the erosion of these ordering patterns, where brute force replaces power, crises pile up, and there is a general inadequacy of policies to arrest the atrophy of the system.¹

Nevertheless, a fundamental question remains: why are policymakers, despite having substantial interest at stake in mitigating global disorder and resolving crisis of liberal internationalism, seemingly unable to address it? What structural factors account for the novel acceleration of global disorder and crisis in our world?

This article engages with this question by examining the interconnected and entangled dynamics between the Global North and Global South states. Both Global North and South are political projects and not a geographical description.² The Global North generally refers to economically developed, industrialized countries, including North America, Western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Despite crises, these states feature high GDP per capita, advanced technologies, relatively stable governance, and disproportionate global influence. The Global South states and their policymakers represent the majority of humanity in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, which were oppressed under the histories of Western imperialism and colonialism, but now seek greater respect, equality, and recognition of their politico-economic potential and woes.

The Global North and South are also tightly entangled. There are many states in the Global North with multiple pockets of 'South' in them.³ Think of Mississippi in the USA or Blackburn in the UK, for example, which faces rising poverty and lower life expectancy. And many Global South states have transnational elites with higher living conditions than some billionaires in the northern states. Think of the global rich in India or South Africa.

Furthermore, there are varieties of Global North and South states. We all know that the West is not a unified category. Similarly, the Global South is a heterogeneous political category. Some like India, Brazil, and South Africa ambitiously endorse and contest

liberal norms, institutions, and rules to seek greater voice, power, and status. Others largely remain marginal due to their security and racial precarity like South Sudan or Central African Republic. Still others constantly suffer marginalization and indignity like many Indigenous groups in our world. Then there are ‘outsiders’ such as Iran and North Korea who often claim membership and ‘disruptors’ like China who often claim leadership in this diverse Global South grouping. Despite variations, both Global North and South states are tightly entangled and interconnected today than ever before, forming a hierarchical network of networks.⁴ It is in the interest of policymakers in these entangled worlds to avoid disorder.

Nevertheless, policymakers seem unable to address the atrophy of international order. Many mainstream IR scholars view this as a serious crisis of liberal internationalism due to the pathologies of American hegemony.⁵ Certainly, many political actors within the West and the non-Western world challenge the established formal and informal institutions, norms, and rules of international order and resent international institutions, cooperative security, democratic change, and the rule of law.⁶ But the faltering American hegemony and the rise of Donald Trump who is an active saboteur of the American led liberal order is seen as the root cause of disorder.⁷

However, existing IR explanations based on the waning American hegemony do not look beneath the crisis of liberal internationalism and the persistence of disorder for long periods across regimes in the post-war and post-Cold War United States. George Lawson and Ayse Zarakol rightly point to the constant misrecognition struggles among states in the liberal international order.⁸ Such accounts look beneath the practices and examine the tensions in ideas of liberal internationalism. Building on such views, this article examines the interconnected structural dynamics between policymakers in the Global South and the North and improves the accounts based on misrecognition taking language-games in politics seriously.

My argument is that global disorder persists and accelerates due to rhetoric of political actors. Rhetoric is a language game defined as the skillful use of arguments by political actors to influence the values of other interlocutors, convince them of a belief, or persuade them to act.⁹ Crisis talk is laden with rhetoric by policymakers across the world. Specifically, in this article, I unpack the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism as articulated by policymakers from the Global North and South. If we analytically open this process, we can see two simultaneous political projects in the rhetoric coming from policymakers in the Global North. One is the project of global ordering, which is a status-quo project with procedural solutions to overcome the crisis. The other is a project on managing global disorder, a radical project with substantive solutions to fix the crisis. My central argument is that the presence of both ordering and disordering projects in the Western policymakers’ rhetoric about the crisis of liberal internationalism creates problem of misperceptions, misunderstanding, confirmation bias, and misinterpretations in the Global South. Many Global South policymakers seek substantive changes in response to the rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism and overcompensate for the misunderstandings with an assertive rhetorical agency of their own that feeds into the system. The agency of the Global South works in and through shaping the discourse on global disorder.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, I show the limitation of the traditional IR ways of examining global disorder through the lens of faltering American hegemony.

The second section focuses on rhetoric and theorizes the structural conditions under which the crisis of liberal internationalism unfolds in the interconnected space between the Global North and South. By focusing the misperceptions and misunderstandings, the section shows why global disorder, and the crisis of liberal internationalism, has taken the seemingly unresolvable structural condition in our times.

The third section illustrates these theoretical dynamics with some empirical examples from the United States and India, as plausibility probes. It is beyond the scope of this article to do a full case study. More research on rhetoric and misperceptions of other Global South state is needed to explore the theoretical dynamics in greater detail. The concluding section explores how rhetorically inflected misperceptions is a structural feature of the widening inequalities of the hierarchical international system. As such, the onus of fixing liberal order rests on Global North actors reducing their procedural rhetoric about disorder and the crisis of liberal internationalism and substantively working with the Global South to fix the world. The problem is less of faltering American hegemony but rather from the hyper manifestation of its brute power.

