Narrative alliances: the discursive foundations of international order

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Traditional understandings of order at the international level neglect the narrative dimension of systems of allegiance. Any form of discursive coordination is considered a result of existing cooperation and alignment—not the other way around. Rendering discourse coordination epiphenomenal as an object of analysis includes the assumption that international order is primarily 'the dominant set of norms and institutions' that are both the product and governing mechanism of interstate relations,[1] a definition which makes no explicit reference to the role of narratives in underwriting and enabling organization and cooperation at the global level. That international order has a discursive foundation has largely been sidelined in the study of international (security) dynamics.

Acknowledging a lack of attention to the role of language in international organization is not new. Two decades ago, Jackson suggested that alliance formation scholarship not only inadequately addressed agency but also eliminated historical contingency, failing to observe how governments coordinate rhetorically around geopolitical constructs as a precondition for formal security cooperation.[2] While Jackson's findings point to the importance of discursive resources in alliance formation, how narratives operate across states and affect international order has received very little attention.[3] Notwithstanding disciplinary turns in International Relations (IR) and related fields towards the centrality of language, there is a lack of sustained scholarly engagement with the discursive dimensions of security allegiances and international ordering practices more broadly.

This is surprising, given the increasing interest since the late 2000s in the concept of strategic narratives in IR, which provides important tools to explain

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[1] Kanti Bajpai and Evan A. Laksmana, 'Asian conceptions of international order: what Asia wants', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 1371–81 at p. 1372, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad165.

[2] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, 'Defending the West: occidentalism and the formation of NATO', *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 11: 3, 2003, pp. 223–52, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00176.

[3] Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, 'Narrative power': how storytelling shapes east Asian international politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 4, 2019, pp. 387–406, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623498.

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purposeful and sustained discursive coordination around shared ideas of international security and order. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle observe that pre-existing narratives not only mould and constrain new security stories, but also shape international alliance behaviour.[4] Roselle further demonstrates that state narratives influence alliance partners and that the narratives of non-members can disrupt alliance cohesion.[5] Strategic narratives are also seen to play an important role in influencing the *raison d'être* of existing formal alliances. As Flockhart argues, NATO has been unable to move beyond established 'crisis narratives' about its purposes and resources towards a 'strong narrative' that would help ensure its ontological security.[6]

This article provides a new conceptual entry point for understanding the complex relationship between order and discourse at the international level. Interrogating the stories political actors tell about the origins, principles, functions and importance of the contemporary international order, it speaks to the wealth of recent IR scholarship on the productive power of language that examines how narratives construct state identities,[7] shape security policy choices[8] and operationalize historical memory for national strategy.[9] We place analytical attention deliberately on narratives because they constitute powerful rhetorical devices that allow political actors to make sense of, and give sense to, the international environment by placing states' national interests within broader concerns of community. They also establish a connection between challenges in the present, and the past and future of international organization.

Methodologically, the article adopts a case-study approach that draws on public statements and policy documents from a variety of geographically dispersed state actors. Specifically, we focus on the narrative elements used in relation to the rules-based order (RBO), a contemporary metastory of international organization now embraced by a range of states and governments. We have chosen this methodological route because it facilitates the exploratory study of complex phenomena to facilitate theory-building, especially where direct comparisons prove difficult for article-length research due to variations in language and socio-political settings.[10] This narrative approach, based on inductive reasoning, not only allows us to contribute to academic debates about the dynamics of international organization and global

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[4] Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: communication power and the new world order* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 182.

[5] Laura Roselle, 'Strategic narratives and alliances: the cases of intervention in Libya (2011) and economic sanctions against Russia (2014)', *Politics and Governance* 5: 3, 2017, pp. 99–110, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i3.1023.

[6] Trine Flockhart, 'Towards a strong NATO narrative: from a "practice of talking" to a "practice of doing"', *International Politics* 49: 1, 2012, pp. 78–97, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2011.31.

[7] Brent J. Steele, *Ontological security in international relations: self-identity and the IR state* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008); Felix Berenskoetter, 'Parameters of a national biography', *European Journal of International Relations* 20: 1, 2014, pp. 262–88, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066112445290.

[8] Alexandra Homolar, *The uncertainty doctrine: narrative politics and US hard power after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12: 4, 2016, pp. 610–27, https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089.

[9] Oliver Turner, 'Global Britain and the narrative of empire', *Political Quarterly* 90: 4, 2019, pp. 727–34, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12739.

[10] Robert K. Yin, *Case study research and applications: design and methods*, 6th edn (New York: SAGE, 2017); Homolar, *The uncertainty doctrine*, ch. 2.

(dis)order, but also opens the way for broader, and so far neglected, conceptual analysis of collective narration at the systemic level of international affairs.

The article shows that the RBO metastory unites under a single discursive umbrella a diverse set of beliefs about contemporary international organization and its relationship to the postwar liberal international order (LIO) that has permeated academic debates for over half a century. With varying degrees of consistency and coherence, political actors in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, Japan and elsewhere go beyond proclaiming the existence of the RBO as an international system of allegiances, commitments and norms. They collectively tell a compelling political story of this order, including its age, nature, purpose and sources of vulnerability. As we argue, rallying behind a shared vision of international organization that rests on declaring some forms of conduct acceptable and appropriate, while denouncing others as deviant and hostile, fosters mutual security investments and demarcates the boundaries of international legitimacy. It also serves as a permanent pretext for agitating against actors and behaviours seen as violating the principles of that order. A narrative alliance bound together by stories of (un)acceptable behaviour equips political actors and audiences with a shared geopolitical gaze and establishes imperatives to act in defence of particular visions of international organization.

Discursive alignment over how the international sphere is ordered matters. As this article shows, while systems of allegiance are constituted through patterns of power, principles and practices, how they converge around shared identity, as well as widely accepted norms, values and codes of conduct, is firmly entwined with processes of narration. In the next two sections we explore how the RBO is discursively established as a system to articulate security concerns and allegiances. In the third section we unpack the concept of a 'narrative alliance' as a form of international discursive coordination. We conclude in the final section by explaining why a focus on narrative alliances is integral to understanding the dynamics and the implications of international discursive alignment outside traditional security arrangements.

