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**Resilience, ontological security, and the liberal international order:**

**Why crisis doesn’t always lead to change**

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Ontological security, order, change, narrative, multilateralism

Abstract:

The liberal international order is widely believed to be resilient because it has always had a remarkable ability to adapt in response to crisis and adversity. Today, the liberal order is clearly in crisis, and yet decisive action to adapt it is not taking place. Using insights from the resilience-thinking literature supplemented with insights from ontological security, the article seeks to understand why agents often fail to take decisive adaptive action, even when such action is clearly needed. The article develops a conceptual framework, including agent-level theorizing to better understand agent motivation for undertaking adaptive action and a conception of the social site for resilience as an ideal-type social domain in which resilience is constituted and defined in the
interaction between patterns of power, principles, and practice. The article contributes to resilience-thinking by demonstrating a plausible link between agents’ ability to invoke their agency and their ontological security.

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Trine Flockhart

In recent years, the term resilience has spread like wildfire within the social sciences having migrated from the original resilience literature in ecology and engineering, which sees resilience as the “ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships” (Holling, 1973, p. 14), to a growing “resilience-thinking” literature in International Relations, which sees resilience as being about sensitivity to emergent change and agent-based feedback processes to trigger appropriate reaction to change before it causes a disconnect between the purpose and function of the entity in question (Chandler, 2014, p. 52; 2019). Both positions see resilience as an entity’s ability to remain “fit for purpose,” but where the former primarily focus on structural conditions such as critical infra-structure, resilience-thinking is more “people-based” and focuses on resilience as an analytic of governance (Korosteleva, 2018; Chandler, 2014). The two positions are complementary and equally important, but in this article, the focus is on the people-based dimension of resilience, with emphasis on the (self)-governance strategies that are necessary to continuously cope with, and adapt to change to overcome adversities (Schmidt, 2015, p. 406). The article therefore starts from the premise that resilience is about the ability to reflectively govern in response to the inevitability of change to remain fit for purpose (Chandler, 2014, p. 52; 2019),
which would imply that resilience relies on processes that facilitate qualities such as “reflexivity” and “adaptability” in response to a changing environment.

I analyze the crisis in the liberal international order from an adapted resilience-thinking perspective. I do so because the use of the term resilience is frequently invoked in the debate about the crisis of the liberal international order, although it is by no means clear what it means for the liberal order to be resilient or who is responsible for the governance strategies to cope with, and adapt to change to overcome the many adversities facing the order today. The new doubt about the resilience of the liberal international order is puzzling because the liberal international order was for long believed to be resilient (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2018) because it has global appeal, deeply embedded practices (Adler, 2013), and because over the past two centuries it has displayed a remarkable ability to adapt and reform in response to crisis and adversity (Dunne & Flockhart, 2013).

However, there is now a growing concern that the liberal international order is in crisis and its resilience is in doubt (Jervis et al., 2018; Acharya, 2018). This impression was cemented when Foreign Affairs in 2017 ran a special section with the title "Out of Order?" and later the anthology “What was the Liberal Order? The World We May Be Losing,” closely resembling an obituary. Today, the situation is that even those who have been the staunchest supporters of the liberal international order acknowledge that the order is in a crisis of transition (Ikenberry, 2018) and pronouncements of liberal order’s passing are now commonplace (Haas, 2018; Kim, 2018). There is however no agreement on where the crisis might lead with some believing that the current crisis will lead to a new, more resilient liberal order (Tocci, 2019), whilst more critical voices doubt its future prospects and even challenge the established narrative about the liberal international order as
an example of successful global ordering (Porter, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Glaser, 2019; Sakwa, 2017).