Global disorder and liberal internationalism

Many American policymakers talk about the crisis of liberal internationalism with a strong performative element, which is often missed in a cursory analysis of global disorder. Let us take some examples. In the UN General Assembly in 1993, marveling the peace of the end of the Cold War, Bill Clinton delivered the most powerful speech focusing on the crisis of liberal internationalism. As he put it:

Thus, as we marvel at this era's promise of new peace, we must also recognize that serious threats remain. Bloody ethnic, religious, and civil wars rage from Angola to the Caucasus to Kashmir. As weapons of mass destruction fall into more hands, even small conflicts can threaten to take on murderous proportions. Hunger and disease continue to take a tragic toll, especially among the world's children. The malignant neglect of our global environment threatens our children's health and their very security. The repression of conscience continues in too many nations. And terrorism, which has taken so many innocent lives, assumes a horrifying immediacy for us here when militant fanatics bombed the World Trade Center and planned to attack even this very hall of peace [Pam Am Flight 103 incident not to be confused with 9/11] . . . At this moment of panoramic change, of vast opportunities and troubling threats, we must all ask ourselves what we can do and what we should do as a community of nations. We must once again dare to dream of what might be, for our dreams may be within our reach. For that to happen, we must all be willing to honestly confront the challenges of the broader world. That has never been easy.¹⁰

Similarly, the Bush administration (2001–2009) did not hesitate to talk about liberal internationalism using performative language of humanity. The National Security Strategy 2002 (NSS 2002), for example, shows the key aspect of the Bush administration's rhetorical performance on liberal internationalism:

Freedom is the non-negotiable demand of human dignity; the birthright of every person—in every civilization. Throughout history, freedom has been threatened by war and terror; it has been challenged by the clashing wills of powerful states and the evil designs of tyrants; and it has been tested by widespread poverty and disease. Today, humanity holds in its hands the

opportunity to further freedom's triumph over all these foes. The United States welcomes our responsibility to lead in this great mission.¹¹

John Bolton, who would become the undersecretary of state and then UN ambassador in the Bush administration, noted that everywhere 'globalists were imposing harm and costs to the United States . . . [by] belittling our popular sovereignty and constitutionalism, and restricting both our domestic and our international policy flexibility and power'.¹² Without this rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism, the political project about averting global disorder would not have taken off the ground. Soon after, the Bush administration renounced US participation in the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and withdrew from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. Through the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism, the political project rejected international institutions and multilateralism.

Similarly, the Obama administration (2009–2017), frequently engaged in a rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism. He authorized a military surge in Iraq and Afghanistan as a course correction against the problems of upholding liberal order. As Obama said, 'American leadership in this world really is indispensable. It's up to us, through action and example, to sustain the international order that's expanded steadily since the end of the Cold War, and upon which our own wealth and safety depend'.¹³ Obama frequently relied on performative rhetoric for renewing American leadership.¹⁴ Even if the surge, extensive killings of civilians in drone operations through targeted killing in counter-terrorist operations alongside Obama's support of Saudi Arabia against Houthis in Yemen showed the raw power involved in the crisis talk of liberal internationalism, rhetoric was nevertheless central in Obama's articulation of American exceptionalism to manage the crisis.¹⁵ Donald Trump inherited this long rhetorical tradition of articulating the crisis of liberal internationalism. He directed his rhetoric towards the radical right, who endorsed his disorder rhetoric as an opportunity for articulating racial exclusion and national renewal against liberal universalism. Seen in this way, Trump did not create but hyper-accelerated claims on disorder. We have been worried about the domestic and international problems created by Trump's accelerated rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism ever since.

Despite the everpresent rhetoric of American policymakers, language is not the focus of the predominant account of the crisis of liberal internationalism led by the liberal school. In John Ikenberry's view, the disorder and the current crisis of liberal internationalism is a serious one but potentially resolvable. The crisis is the result of faltering American hegemony and its inability to renegotiate a redistribution of global authority to create an open, rules-based, but less Western order.¹⁶ This renegotiation is necessary because the end of the Cold War created the entry of many states with diverse ideologies and agendas into the international system. They called for new bargains, roles, and responsibilities on unique and complex issues such as climate change, terrorism, and weapons proliferation that created pressures upon American-liberal hegemony. 'At the core of these challenges has been the problem of authority and governance. Who pays, who adjusts, who leads?' Many Global South states seek voice and role, but there is no clarity on how authority could be redistributed. John Ikenberry states this is a crisis because 'the old foundations have been weakened, but new bargains and governance arrangements are yet to be fully negotiated'.¹⁷ Faltering American hegemony is unable to make these bargains.