Narrating the rules-based order

Shapiro once argued: 'To regard the world of "international relations" as a text, [is] to reveal the way it has been mediated by historically specific scripts governing the interpretations through which it has emerged.'[11] Narrative practices enact, socialize and consolidate or delegitimize certain sets of norms and behaviours, which also holds for the realm of global politics.[12] Stories help impose a sense of organization and hierarchy onto international affairs, by justifying and invali-

[11] Michael J. Shapiro, 'Textualizing global politics', in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro, eds, *International/intertextual relations: postmodern readings of world politics* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 11–12.

[12] Alexander Wendt, 'Collective identity formation and the international state', *The American Political Science Review* 88: 2, 1994, pp. 384–96, https://doi.org/10.2307/2944711; Thomas Risse, 'International norms and domestic change: arguing and communicative behavior in the human rights area', *Politics and Society* 27: 4, 1999, pp. 529–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027004004.

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dating particular codes of conduct. They are sites of power that (re)create security worlds by policing our imagination.[13]

Understood through the lens of narrative, international order is a discursive device to denote a more or less stable distribution of military, economic and/or cultural power that emerges and is sustained through the acceptance and enforcement of specific normative, regulatory and institutional principles. Since the end of the Second World War, the terminology of the LIO has served as the primary rhetorical reference point to delineate those that belong to, and support, a western-centric international system and those located outside of this geopolitical imaginary.[14] It signals recognition of some countries as a 'morally superior grouping' in the international arena, while alternative representations of international order that could attract support are discouraged, alongside norm-deviant behaviour and dissent.[15]

The LIO has long drawn attention from political scientists and scholars of international affairs.[16] While Harold S. Quigley referenced the phrase during the Second World War,[17] it became entwined with the western-centric 'ordering' multilateralism that followed.[18] Western liberal democracies are argued to have built a 'liberal international order … that is relatively open, rule-based, and progressive', successfully delivering global growth and advancement.[19] With critics questioning its liberal and inclusionary characteristics, the LIO is perhaps best understood as a form of international myth-making narrative that underwrites western-centric geopolitical reasoning.[20]

The contemporary notion of a rules-based system as the foundation of order at the global level appropriates key elements of this long-established construct of international organization, which divides the world between accepted and deviant conduct. Indeed, despite frequently repudiating language around politically

[13] Annick Wibben, *Feminist security studies: a narrative approach* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 2, 65.

[14] For example, G. John Ikenberry, 'Power and liberal order: America's postwar world order in transition', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5: 2, 2005, pp. 133–52, https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lci112; G. John Ikenberry, 'Introduction: power, order, and change in world politics', in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *Power, order, and change in world politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014) pp. 1–16; John Agnew, *Geopolitics: re-visioning world politics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004).

[15] Shogo Suzuki, '"Delinquent gangs" in the international system hierarchy', in Ayşe Zarakol, ed., *Hierarchies in world politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 219–40 at pp. 220–2.

[16] Google Ngram Viewer shows a steady increase in references to 'liberal international order' within English-language books from the early 1980s, followed by a sharper increase from the early 2000s. See the *International Affairs* special issue: 'Ordering the world? Liberal internationalism in theory and practice', 94: 1, 2018, https://academic.oup.com/ia/issue/94/1, for an examination of this enduring concept. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 Oct. 2023.)

[17] Harold S. Quigley, 'The Far East and the future', *Virginia Quarterly Review* 19: 1, 1943, pp. 50–64 at p. 64.

[18] For example, Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The nature and sources of liberal international order', *Review of International Studies* 25: 2, 1999, pp. 179–96, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001795; Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order: from liberal multilateralism to postnational liberalism', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 282–305, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000570; Sung-han Kim and Sanghoon Kim, 'China's contestation of the liberal international order', *The Pacific Review* 36: 6, 2023, pp. 1215–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2063367.

[19] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal leviathan: the origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 2.

[20] Inderjeet Parmar, 'The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 151–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix240.

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liberal forms of domestic systems of government, the RBO narrative co-opts the core plotline of the LIO story that western-led multilateralism after the Second World War established a benign and mutually beneficial system of international organization. Particularly in the US and the UK, its emergence is firmly entwined with 1945 and the defeat of fascism as a mythologized moment of victory in their national historical memories. The RBO serves as a story through which the protagonists—as righteous architects and defenders of order—can affirm and reinforce their own positionalities. In late 2016, for example, UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson explained that 'We stood together … throughout the Cold War and when that Cold War ended 26 years ago we hoped that *our* rules-based liberal order would … embrace the whole world.'[21] Former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis further underscored that '[t]he postwar international rules-based order is the greatest gift of the greatest generation'.[22]

The postwar LIO that serves as a historical 'discursive anchor'[23] for the RBO is commonly narrated as the foundation of 'unprecedented peace and prosperity for 70 years',[24] reducing global poverty and providing frameworks for security, trade and environmental protection,[25] and advancing human rights.[26] In 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken defined it as 'the system of laws, agreements, principles, and institutions [built] after two world wars to manage relations between states, to prevent conflict, to uphold the rights of all people'.[27] Political actors in the UK have similarly identified it as 'the laws, rules, treaties, customs and international institutions which together make up the rules-based order, which was constructed between nations after the Second World War'.[28] The

[21] UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Beyond Brexit: a global Britain', speech by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, London, 2 Dec. 2016, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brexit-a-global-britain (emphasis added).

[22] Philip Rucker and Carol D. Leonnig, *A very stable genius: Donald J. Trump's testing of America* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 132; Ben Scott, Madeleine Nyst and Sam Roggeveen, 'Australia's security and the rules-based order: tracking a decade of policy evolution', https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/rules-based-order/ (accessed 8 Feb. 2023).

[23] On the concept of discursive anchoring, see Alexandra Homolar and Pablo A. Rodríguez-Merino, 'Making sense of terrorism: a narrative approach to the study of violent events', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12: 4, 2019, pp. 561–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1585150.

[24] Permanent Mission of the Republic of Singapore, 'Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Singapore Dr Vivian Balakrishnan at the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly', 30 Sep. 2018, https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2018/09/30092018_Min-at-UNGA.

[25] UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 'Global Britain: supporting the rules based international system', speech by the Rt Hon Mark Field, 17 Aug. 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/global-britain-supporting-the-rules-based-international-system.