Although the crisis in the liberal international order currently is one of the most debated issues, and the literature clearly displays a significant degree of reflexivity (Ikenberry, Parma & Stokes, 2018; Alcaro, 2018; Peterson, 2018; Duncombe & Dunne, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Glaser, 2019), the high degree of reflexivity has not (yet) given rise to much discernible adaptive action to ensure that the order remains fit for purpose. This raises the theoretical questions of what conditions determine when agents (such as “real people,” states, and international organizations) invoke their agency to undertake the self-governing processes required for an entity to remain resilient? Or how do we know when an entity is fit for purpose and, perhaps most importantly, why do agents sometimes not undertake the necessary adaptive action, even when it is abundantly clear that the entity cannot remain fit for purpose unless adaptive action is taken? The question is closely related to institutionalists’ concept “sticky institutions” (Hale et. al., 2013; Boettke et.al., 2008) but where stickiness is a positive feature in institutionalist theory because it brings stability, predictability and longevity, in resilience-thinking such stickiness becomes a problem as institutions that fail to adapt, will cease to be “fit for purpose” and will eventually collapse and die (Debre & Dijkstra, 2019; Grey, 2018) The empirical question addressed in this article asks, how resilience in the liberal international order is challenged and why the crisis appears not to have triggered the agent-based feedback processes (cf. Chandler 2014, p. 52). To answer these questions, it is first necessary to venture into a conceptual discussion about how and where resilience is constituted and what the pre-conditions for triggering the constitutive agent-level processes might be.
The article proceeds in four steps. It starts by taking a closer look at the agent-led self-governing processes and the question of why the adaptive agent-led processes specified by resilience-thinking only sometimes are invoked. I draw on the literature on ontological security, focusing on the link between ontological security and the ability of agents to invoke their agency to take reflective action. In the second section, the article turns to the question of where resilience is constituted by developing an ideal-type social domain consisting of three constitutive elements--power, principles, and practice--which together define the overall purpose of the social domain. The use of an ideal-type with three constitutive elements allows for zooming in on precisely where the resilience of the social domain is challenged, but all three are interconnected in complex ways. In the third section, the article returns to the empirical question outlined above by applying the conceptual findings to the current crisis in the liberal international order. In doing so the article demonstrates that the resilience of the liberal international order is currently challenged in all three constitutive elements in three distinct but interconnected crises. Finally, in the fourth section, the article briefly investigates how the crisis in the liberal order appears to influence the ontological security of agents of relevance to the liberal international order.

Theoretically the article finds that resilience as the capacity to continuously cope with, and adapt to change to overcome adversities in order to remain fit for purpose is dependent on agents having a sufficient level of ontological security to be able to invoke their agency when needed; and empirically that at present the liberal international order seems to lack resilience in all of its constitutive elements and that those agents that are supposed to act on its behalf lack the necessary ontological security to be able to take urgently needed adaptive action in response to a fundamentally altered environment both internally and externally.
**Resilience-thinking, “real people,” and ontological security**

One of the main contributions of resilience-thinking is that it considers resilience to be dependent on the capacity of agents to learn by combining experience and knowledge, and if necessary, to adjust their responses to changing external drivers and internal processes (Folke et al., 2010). In this way resilience-thinking is intrinsically linked with issues of agency and governance within the constantly changing environment that characterizes the modern world. Yet, despite its emphasis on agency, resilience-thinking lacks a theory of the agent, and can therefore not fully account for which qualities enable the agents in the self-governing processes to engage in reflection and to undertake the action that is needed to remain fit for purpose. To furnish resilience-thinking with an agent-level theory, I turn to the literature on ontological security and its insights into the conditions associated with agents’ capacity for utilizing their agency. The literature on ontological security may be able to explain why adaptive behavior sometimes does not take place, even when agents are fully aware that failure to undertake adaptive action will have detrimental effects on resilience. This is an important move because it suggests that ontological security may be a precondition for the self-governing behavior specified as essential in the resilience-thinking literature.

The ontological security literature has over the past decade moved from a niche literature within international relations to an approach that aims to enhance our understanding of the emotional underpinnings of agents’ motivation for action and their experience of the world they live in (Kinnvall et.al., 2019, p. 249). Ontological security can be understood as “the security of the self,” which is a condition that all human beings strive to maintain (Mitzen, 2006, p. 341). To be ontologically secure means having a stable identity supported by a narrative that imbues the individual with biographical continuity and a sense of order in relationships and experiences. Without such a sense of order and biographical continuity, individuals will become overwhelmed.
by anxiety and will be unable to undertake reflective action outside of ingrained habits and basic needs for survival. As explained by Giddens (1991), the maintaining of habits and routines is a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties (p. 39), which however only begs the question of how then people can ever cope with transitions, crises and circumstances of high risk (p. 38). From an ontological security perspective, the answer must be found at the emotional level, as people need to develop a sense of “basic trust” and a feeling of “unreality” that allows the person to not dwell too deeply on all the many dreadful things that could happen. Ontologically secure people develop such a sense of unreality, which despite being a false sense of security, nevertheless acts as a protective cocoon, that allows them to get on with the affairs of living and to be able to meet life’s many twists and turns.