Additionally, Ikenberry also points out that the cooperation of liberal democracies as a security community with shared values and public trust during the Cold War period has transformed into a motley platform of trade and exchange without a social purpose. 'The result was an increasing divergence of views across the order about its members, their place in the world, and their historical legacies and grievances. There was less of a sense that liberal internationalism was a community with a shared narrative of its past and future'.¹⁸ Together, these two factors of weakened old foundations and loss of community values contribute to the crisis of liberal internationalism.

From such a liberal perspective, the underlying red thread of every American president, from Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama is the inability to manage the faltering American hegemony and the policymakers reluctance to change the internal and external world.¹⁹ However, from the perspective of many Global South policymakers, American policymakers are not reluctant to engage in new bargains and governance arrangements. It is the opposite. They often do so in an implicit transactionalist *quo pro quo* manner and more often than not with a patronizing notion of military supermacy and order, which is the problem. Trump has only made these things explicit. Liberal accounts thus misdiagnose the contemporary crisis by reducing it to the decline of American hegemony and deficits in institutional accommodation. They assume that redistributing authority or offering greater representation to states can restore liberal order. This overlooks the relational dynamics through which American hegemony is constituted and contested in distinct material *and* linguistic reality. Taking rhetoric seriously reveals that Global South perceptions of exclusion, disdain, and unequal recognition that emerge from sustained practices to fix faltering American hegemony. Taking rhetoric seriously show why liberal order is in crisis and why in the structural realm of misperceptions, liberal order may not recover the way Ikenberry expects.²⁰

However, one prominent alternative set of explanations to the liberal views on the crisis of liberal internationalism comes from socio-psychological aspects of the hierarchical international system.²¹ In this view, the crisis of liberal internationalism has deeper racial and imperial features that are not amenable to simple renegotiation of authority to manage global governance. The legitimizing ideology underpinning liberal internationalism is Eurocentric, with an unapologetic Anglo-American imperial foundation. It is also pointedly racist, which creates status inconsistency and misrecognition struggles in world politics. From such a perspective, populists and their audiences, authoritarians, and illiberal states are not merely undermining cooperation and inhibiting progress but enacting and performing the fundamental problems of being misrecognized. These groups are keen to restore their hierarchies in the international system. Against the double standards of enlightened liberal internationalism and the recognitional grievances among several actors, there is a merger of discontentment in the core and periphery that is simply not going away.

For Ayşe Zarakol and a cohort of thinkers, a fundamental problem of liberal internationalism is the constant misrecognition struggles.²² George Lawson and Ayşe Zarakol argue that such struggles bring the injustice and hypocrisy of the liberal international order to the fore.²³ First, the promises of principles of liberalism based on justice, equal membership, universal rationality, and individual rights, among others, are in tension with practices of social hierarchies, unequal recognition, and racial and class-based

exclusion that form an intricate part of the system. Second, the tension between liberal principles and practices undermines recognitional justice. These ‘unequal practices, and their relationship to issues of status and belonging, lie behind much of the anger, resentment and bitterness’ and are part of the crisis of liberal internationalism.²⁴

Furthermore, Lawson and Zarakol also point out that these tensions are fundamentally unique to the modern liberal order. Thus, past lessons on how prudential actors managed social hierarchy and durable inequality cannot be used to resolve the current crisis by merely strengthening democratic institutions or taming American power. It is because the principles and, sometimes, the practices of these movements of resistance (such as non-violent mass demonstrations) overlap with liberalism. And ‘members cannot reject them “out of hand, at least not without—again—slipping into illiberalism.”’²⁵ This irresolvable tension is the heart of the crisis of liberal internationalism. Such critical accounts are useful. This article builds on it. However, these accounts could be improved with a greater attention to linguistic-dynamics among policymakers in misrecognition struggles. The problem is not just the North (or the South) but the interconnected entanglements of actors in world politics. If we focus on the rhetorical aspects of these tensions, we can better understand the interconnected aspects of the crises talk unfolding *in-between* Global North and South actors.

Theorizing rhetorical roots of disorder: entangled space and misperceptions between Global North and South

Rhetoric is defined as the skillful use of arguments by political actors to influence the values of other interlocutors and audiences, convince them of a belief, or persuade them to act. Rhetoric is a language game connected to broader narratives, discourse, and ideologies. For Chaim Perelman, rhetoric ‘is central to discourse because its role is to intensify adherence to values, adherence without which discourses that aim at provoking action cannot find the lever to move or to inspire their listeners’.²⁶ Rhetoric is thus a practical art seized by democratic actors and tyrants, including storytellers and soothsayers across the Global North and South. Much of recent scholarship in IR shows that rhetoric is central to politics.²⁷ Rhetoric is power politics in the hierarchical international system.²⁸