[26] US Department of State, 'The administration's approach to the People's Republic of China', speech by Antony Blinken, Secretary of State, George Washington University, Washington DC, 26 May 2022, https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china.

[27] US Department of State, 'The administration's approach to the People's Republic of China'; also The White House, *National security strategy*, 12 Oct. 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf, p. 32; Caitlin Byrne notes that rules-based order (RBO) terminology is widely used to designate 'the body of rules, norms and institutions' that govern the international system, 'most visibly founded on the United Nations (UN) and Bretton Woods institutions under the global stewardship of the United States': Caitlin Byrne, 'Securing the "rules-based order" in the Indo-Pacific: the significance of strategic narrative', *Security Challenges* 16: 3, 2020, pp. 10–15 at p. 10, https://doi.org/10.2307/26924333.

[28] UK House of Lords, *UK foreign policy in a shifting world order: 5th report of session 2017–19* (London: House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations, 2018), https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldintrel/250/250.pdf, p. 5.

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Australian government has also subscribed to this plotline, noting that 'Australia has a long record of helping to develop the rules-based component of the global order, beginning with the establishment of the United Nations in 1945'.[29] In 2018, Singapore's minister for foreign affairs stressed that small states 'cannot and should not abandon the rules-based world order that has brought unprecedented peace and prosperity for 70 years'.[30] The governments of Poland, South Korea and Taiwan have each embraced the RBO script in their foreign policy discourse.[31]

A significant degree of inbuilt narrative flexibility allows the RBO origin story to accommodate supporters whose image of the national Self is less entwined with the establishment of a new international order after 1945. India, for example, for whom the defeat of fascism holds less national-historical resonance, vocally endorses both the notion of an 'inclusive rule-based global order'[32] and the intention to 'promote a democratic and rules-based international order, in which all nations … thrive as equal and sovereign'[33] without the post-1945 framing. Japan, for whom the Second World War is less a moment of celebration than it is one of reflection and shame,[34] routinely expresses support for a 'rules-based international system', especially one marked by inclusivity, sovereignty and non-intervention, and which is adaptable to localized normative contexts.[35] The greater narrative flexibility the RBO enjoys over the adjacent LIO allows it to bring more non-western actors into the ordered fold, 'where all states, big and small, help shape the rules even if they do so differently given asymmetries of power'.[36]

Overall, the RBO origin story is one of peace, stability and prosperity that replaced a previously violent and disordered world.[37] Until recently, however,

[29] Australian Government, *2017 foreign policy white paper* (Barton, ACT: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017), https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/pdf/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf, pp. 82–3.

[30] Permanent Mission of the Republic of Singapore, 'Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Singapore'.

[31] Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Polish foreign policy strategy: 2017–2021* (Warsaw: Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017), https://www.gov.pl/attachment/869184c0-bd6f-4a20-b8af-a5c8190350a1; Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'Opening Speech by Foreign Minister Park Jin at CSIS Roundtable', 14 June 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/opening-speech-foreign-minister-park-jin-csis-roundtable; Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), 'President Tsai addresses GTI Annual Symposium', Global Taiwan Institute Annual Symposium, 5 Sep. 2022, https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6340.

[32] The White House, 'India–U.S. Delhi declaration of friendship', 25 Jan. 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/india-us-delhi-declaration-friendship.

[33] Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Prime Minister's keynote address at Shangri La Dialogue', 1 June 2018, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018.

[34] Yinan He, *The search for reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish relations since World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[35] Ryoko Nakano, 'Japan and the liberal international order: rules-based, multilateral, inclusive and localized', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 1421–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad166; Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Malaysian conceptions of international order: paradoxes of small-state pragmatism', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 1477–97, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad166.

[36] Bajpai and Laksmana, 'Asian conceptions of international order', p. 1373–4.

[37] UK House of Lords, *UK foreign policy in a shifting world order*, p. 5; UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Britain's role in a post-Brexit world'; speech by Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore, 2 Jan. 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-hunt-britains-role-in-a-post-brexit-world; United Nations Association of Australia, *The United Nations and the rules-based international order* (Canberra: United Nations Association of Australia, 2016), https://www.unaa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/UNAA_RulesBasedOrder_ARTweb3.pdf, p. 3; see also Leigh Sarty, 'Sunset Boulevard revisited? Canadian internationalism after the Cold War', *International Journal* 48: 4, 1993,

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references to the RBO were infrequent outside the scholarly world. The order was articulated only sporadically, such as when the shape and stability of the international system was challenged by events like the end of the Cold War[38]—when it was unclear how 'smaller' countries might navigate uncertainty-inducing change,[39] or when the promotion of an RBO was tied to reducing inequalities of wealth and power.[40]

This appeared to change in 2008 in the context of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's assertion of the need to promote a rules-based order, grounded upon multilateral institutions like the United Nations, to ensure global economic growth and security.[41] Since then, the RBO has become a prominent story to impose order onto international affairs. It is endorsed by a range of national governments—often close partners and longstanding military allies—who traditionally identify as architects of the postwar international order, including the UK, the US, Australia and Canada. It may seem unremarkable to find shared geopolitical narratives across established interstate networks, especially where common colonially driven socio-cultural experiences predate formal military cooperation after the Second World War. But discursive alignment under the narrative RBO umbrella also operates in the absence of formalized security alliances as a means to signal alternative yet still powerful forms of allegiance.[42]

The US acts as a core facilitator for pledges of allegiance to the RBO, driving its narrative uptake among countries inside and outside formal security alliances from the position of architect and guardian of order. Indeed, the RBO has recently become a cornerstone of Washington's approach to collaboration and coalition-building, demonstrated by President Joe Biden linking the political possibility of entering a formal alliance with commitment to the RBO.[43] The Australian government underscores the role of the US in advancing the RBO, explaining that 'Without sustained US support, the effectiveness and liberal character of the rules-based order will decline … In the post-Second World War period, we have [benefited] significantly from an international order shaped by US power

pp. 749–77, at p. 775, https://doi.org/10.1177/002070209304800407; Jeffrey Cimmino and Matthew Kroenig, *Strategic context: the rules-based international system* (Washington DC: Atlantic Council, 2020), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/atlantic-council-strategy-paper-series/strategic-context-the-rules-based-international-system.