The literature on ontological security shows a quite conclusive link between people’s ontological security and their ability–even willingness–to invoke their agency. The psychiatrist R. D. Laing (1990/1969), who developed the concept in the 1950s, described an ontologically secure person as “an individual that can be said to have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person” (p. 39). Individuals without ontological security are likely to be overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of individuals' coherent sense of “being in the world” (Giddens, 1991, p. 37) causing individuals to be “preoccupied with preserving [themselves]” (Laing, 1990/1969, p. 44) and so be unlikely to undertake any form of action outside the narrow confines of simply preserving their own “beings.” This is unlike ontologically secure persons, who can take the “knocks and bumps” of normal life, by quickly re-establishing “basic trust” and the belief that “things will be ok” (Giddens, 1991, pp. 39–41). Human beings therefore always aim at having a sufficient level of ontological security by maintaining cognitive consistency through established practice and by striving toward having a stable identity supported by a narrative
that maintains their biographical continuity (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). However, persistent crisis, or disruptive events that undermine the biographical continuity or cognitive consistency will eventually produce a sense of anxiety and insecurity about the future—even without physically threatening the lives of the agents in question (Kinnvall et. al., 2019, p. 249).

Ontological insecurity is often produced by a misalignment between the individual’s sense of order expressed through norms and values and the actual behavior performed through practice and action. When such a misalignment occurs, the individual will have to spend time and effort to re-establish the required alignment that maintains the sense of “basic trust” and “unreality” (Flockhart, 2016a). Arguably all human beings engage in processes of “ontological security seeking,” which take place through two strategies: a “strategy of being” focused on securing a stable identity and biographical continuity through the construction of a "strong narrative"; and a “strategy of doing” focused on the seemingly paradoxical relationship between on the one hand, seeking to uphold a stable cognitive environment through routinized practice whilst at the same time allowing space for undertaking the reflective adaptive action specified by resilience-thinking. Alignment between identity and narrative is ensured through a process, which Ciutâ (2002) has called the “identity-narrative shuttle,” in which agents continuously adjust the narrative to incorporate all externally and internally derived changes and their impact on identity and practice. Any disconnect between identity, narrative, and practice that cannot be “fixed” through adjustments on the “narrative-identity shuttle,” will result in a reduction in the level of ontological security, and trigger time-consuming, and inward-looking processes to find ways to re-establish a stable identity, supported by a revised narrative that can be reinforced by adapted appropriate practices. In cases where no adaptation is undertaken, the result is a downward spiral of growing misalignment between identity, narrative and practice. During the ontological security seeking process, the “bandwidth” available for strategically adapting to a
changed environment, simply is not available and agents will have diminished motivation, and a pernicious incapacity, for taking the required adaptive action (Flockhart, 2016a). From this it seems that ontological security is a pre-condition for resilience.

The ideal-type social domain as the site of resilience

If resilience is constituted by agents performing self-governing action to adapt to a changing environment, these are essentially social processes that necessarily must be located within some form of social structure. However, just like resilience-thinking does not specify an agent-level theory, neither does it specify its understanding of the structural features of the social environment within which the agent-level processes take place. Yet, it is necessary to have a basic characterization of social structure that can be applied to the wide variety of social settings within which resilience is constituted. To overcome the problems associated with the variety of social structures, I conceptualize the site of the agent-level processes as an ideal-type social domain in which agents undertake self-governing reflexive and adaptive action to ensure that the social domain stays fit for purpose.

The use of ideal-types is particularly suitable because the social domains that are of relevance in International Relations are often what Searle (1985) called “social facts”—that is social entities that have little presence in material form, but which primarily exist through common agreement and which are visible mainly through the social practices that are performed by “real people” acting within, and on behalf of, the social domain. International organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), states, and international orders are examples of social facts. Ideal-types can add substance to these forms of social facts and provide a unified analytical construct or, as Max Weber called it, a Gedankenbild (Swedberg, 1999, p. 248). A Gedankenbild allows the
researcher to impose a semblance of similarity despite a high degree of variety and to think more clearly about aspects of the real world that are often too complex and interwoven with other secondary issues to allow for clarity. In this article I use a Gedankenbild to think conceptually about where the agent processes outlined above take place and what it means to be “fit for purpose.”