It is, however, necessary to analytically unpack the rhetoric of political actors on the crisis of liberal internationalism to understand why global disorder seems unsolvable and hastening in recent years. I argue that political actors pursue three rhetorical modalities to engage with multiple audiences in international politics. Analytically, in keeping with the classical Aristotelian tradition, rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism can be (1) deliberative, (2) forensic, and (3) epideictic.²⁹ In the deliberative form, rhetoric is directed to do or not to do something, and rhetorical actors aim to persuade audiences about the future course of action. In IR, there are multiple ways of understanding deliberation, its qualities, the workings of deliberative reason, and the product of deliberation mixed with compromise and complexity. In a way, deliberation is the classical focus of politics.³⁰

In hierarchical international politics, I wager that the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism in a deliberative mode aims to maintain the status quo and strengthen order. Deliberative rhetoric privileges top dogs in the super- and subordinate relations because of the entrenched forms of institutional arrangements, unequal social and

political capital tilted to the North, and the skewed distribution of military and economic power of the West in relation to the rest. Thus, when the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism is in the realm of deliberation, it resonates with status-quo defenders rather than with the status quo's challengers. Nobody deliberates toward a revolution. As famously put by Gil-Scott-Heron, the revolution will not be televised.

For example, elites deliberated the 2007–2008 financial crisis, which was the biggest crisis of the liberal international order. But these deliberations were also a political project to retain the neoliberal capitalist ordering among states rather than to reorder the world by recognizing the limits of predatory capitalism in international political economy. Both proponents and critics deliberated on the financial crisis for recovering capitalist modes of economic relations, strategies for retrieving growth, and political priorities for enabling development and progress.

Forensic rhetoric, on the other hand, aims to disentangle past actions for scrutiny. Policymakers in a forensic mode engage in accusation and defense, and the audience evaluates these claims and makes judgments about the past. In IR, the focus on legal litigation processes, social narratives of the past, including guilt in adversarial cases, claimed rights and wrongs, and the reconstruction of the past offer a systematic way of understanding the judicial aspect of forensic analysis. Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca focus on the narrative element of forensic rhetoric and Chris Heffer builds upon it: 'The persuasive power of narrative lies in the fact that the narrator selects, slants, and styles past action to meet present rhetorical goals'.³¹

In hierarchical international politics, my wager is that the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism in the forensic rhetorical mode aims to challenge the status quo, articulate ideas to avert disorder, and focus on the justice of underdogs in the super- and subordinate relations. Thus, in the realm of forensic rhetoric, the crisis of liberal internationalism resonates with challengers of the status quo than with its defenders. The debates on the regulation of the political economy or Artificial Intelligence (AI), for instance, in forensic rhetoric within liberal internationalism, aim at the problems of exploitative capitalism, the rise of the corporate greed of multinational corporations, and resource extraction. Forensic analysis of political economy allows both proponents and opponents to reorder the world. Assessment of neoliberal economy in a forensic mode aim to tame corporate power, address climate change and resource exploitation, and acknowledge the problems of an international system beset with racial capitalism and gendered injustices.

Finally, epideictic rhetoric aims to bestow praise or censure somebody with the pedagogical purpose of bringing change. Rhetorical actors in this epideictic modality do not debate but are demonstrative in the spectacle of praise (eulogy) or blame (censure) as a form of political instruction. In the ornamentality of the discussion, the audience's task is not judging the claims concerning the future (like the deliberative genre) or the past (like the forensic) genre but taking civic history and imbibing the lessons of the present. In IR, there are multiple ways of understanding this genre that involves commemoration and praise of the dead in war, populists and demagogues who offer invectives or mock opponents with a disinformation campaign, and cultural critiques.

In hierarchical international politics, I wager that the epideictic rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism involves radical critique and correction of the system here and