[38] Erik B. Wang, 'The Iran–Iraq War revisited: some reflections on the role of international law', *Canadian Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 32, 1995, pp. 83–110 at p. 84, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0069005800005749.

[39] Sarty, 'Sunset Boulevard revisited?'.

[40] Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, 'Foreign minister's address', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 7: 1, 2000, pp. 201–207, https://doi.org/10.1080/10220460009545303.

[41] Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'The first national security statement to the Parliament address by the Prime Minister of Australia the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP', 4 Dec. 2008, https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-16289.

[42] For example, the shared commitment 'to stand up for multilateralism and the rules-based international order' by the US and Mexico in: US Department of State, 'Joint Statement on Canada–Mexico–United States cooperation', 10 June 2022, https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-canada-mexico-united-states-cooperation. See also the US and India: The White House, 'India–U.S. Delhi declaration of friendship'; Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Foreign secretary's remarks on "Quad and future of the Indo-Pacific" at the 5th India–US Forum', 2 Dec. 2021, http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34571/Foreign+Secretarys+Remarks+on+Quad+and+Future+of+the+IndoPacific+at+the+5th+IndiaUS+Forum.

[43] The White House, *National security strategy*, pp. 3, 16.

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and global leadership'.[44] Singapore's former Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan also argued: 'since 1945, many countries and regions have [benefited] from … a world order, that was substantially underwritten by a single power—the United States of America'.[45]

Governments less inclined to claim ownership of the RBO facilitate the narrative, but in the service of their own interests. Japan, for instance, prioritizes the economic arenas of RBO to expand relationships with partners in Europe and the Pacific, advancing distinct but complementary geopolitical imaginaries in which it builds (regional) order, notably through variations of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP).[46] The US, as Japan's longstanding formal alliance partner, does not contest these representations and reiterates the need to protect the FOIP in joint statements.[47] This points to the importance of inter-narrativity, in which allegiance to the RBO is pledged via storylines that work alongside the US-centric plot. To achieve wide-reaching international portability, the RBO story must be flexible and adaptive to local interests—veiling the *me-ness* of American hegemony within the *we-ness* of a wider narrative alliance about the shape and dynamics of international order.

Rallying behind the vulnerability of international order

The dominant storyline of the RBO today features vulnerability, fracture and decline. Scholars and commentators of international politics play a key role in driving the narrative of potential or imminent RBO collapse, pointing to a system 'under challenge on a number of fronts',[48] creating 'the greatest sense of instability and uncertainty since the 1930s'.[49] At times, this scepticism about the future of the RBO combines with a rallying call to rescue the western-led (often liberal international) order which, as noted above, occupies an overlapping discursive space. From an understanding that '[t]he liberal world order is collapsing', Ikenberry argues that 'it was the success of the US-led order' that ultimately led to its downfall.[50] Ikenberry previously diagnosed the weakening of US-led international order as a consequence of the 'gradual diffusion of power away from

[44] Australian Government, *2017 foreign policy white paper*, pp. 7, 21.

[45] Permanent Mission of the Republic of Singapore, 'Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Singapore'.

[46] This includes the 2019 to 2022 annual Diplomatic bluebooks published by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/index.html.

[47] For example, US Department of State, 'Joint statement of the U.S.–Japan Economic Policy Consultative Committee: strengthening economic security and the rules-based order', 29 July 2022, https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-u-s-japan-economic-policy-consultative-committee-strengthening-economic-security-and-the-rules-based-order.

[48] Caitlin Byrne, 'Securing the "rules-based order"', p. 10.

[49] Guy de Jonquières, 'The world turned upside down: the decline of the rules-based international system and the rise of authoritarian nationalism', *International Politics*, vol. 54, 2017, pp. 552–60 at p. 552, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0049-5; Priya Chacko and Kanishka Jayasuriya, 'Trump, the authoritarian populist revolt and the future of the rules-based order in Asia', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 71: 2, 2017, pp. 121–7, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2016.1266463.

[50] G. John Ikenberry, 'The next liberal order: the age of contagion demands more internationalism, not less', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 99, 2020, pp. 133–42 at p. 133, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/next-liberal-order.

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the West' and the 'internal difficulties and discontents' of democracies within the LIO.[51] This echoes Kagan's assessment that '[t]he liberal world order established in the aftermath of World War II may be coming to an end, challenged by forces both without and within', and that 'this crisis of confidence in liberalism coincides with a breakdown of the strategic order'.[52] For Ikenberry, the response to governments' diminished interest in working together 'demands more internationalism, not less', with the US and other liberal democracies needing 'to reconstitute themselves as a more coherent and functional coalition'.[53] For Kagan, it requires Washington's (re)commitment to militarily underwrite the international order, as without US leadership 'the system will buckle under the unrestrained military competition of regional powers'.[54]

Governments long associated with the western-centric post-1945 system of international organization reinforce these notions of fragility and fracture. Former foreign ministers of France and Germany argue, for instance, that '[t]he multilateral order is experiencing its perhaps gravest crisis since its emergence after the Second World War'.[55] The storyline promoted here is that of a system 'under greater strain than for many decades', which is nonetheless worthy of rescue.[56] But there has been a marked shift from utilizing LIO terminology towards referencing the RBO to defend the continuation of the postwar international order, while de-emphasizing the role of the US and the West more broadly. The European Commission has asserted that, even as major power relations become increasingly confrontational and unilateralist, '[t]he EU and its Member States are and will remain firm supporters of the rules-based international order … [since] the world no longer resembles what it was'.[57] In 2018, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggested that '[t]he foundations of the global order appear shaken … For all our progress, we live on the edge of uncertainty'. Still, he concluded, 'our common prosperity and security require us to evolve, through dialogue, a common rules-based order for the region'.[58] The RBO narrative is consequently a story built around existential tensions: between the possibility of collapse and the desire to not only keep it alive, but rebuild it from the ashes. The imbalance between what is, what was and what could be is one of its core features.

Through processes of differentiation, collective narratives can forge and foster cohesion within and across groups.[59] They are also constitutive of the RBO,

[51] G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23 at pp. 17–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241.

[52] Robert Kagan, 'The twilight of the liberal world order', Brookings, 24 Jan. 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-twilight-of-the-liberal-world-order.

[53] Ikenberry, 'The next liberal order', pp. 133, 140.