I draw on Weber’s ideal-type method to conceptualize social structure as any kind of social domain that is characterized by inter-related elements that influence both the functioning of the domain as a whole and the activities of its individual members. I argue that all social domains, despite their great variety, consist of three interrelated constitutive elements: 1) patterns of power which define the identity of the social domain and its internal hierarchies, status, roles and material privileges (Merton, 1949/1968); 2) patterns of principles consisting of a complex web of principles, norms, rules and values, which together define what counts as appropriate behavior and what might be described as the vision for the “good life” and; 3) patterns of practice consisting of institutionalized and habitual forms of behavior which serve to externalize and reify the patterns of power and principles (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; March & Olsen, 1989) and which should always contribute towards the (eventual) achievement of the vision for the “good life.” I summarize the three constitutive elements of the ideal-type social domain as “the three Ps”--power, principles, and practice--and I conceptualize “fit for purpose” as coherence between the three elements and their suitability for enabling agents acting within and on behalf of the social domain to work towards the future achievement of the social domain’s vision for the “good life.” The three elements are outlined in more detail below.

The power element
A social domain is partly characterized by the type of authority and hierarchy present in the domain, especially whether the domain is characterized by imposition of power or consent to it (Sørensen, 2011) and how the position of individual members in the hierarchy of the domain shape actors and their behavior (Zarakol, 2017, p. 10). In consent-based domains it is important that a high level of trust in those wielding power is maintained and that the power arrangements are seen to be legitimate and in the interest of other members of the domain. In imposition-based domains, the ability to control the other members of the domain and to maintain its stability is important. However, the power element is not just about power understood as the ability to influence or control the conduct of others but is also associated with how knowledge within the domain is constituted and who gets to define important, but unquestioned elements of a society. In this way the power element links to the other constitutive elements by influencing the overall identity of the social domain, its normative foundations and sense of purpose and commonsense expressed in its vision for the “good life” and what is regarded as appropriate action.

Changes in the power patterns of a social domain must always be taken very seriously because shifting power patterns are likely to have a significant impact on the identity of the social domain and as a result also on the agents acting within and on behalf of the domain. As outlined in the previous section, a stable identity expressed in a sense-making narrative that ensures biographical continuity is of great importance for maintaining agents’ ontological security. Changes in a social domain’s identity that cannot be incorporated into a sense-making narrative is likely to be deeply unsettling and thus to have a significant impact on the cognitive consistency of agents within the domain whilst requiring significant adaptive action to maintain coherence between the constitutive elements of the social domain. Consequently, changes in the power element of a social domain are
likely to have a major impact on the ontological security of its members and on the resilience of the domain.

The principles element

All social domains are characterized by domain-specific normative patterns consisting of a myriad of formal and informal rules, norms and values that together express—sometimes implicitly—the main purpose (goals) of the social domain. Although, the principles element of social domains is not easy to summarize, it is possible to make a distinction between two kinds of universal goals and values: those that are of an existential nature and those that are related to the quality of one’s existence and which include all those aspects of life that makes life worth living. Aristotle referred to the latter as “goods of the soul” such as love, friendship, fairness, self-esteem, honor, morality, and justice (Cooper, 1985). Bull (1977/1995) speaks mostly of the former “the fundamental goals of social life,” which he identified as the need to secure “life, truth and property,” meaning that members of a social domain would have a reasonable expectation of security against violence, a shared acceptance of the sanctity of promises and a reasonable expectation of the stability of the possession of property (Bull, 1977/1995, p. 4). These goals are fundamental because without them one cannot speak of a social domain. It goes without saying that a minimum requirement for resilience is the need to always be able to ensure the fulfillment of the fundamental goals of social life. However, the purpose of a social domain is of course more than just to continue to exist. Bull recognizes this as he also speaks of other more culturally specific goals and values which he saw as the “glue” that holds a society together (Bull, 1977/1995, p.6) which express the domain’s vision for the future and its shared ideas about “the good life” (Williams, 2011, p. 1237). In this respect the notion of “fit for purpose” takes on a different meaning, because just like all societies have to fulfill the fundamental goals of social life, they also have to be able to maintain a belief in the possible
realization of a greater purpose of life—that which is beyond mere existence and which makes life worth living. Realistically, the achievement of the “good life” may be a very long way off, and in some cultural and religious contexts, may not even be achievable in this life. However, no social domain can claim to be resilient unless it is able to sustain the main functions of the domain in such a way that the realization of the “good life” is believed to be a feasible outcome.