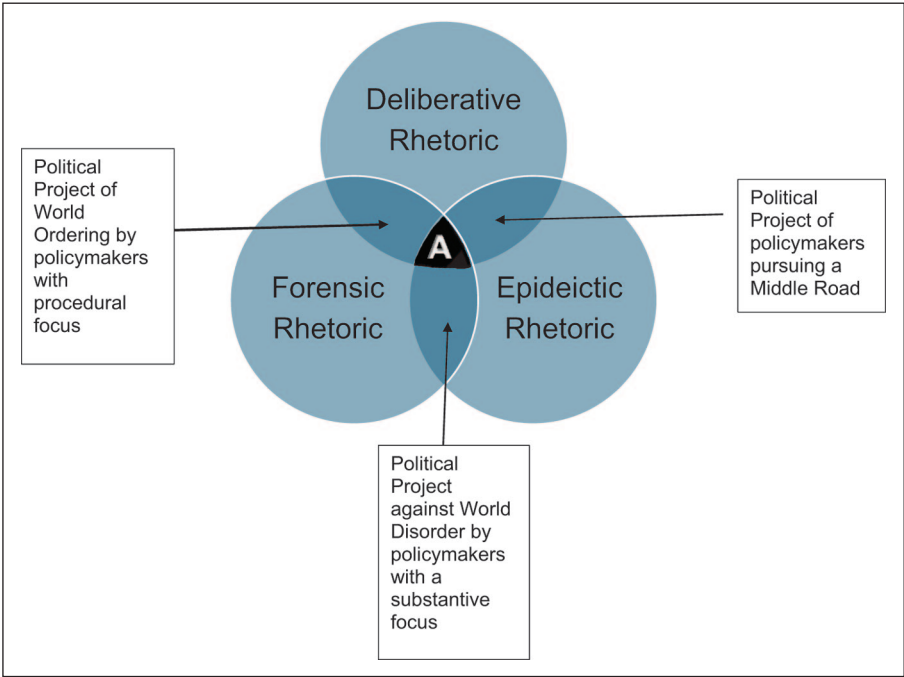


Figure 1. Configuration of rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism and different political projects.

now. Here the problem of liberal internationalism becomes a spectacle that does not offer a deliberative solution for a future or remains fixated on a diagnosis of the past but focuses squarely on the present. In the crisis of political economy, the affective energies against late capitalism, spectacle, and street protests against Anthropogenic climate change, Black Lives Matter protests, including that of extinction rebellion are rhetorical moves focused on blame and shame. Crucially, it aims at a pedagogical change here and now. Critics charge such focus on the present as problems of wokeness and dismiss its civic and pedagogical purpose. But in epideictic mode, a rhetoric-wielding policymaker offers instruction on how to deal with the world.

In international practices, every political actor mixes these three rhetorical modalities in creative ways. See entangled Space [A] in Figure 1. Often, Global North political actors are skillful in using all these forms of rhetoric in talking about the crisis of liberal internationalism. The rhetorics of Global South actors are not far behind in creativity. But the configurations make distinct differences to the structural conditions of problems of our times. When rhetorical actors engage in a deliberative mode configured with forensic analysis, their crisis talk of liberal internationalism involves a *political ordering* project. As we saw, order or ordering is a systematic exercise of power for organizing norms, rules, and institutions to sustain the elementary goals of stability and cooperation in the society of states. Top dogs’ benefit from order and some underdogs suffer from it.

International ordering is a procedural problem outsourced to international institutions, lawyers, technocrats, and bureaucratic organizations. In this configuration of deliberative and forensic rhetoric, political actors focus on procedural correctness, slow but systematic progressive improvement, and rely on past 'crises' to judge the pathways for resolving the crisis. Procedural correctness also requires clear specification of the conditions that make any response to the crisis legitimate. Thus, this rhetorical configuration of the crisis of liberal internationalism – irrespective of whether it is progressives or conservatives deploy it – reinforces global order.

However, when these rhetorical actors engage in forensic mode alongside epideictic analysis, then crisis talk of liberal internationalism involves the project of averting a global disorder. Disorder is the erosion of practices in organizing norms, rules, and institutions that affects the stability and cooperation of international society of states. In the rhetoric about the crisis of liberal internationalism, the talk of disorder, is also a focus on ways to fix the atrophy of the system. It becomes a substantive moral problem that requires new political solutions and creative rethinking. Political actors focus on the morality and legitimacy of the unfolding crisis to the liberal order because procedural correctness alone does not guarantee solutions. It is similar to Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which opens with an analysis of the past, a funeral eulogy as epideictic discourse, and provokes a riot.³² This is because forensic rhetoric of the past brings injustices to light as a problem of legitimacy, which epideictic rhetoric preserves in the present as a spectacle in its pedagogical mode of blame and shame. Finally, when rhetorical actors engage in deliberative rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism configured with epideictic rhetoric, they pursue a middle ground between ordering and disordering political projects. Struck in the middle ground, many political actors aim to resolve big problems but frequently find unable to find creative solutions.

However, such rhetorical configuration has different effects on audiences and shapes practical problems differently. It is here that the misperceptions, misunderstandings, and tensions arise with the Global South. The Global South states are a major audience of this rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism. Building on recent scholarship about perceptual problems in the international system, I argue that top-down rhetoric generates misunderstandings in the bottom-up.³³ One way the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism creates tensions in the Global South is by generating differentiated expectations of change. The multivocal rhetoric by top dogs reinforces the confirmation bias of underdogs in a peculiar way: every rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism becomes a substantive political mission to change the world.

Many Global South policymakers view rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism focused on global ordering as a dispositional trait of superordinate states to protect the entrenched systems of power. In similar lines, these policymakers view the rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism focused on global disorder as a situational feature that can engender change.³⁴ Rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism from the top thus vindicates the claims of political elites in the Global South, encouraging them with the substantive view that the North has finally come to terms with understanding the predicaments of the South. However, rhetoric that focuses on political ordering, as we saw earlier, is thoroughly focused on offering procedural solutions to the crisis. When

global South actors perceive it as offering avenues for substantive reordering of the system, it leads to misunderstandings and tensions.