[54] Kagan, 'The twilight of the liberal order'.

[55] Heiko Maas and Jean-Yves Le Drian, 'Who, if not us?', French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 15 Feb. 2019, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/germany/events/article/who-if-not-us-15-02-19.

[56] UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Britain's role in a post-Brexit world'.

[57] European Commission, *Joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism* (Brussels: European Commission, 2021), https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-communication-european-parliament-and-council-strengthening-eu%E2%80%99s-contribution-rules_en.

[58] Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Prime Minister's keynote address'.

[59] Ana-Maria Bliuc and Alexander Chidley, 'From cooperation to conflict: the role of collective narratives in shaping group behaviour', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 16: 7, 2022, e12670, https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12670.

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where antagonists are represented not simply as rejecting the workings of that order but as actively undermining its existence. However, the construction of belonging and exclusion in the RBO takes place at the intersection of language and emotion.[60] Portraying countries as challengers to the RBO nurtures representations of the international arena as characterized by insecurity, distrust and enmity—while simultaneously reaffirming the cluster of interrelated values that underwrite its existence. International discursive ordering practices of exclusion serve as powerful affective articulations that both draw on, and stimulate, emotions of belonging, 'which are themselves rooted in concerns about recognition'.[61] Separating insiders from outsiders, they galvanize the RBO as an emotional community of like-minded others that sanctions non-conformity with the loss of power and status in the international order.[62]

The primary antagonist of the RBO storyline is China. Indeed, some suggest that the notion of the RBO 'is almost uniquely tied to analyses of China'.[63] Blinken emphasized that 'the most serious long-term challenge to the international order [is] … posed by the People's Republic of China'.[64] For Japan, China's code of conduct and stated ambitions are similarly deemed 'inconsistent with the existing international order'.[65] While India has been reluctant to draw a causal link between its neighbour's actions and objectives on the one hand, and the breakdown of order in the international arena on the other, concerns over the security implications of China's rise have been implicit—with a commitment to the RBO seen as a means of managing China's influence in the region.[66] Since annexing Crimea in 2014, and especially since launching its full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, Russia has been identified as a second key threat to the stability of the rules based-order.[67] Joint pledges of strategic alignment between Moscow and

[60] Linus Hagström, 'Disciplinary power: text and body in the Swedish NATO debate', *Cooperation and Conflict* 56: 2, 2021, pp. 141–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836720966376.

[61] George Lawson and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Recognizing injustice: the "hypocrisy charge" and the future of the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 201–17 at p. 207, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac258; Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, 'Populism and the affective politics of humiliation narratives', *Global Studies Quarterly* 1: 1, 2021, ksab002, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab002.

[62] Simon Koschut 'Emotional (security) communities: the significance of emotion norms in inter-allied conflict management', *Review of International Studies* 40: 3, 2014, pp. 533–58, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210513000375.

[63] Adam Breuer and Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Memes, narratives and the emergent US–China security dilemma', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 4, 2019, pp. 429–55 at p. 430, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1622083.

[64] US Department of State, 'The administration's approach to the People's Republic of China'.

[65] Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Diplomatic bluebook 2022: Japanese diplomacy and international situation in 2021* (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022), https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2022/pdf/en_index.html, pp. 15, 42.

[66] For example, Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Prime Minister's keynote address'; Ian Hall, 'India and a regional rules-based order: equity and inclusion', *Security Challenges* 16: 3, 2020, pp. 27–31, https://regionalsecurity.org.au/security_challenge/india-and-a-regional-rules-based-order-equity-and-inclusion/; scholars and pundits have likewise located the principal threat to the rules-based order in China, see Fareed Zakaria, 'The new China scare: why America shouldn't panic about its latest challenger', *Foreign Affairs* 99: 1 2020, pp. 52–69 at pp. 53–4; Cimmino and Kroenig, *Strategic context*.

[67] UK Cabinet Office, *Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy* (London: Cabinet Office, 2021), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy; US Department of Defense, *2022 national defense strategy of the United States of America, including the 2022 nuclear posture review and the 2022 missile defense review* (Washington DC, White House, 2022), https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-national-defense-strategy-npr-mdr.pdf; The White House, 'Remarks by

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Beijing seem to have added a sense of urgency to defending the existing western-centric international system from these two apparent enemies-in-chief.[68] This has prompted recommitment to a shared purpose, giving a new lease of life to existing military alliances within the system, such as NATO.

Importantly, despite the tendency to vilify China and Russia, the narrative of the RBO rarely identifies specific instances in which *rules* and behavioural norms are broken. Antagonism is instead created by diagnosing a deviant relationship to *order* and the attribution of intentionality to violate the rules-based system, which is how RBO proponents often represent China and Russia. Because the RBO story is organized less around which actors and actions precisely underwrite and codify the system of allegiance, and relies more on ambiguous understandings of that order, it enables broad and flexible adaptation for different audiences. Narrators of the RBO can head off accusations of rule-breaking and hypocrisy by framing themselves as those defenders and even creators of international order. This is how US and Australian leaders could claim 'to affirm an international order and rules of the road' while engaging in controversial military operations in 'key hotspots … including Afghanistan and Iraq',[69] which were widely criticized by the very institutions on which the foundations of the RBO are claimed to rest. Narrative flexibility underpinning the logic of the RBO storyline also allows space for internal critique by supporters. In 2019, for example, India's Minister of External Affairs explained that, while he was supportive of a more rules-based world, 'when people start pressing you in the name of a rules-based order to give up, to compromise on, what are very deep interests … I'm afraid it's important to contest that'.[70]

The Janus-faced representation of belonging and exclusion is not without contestation. Criticism of the RBO, as has long been the case with the LIO, is generally articulated in the context of questions such as: 1) Whose rules rule?; 2) What are the precise nature, definition and scope of the rules?; 3) How do states and other political actors consent to the rules?; and 4) What are the appropriate sanctions and enforcement mechanisms for rule-violations? Privileging the terminology of the RBO over that of the LIO may serve to obscure the fact that its key advocates are not party to many of the international legal agreements that govern the use of force. As the Chinese mission to the EU pointed out, there is no article in the UN charter that defines the RBO as integral to its framework, proclaiming: 'The so-called "rules-based international order" … reflects no more than a logic of gangsters that whatever evil they do, others must not fight back.'[71]

President Biden on the united efforts of the free world to support the people of Ukraine', Warsaw, Poland, 26 March 2022, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine; Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Diplomatic bluebook 2022', p. 6.