On the other hand, rhetoric that relies on averting global disorder is focused on substantive concerns about the future of the planet, Anthropogenic climate change, protection of democracy and the rule of law, and the rise of technological disruption among others. It also generates expectations of change among members of the political elites in the Global South that a new authority redistribution is in the offing due to the unmanageable situations in the crisis. However, when Global North actors deploy this rhetoric but fail to revise procedural or substantive principles, it causes disconcerting struggles from below. In this understanding, the unresolvable structural problems between Global North and South are largely a matter of rhetoric creating differing perceptions among interlocutors on the normatively right and appropriate response to the crisis of liberal internationalism. It is not that material differences such as military and economic differentials are not the cause of structural problems between the Global North and South. But more often these differences are articulated through rhetoric that creates the seemingly unresolvable structural misperceptions and misunderstandings. The prisoners of geography, military, and economy are prisoners of language.

Rhetoric and misperceptions between the United States and India in the post-Cold War period

Within the scope of this article, a few relevant examples can show the extent of misperceptions in the bottom rung arising from multivocal rhetoric from the top dogs. Take the case of India. Alongside Brazil or South Africa, it is a second-tier democratic state and a rising challenger but not quite illiberal and radically revisionist like Russia or China. That is why the West cajoles India to see the benefits of liberal order despite disagreements. But the presentist attention to the problems and pitfalls of the Narendra Modi administration should not cloud our views to see the consistent structural misperceptions and misunderstandings of the nature of the liberal order for every Indian political actor in the post-Cold War period, from Indian Prime Minister Narashima Rao in the 1990s to Narendra Modi facing Trump's tariffs today in 2025.

Liberal internationalism involves a combination of practices based on 'open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, [and] the rule of law'.³⁵ Bill Clinton's rhetoric on each of these tenets of liberal internationalism sent shock waves to India. The American rhetoric of *It's the economy, stupid*, for instance, created fears of unregulated free trade liberalism against developmentalism. The centrality of international institutions such as the UN through 'assertive multilateralism'³⁶ but the abandonment of it such as in the ousting of Boutros-Ghali in 1996 created concerns about India's inability to leverage its Cold War bargaining for an equitable opportunity structure in the discriminatory regimes to voice demands within these institutions.³⁷ The unfolding of European cooperative security and democratic community led to Indian policymakers' fears of Western norms entrepreneurs. These members focused on individualistic human rights issues, in Kashmir for example, and ritualistic democracy promotion oblivious of

socio-cultural differences in the non-Western world. For Indian policymakers, collective problem-solving involved confusion of being marooned into 'passive, often resentful acceptance'³⁸ and the focus on the rule of law involved prosecution and an adjudication mindset that loses sight of the developmental rights of non-Western states.

Thus, Indian Prime Minister Narashima Rao, often asserted that developed countries cannot 'prescribe, in somewhat arbitrary terms' the ideals of 'democracy, human rights, rule of law, etc'³⁹ and 'development must remain at the center of international attention in the future'⁴⁰ to ensure a cooperative future. Resorting to socio-cultural differences between states became a mainstay of India's rhetoric:

There is a danger of a new ideological orthodoxy replacing the old, imposing on our minds and prescribing rigid pre-determined models for vastly different situations. We accept the need for a much wider role for the 'market' principle; there should be a congenial environment for entrepreneurship; and there should be fewer controls on economic activity. Nevertheless, for countries where poverty and destitution are pervasive, the state cannot absolve itself of the responsibility to involve itself in economic decision making . . . There are also cultural differences among nations.⁴¹

Importantly, India's rhetoric was itself a byproduct of the misperception of the procedural aspects of ordering and the substantive aspects of disordering rhetoric emanating from the United States. When Rao visited Washington in 1994, representing India's newly liberalizing economy, he carried the baggage of confirmation bias of Western viewpoints that are turning into new 'ideological orthodoxy'⁴² on Kashmir, human rights, or environmental norms, for example. He suggested that 'one must guard against East-West confrontation being transformed into a new type of North-South confrontation'.⁴³ Furthermore, Clinton's procedural emphasis on the renewal of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the importance of signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) were seen as substantive reordering of the world based on nuclear haves and nuclear have-nots. But alongside the institutional deliberations on the May 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, the world saw China's nuclear test four days later. As the vote on CTBT was strategically moved from the Conference on Disarmament to the General Assembly to bypass India's opposition, the power politics within these institutions became stark for Indian policymakers. In keeping with the process set in motion by Rajiv Gandhi in 1985 with a group of experts to assess the costs of a nuclear deterrent, Rao gave the green light to Indian scientists to test nuclear weapons in 1995, which was stopped at the last minute. It paved the way for the BJP to test nuclear weapons in 1998.

The two opposite regimes led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004–2014), involved roughly a decade of converging tensions in interpreting and judging American intentions in the unfolding of the rhetoric of American policymakers on the crisis of liberal internationalism. Even as Vajpayee faced questions on India's nuclear weapons tests, leading to heightened tensions with Pakistan, and as the UNSC Resolution 1172⁴⁴ called to halt and roll back India's (and Pakistan's) weapons program, Vajpayee was wont to articulate a rhetoric of 'nuclear apartheid', problems of 'technology denials', 'hypocrisy'⁴⁵ and misunderstandings in the unequal international order. India and the United States engaged in a dialogue to reduce these misperceptions.⁴⁶

The 9/11 and the subsequent 'Bush Doctrine' based on preventive strikes with the rhetoric that 'If you are not with us, you are against us' certainly led to a new American approach to resetting strategic relations with India to counter China.⁴⁷ However, misperceptions and misunderstandings remained throughout. Just 3 months after 9/11, India suffered a terror attack on Parliament House on 13 December 2001 that Indian intelligence traced to Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Yet, the United States retained its existing strategic partnership with Pakistan. Furthermore, with the past as prologue, the US-led attack on Iraq in 2003 colored India's view of the United States as an unrestrained hegemon. Vajpayee joined Russian President Putin and French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre to oppose unilateral action without the approval of the UN. Furthermore, India joined Brazil and China in the G21 bloc to oppose the West's lavish farm subsidies and trade liberalization policies. For Indian political actors responding to American rhetoric, the progress in US-Indian strategic talks could not be held hostage to India's autonomy in the international system. President Bush and Prime Minister Vajpayee signed the Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP) in September 2004. Condoleezza Rice visited India in March 2005 and expressed her misgivings against India's gas pipeline policy plan with Iran.

Thus, by the time Manmohan Singh took power in 2004, American rhetoric on different tenets of the crisis of liberal internationalism from democracy promotion, the rule of law and open market were under a severe strain of misperceptions among multiple Indian audiences. New Delhi, on the receiving end, found it impossible to understand the gap between rhetorical practices on the crisis of liberal internationalism and the continuation of established conventions of American hegemony focused on exceptionalism, military superiority, and *realpolitik*.

Manmohan Singh started with the view that India would maintain an independent foreign policy where 'We will work with like-minded nations for an equitable, multi-polar world-order, which takes into account the legitimate aspirations of developing countries'.⁴⁸ But in keeping with developments in NSSP, in about 3 months, Manmohan Singh articulated that 'Our responsible record underscores the logic of India's partnership with the United States to make the world a safer place'. He asserted that the 'India-US relationship reached a stage where it can serve' a 'larger global cause' without the 'straightjacket of old paradigms'.⁴⁹ Through the Hyde Act in December 2006, the United States and India finalized an agreement in July 2007 that enabled a change in the Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954 for nuclear cooperation with India. However, considering American rhetoric on the war on terror, the rise of China, and its missile defence initiatives, outright interconnected misperceptions and misunderstanding of India's role in the international liberal order remained throughout. Despite the claims of strengthening US-India relations, there were cracks largely due to the circulation of claims and counterclaims from Washington DC and New Delhi.

Barack Obama came to power in the US in 2009 with a rhetorical prowess focused on American exceptionalism, commitment to change, and, offering a middle way between ordering and disordering as political projects in American foreign policy. On the one hand on global ordering rhetoric, in November 2010, Obama offered a qualified support to a reformed UNSC that includes India as a permanent member and argued that "India and the US shared a vision for peace, stability, and prosperity in Asia, the Indian Ocean

region, and the Pacific region.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, with the focus on averting global disorder, Obama’s rhetoric focused first on establishing a condominium with China (in the form of G2) and then asserted a ‘pivot to Asia’. This mix in Obama’s rhetoric alienated Indian practitioners and increased their misunderstanding of trusting American commitment to assist the rise of India as a great power and manage China’s rise in the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, the idea of G2 between the United States and China led to great consternation in the Manmohan Singh government. Indian political actors interpreted the American rhetoric against China as a ‘development fraught with uncertainty’ and thus decided it was not in a zero-sum relation with China and the USA.⁵¹

Importantly, Indian policymakers used Obama’s own rhetoric on the crisis of liberal internationalism to pursue a multi-alignment strategy. In the context of BRIC, Manmohan Singh argued that ‘Our countries have gathered here today because we stand to gain from cooperation with each other, and because we believe that greater cooperation among us is also good for the world’. He insisted that ‘We support a multipolar, equitable, democratic and just world order with the United Nations playing a central role in tackling global challenges’.⁵² In other words, India found a novel pathway to hedge in the liberal international order without antagonizing the United States because of the ambiguous rhetoric that came from the top down. Thereafter, in the crisis in Libya and Syria and in the Ukraine crisis (2014), Indian practitioners stood against the interventionist policy prescriptions of United States and the West.