[68] For example, European Commission, 'Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2022', Brussels, 12 Oct. 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_6133.

[69] The American Presidency Project, 'Remarks prior to a meeting with Prime Minister Malcolm B. Turnbull of Australia', speech by President Barack Obama, 19 Jan. 2016, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/313407.

[70] S. Jaishankar, cited in Roger Cohen, 'Russia's war could make it India's world', *New York Times*, 31 Dec. 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/31/world/asia/india-ukraine-russia.html.

[71] Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, 'Spokesperson of Chinese Mission to the EU speaks on a question concerning the statement on Taiwan by G7 foreign ministers and the EU high

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Those who contest the RBO's legitimacy suggest that privileging the notion of an RBO over the UN system is detrimental to the latter and threatens to undermine and weaken international legal frameworks in a way that favours the US and its allies. A joint declaration between China and Russia—who both hold veto power in the UN Security Council—has maintained that they are committed to the principles of international law, especially the UN Charter, which they describe as 'the cornerstone for just and equitable international relations featuring win-win cooperation, creating a community of shared future for mankind, and establishing common space of equal and indivisible security and economic cooperation.'[72] While containing core principles associated with the RBO, such as sovereignty and conflict resolution in accordance with international law, their declaration criticizes double standards and omits references to a rules-based international order itself. At the same time, Beijing and Moscow push the notion of a prevailing Cold War 'zero-sum mentality' in the West to deconstruct presumptions of a benevolent RBO.[73] While such converging counter-hegemonic discourses feed the impression of a new authoritarian frontier aimed at reshaping international order, it is important to note that they are also directed at domestic audiences and far from monolithic.[74] Seemingly all-encompassing metanarratives about the dangers posed by counter-hegemonic actions are ingrained, even if they are highly problematic.[75]

We argue that the RBO is a script that reflects and enacts a particular vision of the world and entwines the present of international relations with established representations of good and bad in global affairs. It is an organizing idea that transmits implicitly or explicitly accepted knowledge of events and actions on the one hand, and protagonists and antagonists on the other. Both rhetorical contestation and affirmation of the RBO work to (re)create it as a discursive and cognitive reference point to make sense of international dynamics and allegiances, conveying dominant understandings of how states should act and creating expectations of how states will act.

Rhetorical acceptance of the RBO as the legitimate system of international organization signals identification with that order and characterizes morally acceptable actors and actions, which helps to reduce uncertainty about intentions

representative', 4 Aug. 2022, http://eu.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/fyrjh/202208/t20220805_10734918.htm.

[72] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'The declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the promotion of international law', 26 June 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201608/t20160801_679466.html.

[73] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'A global community of shared future: China's proposals and actions', 26 Sept. 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202309/t20230926_11150122.html.

[74] Chang Zhang, *A comparative study of the communication strategies of Chinese and Russian English language international broadcasting*, PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2021, http://webcat.warwick.ac.uk/record=b3715292; also Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, 'China's "new type of Great Power relations": a G2 with Chinese characteristics?', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 773–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12656.

[75] Chengxin Pan, 'The "China threat" in American self-imagination: the discursive construction of other as power politics', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29: 3, 2004, pp. 305–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540402900304; Oliver Turner, '"Threatening" China and US security: the international politics of identity', *Review of International Studies* 39: 4, 2013 pp. 903–24, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210512000599; Oliver Turner and Nicola Nymalm, 'Morality and progress: IR narratives on international revisionism and the status quo', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 4, 2019, pp. 407–28 at p. 410, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623173.

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and behaviour for those who belong to this narrative alliance. Narrative contestations of how and why the international arena should be structured differently also unite disparate critiques against the prevailing order under the RBO discursive umbrella. The status quo of international order is thereby upheld via stories of the RBO that both support and reject it as the prevailing form of international organization. It is authored by those who use the RBO narrative in support of a western-centric international order that espouses liberal values—as an adaptation of the LIO to contemporary challenges and critiques—and by those actors and coalitions engaged in counter-hegemonic discourses against the universality of western norms and behaviours that leave the RBO frame intact.

Rallying behind the RBO in general, and its vulnerability in particular, allows states participating in the narrative alliance to pursue collective and individual action by referencing a shared vision of what the world is and what it ought to be. While the setting of the story is global, it is discursively anchored to the western-led system of multilateral institutions and organizations established after 1945. As a narrative (de)legitimation device, the RBO thus offers a 'geopolitical gaze' that effectively 'triangulates the world political map from a Western imperial vantage point [and] measures it using Western conceptual systems of identity/difference'.[76]

Narrative alliances as international ordering practices

Following our explication of RBO narration, we conceive of narrative alliances as collective storylines that allow identification through differentiation. They function as a narrative system of allegiance directed against those actors and actions regarded as threatening both the in-group and the type of international order its members advocate and support. Conceptualized in this way, a narrative alliance shares one of the key elements that traditional definitions feature as a necessary condition for systems of allegiance and coordination to qualify as an alliance: international cooperation emerging from states' perceptions of threat.[77]

Applying the terminology of alliances to the narrative dimension of international order may seem to overstretch an already contested concept.[78] We see it, instead, as an important step away from debates over the essential ingredients of alliances towards understanding international ordering practices as intimately linked to discourse. Narratives are integral to collective behaviour, including the creation of formal security partnerships and systems of international organization more broadly, as well as the behavioural norms that underwrite them.[79] Narra-

[76] Gerard Toal (Gearóid Ó Tuathail), *Critical geopolitics: the politics of writing global space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 41.

[77] For a review of the international alliance literature see Patricia A. Weitsman, 'Alliances and war', in *Oxford research encyclopedia of international studies,* 30 Nov. 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.118; for realist IR traditions, which conceive alliances as military–security relationships to achieve favourable balances of international power, see Stephen M. Walt, *The origins of alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[78] As acknowledged by alliance scholars, alliances come in formal and informal arrangements. See Weitsman, 'Alliances and war'.

[79] Bliuc and Chidley, 'From cooperation to conflict'.