With the advent of Narendra Modi in 2014, the rhetoric from India took center stage, thus further adding India’s misperceptions of the crisis of liberal internationalism. In response to the substantive concerns expressed in Obama’s rhetoric about the crisis of liberal order, India under Modi decisively focused on procedural changes such as overcoming the nuclear liability laws that impeded full nuclear cooperation with the United States, Defense Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), a settlement on the Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement initiated in 2004 to help India expand its engagement in the Asia-Pacific, and a permanent seat in the UNSC.

On rhetoric focused on the substantive problems of managing global disorder, the Modi administration placed India as lynchpin of the US pivot to Asia. In 2017, the United States, with India, Australia, and Japan, established the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). However, misreading American rhetoric on the role of India in the changing international order, Modi emphasized the Quad as an avenue for a ‘free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific’ with a win-win place for China. At the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, Modi poured cold water on the substantive concern of the United States by emphasizing that India does not see the ‘Indo-Pacific as a club of limited members’ or ‘directed against any country’. Its confirmation bias against American hegemony and the habit of non-alignment entrenched in Indian bureaucracy thus came in full strength. Kanwal Sibal, a former Foreign Secretary of India, notes this bias: ‘the USA has historical pursued policies in our neighborhood that have been detrimental to our interests; even now it is unable to overcome the legacy of the past, or go beyond the traditional ties it has developed with particular countries in our region, and the geopolitical need to maintain a certain regional balance so that its primacy is maintained’.⁵³ Trump’s tariff wars and Modi’s rhetoric that called for domestic self-strengthening through ‘Make in India’ and a reset in India-China relations and BRICS expansion is a latest reiteration of the circulation of rhetorics that

has led to the seemingly unresolvable structural problem of global disorder.⁵⁴ This plausibility probe is only a first step for a detailed analysis for opening the rhetorical configurations in the interactions through archival research and for understanding the nature of structural tensions at issue.

Conclusion

This article theorized that rhetoric is central to the seemingly unresolvable structural tensions in-between Global North and South state that we witness as global disorder in our times. Policymakers are not artlessly speaking about the crisis of liberal internationalism. They deploy performative rhetoric in crisis talk. The American policymakers from the end of the Cold War were frequently engaging in such rhetorical displays of the problems of our times. This article analytically used three rhetorical modalities based on past (forensic), present (epideictic), and future (deliberative) to show how political actors engage in rhetorical performances for building order and averting disorder with important procedural and substantive logic to their engagements. It makes the rhetoric of the crisis of liberal internationalism highly complex in the hierarchical system. Specifically, I theorized that multivocal rhetoric creates problems of misperceptions, particularly in the Global South, where policymakers view all rhetoric as a substantive call to reorder and change the world. In other words, the friction between the West and the rest is due to the complexity of rhetoric based on concurrent ordering and disordering projects and the mixed signals it sends to audiences in the Global South who reiterate their confirmation bias with the expectations of change.

More detailed case studies from other states, for example, Turkey, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Brazil, Indonesia, or Vietnam on the type of rhetorical configurations, perceptions of American rhetoric in shaping the world both through procedural rules and substantive thinking about world politics, and its structural effects is necessary.⁵⁵ Many Global South states face complex rhetoric from top-dogs and yet hope to change the status quo. Indian policymakers, for example, did not carefully distinguish between ordering and disordering projects in the rhetoric of crisis of liberal internationalism. We need detailed case studies across a variety of Global South states to examine these theoretical logics of rhetoric-led misperceptions in greater detail.

Nevertheless, the theorizing offered here allows us to reexamine three things. One, even if rhetoric is unavoidable, American policymakers could assuage concerns in the Global South on the tensions with China, for example, by changing the way they articulate ideas on the crisis of liberal internationalism or global disorder. The idea that somehow American views of order and disorder are easily accepted in the Global South is largely mistaken. Two, even if confirmation bias cannot be completely set aside, the Global South policymakers must work with Global North leadership on urgent issues such as Anthropogenic climate change, the consequences of AI, or on managing the power of oligarchic elites and billionaires. Finally, the seemingly unresolvable problems of global disorder through the crisis of liberal internationalism are not unique to our times. Rhetorical power politics is pathological.⁵⁶ If policymakers step down from rhetorical power politics and address their misperceptions toward seeking creative solutions

then the disordering of the system and its widening economic and material inequalities can be pragmatically managed.

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Notes

1. On order and disorder see the Introduction of this Special Issue. Also see Aaron McKeil, 'On the Concept of International Disorder', *International Relations*, 35(2), 2021, pp. 197–215; Jamie M. Johnson, Victoria M. Basham and Owen D. Thomas, 'Ordering Disorder: The Making of World Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 48(4), 2022, pp. 607–625.
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24. Lawson and Zarakol, 'Recognizing Injustice', p. 208.
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