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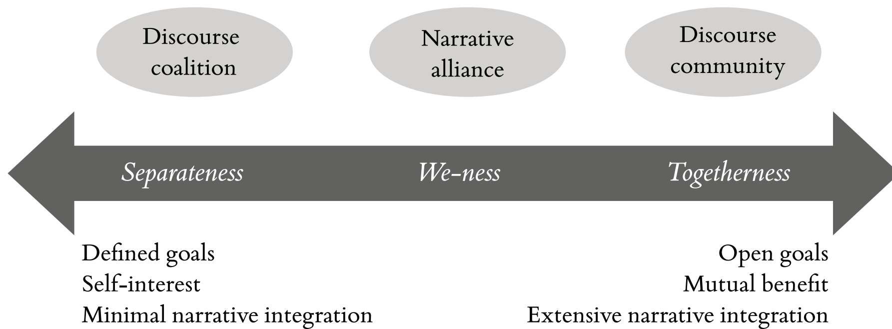
tive alliances are not the only form of international discursive ordering practice, however. Based on the strength of rhetorical alignment, narrative alliances can be located on a spectrum between a discourse coalition at one end and a discourse community at the other, as the two other primary types of international discursive coordination (see figure 1).

Figure 1: A spectrum of international discursive coordination



An ideal-type discourse coalition is comparatively short-lived and oriented towards the achievement of a defined goal that is narrow in scope. It is a form of discursive coordination that is 'for something', with an emphasis on taking mutually beneficial action, where considerations of ideology, norms and values play a limited role. A key marker is 'separateness', in the sense that socialization and perceptions of community are absent and unilateral action outside the remit of the coalition's purpose is acceptable. Through the lens of narrative, a discourse coalition uses a particular 'ensemble of a set of story lines'[80] by participating political actors to mobilize support for specific goals, 'all organized around a discourse', while openly maintaining a sense of 'me-ness'.

An ideal-type discourse community goes beyond allying behind a common cause. It is durable and broad in scope, and may have the building of community as an aim rather than merely a means to a separate goal. There is a communality of public interest, with participants' individual concerns being downgraded in favour of broader commitments, and unilateral action is not generally acceptable. A key marker is 'togetherness', with discourse essential to creating, maintaining and expanding a sense of community between participants. Considered through the lens of narrative, a discourse community is characterized by a dynamic towards increasingly shared patterns of communication, terminology and storytelling, even if participants' languages differ.[81] It is a form of discursive coordination

[80] Maarten A. Hajer, 'Discourse coalitions and the institutionalization of practice: the case of acid rain in Great Britain', in Frank Fischer and John Forester, eds, *The argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 43–76 at p. 47.

[81] John Swales, 'Discourse communities, genres and English as an international language', *World Englishes* 7: 2, 1988, pp. 211–20 at p. 212, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.1988.tb00232.x.

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that builds upon and expands considerations of ideology, norms and values, and embodies a high degree of narrative integration, interaction and interdependence.

We conceptualize an ideal-type narrative alliance as a form of discourse organization that recognizes commitment and supports participants' mutual interests and benefits. In contrast to a discourse community, which establishes meaning from within, it has a clear goal-orientation that is directed *against* political actors and forms of conduct that are considered to be situated outside its boundaries, with an emphasis on avoidance of undesired transformations of the status quo. At the same time, it draws attention to communalities of ideology, norms and values among participants. A narrative alliance is always *relational* in that it is unequivocally exclusionary towards an out-group (*you-ness*) while concurrently nurturing a sense of shared identity (*we-ness*) that veils differences between participants. Despite an emphasis on 'singing from the same song sheet', unilateral action outside the narrative alliance framework remains acceptable. Through the lens of narrative, this form of discursive coordination evolves around stories that are both temporally organized across sequential timelines[82] and purposefully selective, 'omitting certain parts while emphasizing others'.[83] A narrative alliance gives sense to the international environment by retelling history and events through subjective representation of what is right and wrong from the perspective of alliance participants. This exposes narrators' conceptions of Self and Other and curtails alternative imaginations of order.

We define the membership of a narrative alliance as a group of actors—including but not limited to states, institutions and individuals—who formulate and promote shared understandings of the international security environment as well as friends and foes that populate it. Whereas our discussion centres on states as narrating agents, the concept of narrative alliances explicitly recognizes that meaning is produced across a storytelling spectrum, permeating wider political circles and the everyday. Like their nation-state counterparts, political actors—ranging from international organizations and domestic political institutions to the media, experts and 'ordinary' members of the public—represent international security through 'drama, plot, explanation, and selective appropriation'.[84] Expressing allegiance with the protagonist of the story and distance from its villain(s) in international affairs is not the preserve of states.[85] Indeed, authorship does not reside with individual speakers even if specific political actors are instrumental in the formation and propagation of narrative alliances. Instead, they are constructed and pushed through '"webs" of narrativity'.[86] As we have shown, narrative alliances are unconstrained by geography because the stories that form

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[82] Andrew R. Hom, *International relations and the problem of time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Alexandra Homolar, 'A call to arms: hero–villain narratives in US security discourse', *Security Dialogue* 53: 4, 2022, pp. 324–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106211005897.

[83] Turner and Nymalm, 'Morality and progress'.

[84] Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson, 'Reclaiming the epistemological other: narrative and the social constitution of identity', in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Social theory and the politics of identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 37–99 at p. 61.

[85] Homolar, 'A call to arms'.

[86] Turner and Nymalm, 'Morality and progress', p. 410.

their core can be formulated, disseminated and adapted with a high degree of flexibility. This is possible if and when key organizing ideas function as floating (or empty) signifiers, thus evading the (re)creation of unitary meaning. The stories that underwrite a narrative alliance gain acceptance and traction precisely because they mask potential tensions and contradictions of 'deeply institutionalized master narratives'.[87]

Despite their flexibility and geographical spread, narrative alliances are often comprised of participants with unequal membership cards. As we showed above, some play a key role in the development and dissemination of the substantive storylines and may narrate themselves into leadership positions. Others occupy more peripheral roles, especially when situated outside the narrative alliance's origin story. Such 'associate members' tend to represent a less fully fledged version of how core participants give meaning to the international security environment, endorsing only its central ideas by reciting well-established messages or slogans to signal commitment and belonging. Even as 'lesser' members they affirm the validity of the narrative alliance and disseminate its foundational security stories, thereby helping to legitimate this particular form of hegemony as universally applicable. Being adaptable to different interests, local political myths and varying degrees of support should be understood as a source of alliance strength rather than a sign of weakness, because it minimizes the risk of widespread contestation and exclusion and maximizes the take-up of its core logic.[88] For a narrative alliance to emerge and persist, it requires leaders and followers just like other forms of international organization.[89]

Scholars relying on traditional conceptions of security might argue that orthodox security allegiances and discursive coordination efforts occupy different categories of meaning, rendering the term 'alliance' in the case of narratives inappropriate. We propose, in contrast, that collective social practices of meaning-making constitute an important form of international organization in their own right, *whether or not* more institutionalized arrangements emerge later. Our argument is not that collective stories of allegiance, such as those centred around the RBO, necessarily offer direct or intended routes to materially organized alliance structures. Rather, we contend that narrative alliances should be understood as international ordering practices that sit ontologically prior to collaborations captured in mainstream debates on military alliances and security communities. However, because narrative alliances allow participants to manage expectations about norms, interests and behaviour, they can perform security functions long associated with codified security pacts and less formal systems of allegiance.

As we have demonstrated through the example of the narrative alliance around the concept of the RBO, states give meaning to the security environment by narra-

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[87] Hagström and Gustafsson, 'Narrative power', p. 392.

[88] Oliver Schmitt, 'When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives', *Contemporary Security Policy* 39: 4, 2018, pp. 487–511 at p. 492, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925.

[89] Alexandra Homolar, 'Multilateralism in crisis? The character of US international engagement under Obama', *Global Society* 26: 1, 2012, pp. 103–122, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2011.629991.

tively constructing a system of international organization, its origin story and their relational positions, discursively anchoring the legitimation of actions and policies within it. In contrast to traditional conceptions of security alliances, the framing states use to associate themselves with the RBO is its foundational element rather than a by-product and serves as a prerequisite for action. As an international ordering practice, the RBO narrative alliance shapes norms, behaviour and identity at the individual and collective levels. It serves to define and position individual actors—in our case primarily states—within a broader socio-historical context, which includes emphasizing how the in-group is positively distinct from, and superior to, those who do not belong.[90] Sharing and developing the story of the RBO therefore allows states to create a sense of community, with firm boundaries of belonging and exclusion based on rhetorically accepted codes of conduct.

Conclusion

The importance of a unifying story for the maintenance of formal security alliances is uncontroversial.[91] We have made the case for shifting our understanding of security allegiances further beyond material forms of security cooperation and coordination to argue that discursive alignment around imaginaries of belonging and exclusion in the international arena is not merely a by-product of materially driven strategic alliances. Internationally shared security stories of mutual interests and benefits that draw firm boundaries of exclusion help political actors to persuade (potential) participants and wider audiences to see international order through the prism of belonging, which signals, advocates and validates choosing the 'right' side. Discursive coordination exists in the absence of formalized mutual security agreements, serving to aggregate power and influence in the name of securing against perceived threats.

A narrative alliance organized around the notion of the RBO has provided a lifeline for some of the heavily criticized institutions, rules and norms associated with the postwar international order, and arguably supplanted the earlier framing of the LIO. While it may intuitively appear 'thinner' than the forms of allegiance conceptualized within existing IR scholarship, as a narrative system of meaning-making the RBO manages expectations about behaviour, interests and values like its traditional counterparts. It also serves as a discursive device to (re)produce mutual understandings of which actors and actions pose a threat to member states and what should be done to protect the order and its participants. The RBO story is a call to arms to defend the status quo of international organization, while the departure from the LIO terminology rhetorically sweeps some of its western-centric baggage under the rug.

Our analysis suggests that some of the most significant implications of a narrative alliance centred around the idea of a RBO include the following:

90 Bliuc and Chidley, 'From cooperation to conflict', p. 3.
91 Michael C. Williams and Iver B. Neumann, 'From alliance to security community: NATO, Russia, and the power of identity', *Millennium* 29: 2, 2000, pp. 357–87 at p. 386, https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290020801.

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1. Broad-based affirmations of support for the RBO often obscure divergent policy objectives in localized political contexts. We have noted, for example, how Indian and Japanese policy-makers endorse the core of the RBO storyline, but critique and modify certain elements in the service of national interests. Beneath the surface, stories of international order are constantly (re)negotiated, which creates tensions and opportunities for domestic political actors who seek to tailor the meaning of the RBO to suit parochial agendas.

2. Competing objectives in expressing allegiance mean that support for the RBO may be weaker than it first appears and not simply because of explicit challengers to its legitimacy. While leading actors of the RBO narrative alliance may perceive broad-based backing, there is an ongoing need to pay attention to subtle divergences of language among members as much as to counter-hegemonic contestations, because they can point to the emergence of preferences at odds with the type of international order they seek to build and maintain.

3. Equally, the discursive foundations of international order are deeper and more durable than they may appear given the significant variation in terminology. Through webs of inter-narrativity, the contemporary concept of the RBO has been crafted onto earlier myth-making processes that valorized the emergence of a new postwar ('liberal') order after 1945. Because narratives always ebb and flow, the RBO story is as susceptible to future discursive evolutions as it is to disbandment, but its core element of dividing the world into those who belong to the community of righteous actors and those situated outside is likely to persist and form the basis of a new narrative alliance.

4. Narrative alliances are consequential elements of global affairs. Perceived violations of the RBO may reinforce a sense of shared purpose and in-group solidarity among its supporters. This can result in rhetorical condemnation and serve as a political pretext for sanctions, defensive military intervention or even offensive engagement. Far from conceptual curiosities at the periphery of international order, narrative alliances must thus be understood as integral to dynamics traditionally placed at the core of international security.

Narratives such as the metastory of the RBO are relevant to collective action because they contain norms- and values-based prescriptions about how to address deviance from accepted codes of conduct. Despite widespread ambiguity and variation over membership, the most central element of the RBO narrative alliance is the establishment of a unifying 'we' in opposition to a threatening 'you', which shapes how international order is imagined, framed and acted upon. The presence of a threatening Other is a necessary condition for a narrative alliance to emerge—just as it is for more traditional understandings of security alliances.

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