The extent to which the agents of the social domain behave in accordance with the “principles element” will depend on the social cohesion of the domain and the salience of the shared conception of the “good life.” Although all social domains at times will experience some degree of internal and external contestation against the established conception of the “good life, consistently high levels, or sudden peaks of contestation are warning signs to be taken seriously as a shared conception of the “good life” is what sustains the social domain. Moreover, for ontological security to be maintained, there must be a widespread belief that the achievement of the “good life” is neither severely, nor permanently, compromised and the shared conception of the “good life” must be in line with the domain’s identity and power patterns and must also be possible to be articulated in a strong narrative and to be reinforced through practice that shows a high degree of active convergence around the domain’s vision, values, norms, and rules.

**The practice element**

The practice element has received most attention in resilience-thinking because this is where the self-governing agent processes are most easily observed. Practice in social domains is essentially about institutions because the assemblage of norms, rules, visions and values of the social domain’s “principles element” are expressed and performed through either formal or informal institutions. Institutions are here broadly conceptualized as “stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior” that
persist beyond the tenure of individuals occupying roles within the social domain (Fukuyama, 2015, p. 6). Paradoxically, institutionalized practices are both a source of the domain’s stability, or stickiness, through the embeddedness and often habitual and taken-for-granted nature and therefore provide a feeling of cognitive consistency, but they are also the main source of change, as adaptation can only be realized through altered practice. Buzan’s (2004) concept primary and secondary institutions is useful here because it allows for a distinction between on the one hand, the many durable and recognized patterns of shared practices that have gradually evolved from behavior anchored in the values, norms, principles and rules of the domain, and on the other hand, the increasing level of “constitutionalism” in modern societies, in the form of designed bureaucratic structures for managing relations and for providing an organizational setting for meeting common challenges and providing public goods (Buzan, 2004, p. 167).

“Primary” and “secondary” institutions serve a dual function of reinforcing the identity and power patterns of the social domain through a performative expression of the norms, values and the vision of the “good life,” and for providing services necessary for fulfilling the functional objectives of the domain. The practice element can be assessed in terms of the stickiness of established practice associated with a wide array of institutions in ways that ensure a high degree of cognitive consistency and reinforcement of the norms, rules and values of the social domain. For ontological security to be maintained, the primary institutions must provide reinforcing practice and cognitive consistency among agents associated with the social domain, whilst the secondary institutions must also have the capability to meet their obligations and to undertake necessary adaptive action in response to events and other forms of internal and external pressure. As a result, the secondary institutions are the sites where a lack of ontological security may be most visible and where signs of fading resilience first materialize.
The ideal-type approach as outlined here mainly offers the possibility for investigating the constitutive elements and self-governing processes in a variety of social domains. However, it is of course often the case that emergent change processes, events and influences originate from the external environment including influences from other domains located at both the local and global level. Regardless of whether the stimuli is externally or internally generated, it will inevitably impact the level of ontological security of those who act on behalf of the social domain because any form of change, disruption or contestation will result in cognitive dissonance and thus trigger time-consuming ontological security seeking processes and delay or derail the required adaptive self-governance moves to maintain resilience.

**The current crises of the liberal international order**

To assess the liberal order’s resilience is not an easy task, partly because even to determine precisely what the liberal international order is, is far from self-explanatory (Kundnani, 2017, p. 1). The most prominent scholarly account—which, it should be noted, has primarily been constructed by liberal internationalist scholars--portrays the liberal international order as a governing arrangement among a group of states, where certain principles, rules and institutions define the core relationship between the states that are party to the order (Ikenberry, 2001, p. 23). In other words, an international order is seen as an institutional arrangement that serves certain ends, upheld by rules, norms and practices (Reus-Smit, 2017, p. 78), which in the case of the liberal international order, happen to be derived from liberal ideas. However, the term *liberal international order* was hardly used before G. John Ikenberry brought the term to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s in his scholarship about American postwar strategy (Wright, 2018). Indeed, the phenomenon that I have referred to throughout this article as “the liberal international order” is also known variously as the
American-led order or *Pax Americana*. Moreover, what is described by some as a carefully designed governing arrangement, is by others seen as the unintended outcome of competition and the haphazard accumulation of the ways policy-makers have tried, sometimes spontaneously, to solve their era’s problems (Zelikow, 2017; Young, 1982). Finally, it is important not to forget that the benign form of order that is described by liberal internationalists as a means for bringing order and prosperity, is seen by others as a form of unwelcome domination where “the liberal order’s values is that they are values about how other countries are governed” (Zelikow, 2017).

This article does not try to settle how the liberal order should be understood because doing so is an impossible task as the nature of the liberal order inevitably is in the eye of the beholder. My ambition here is limited to seeking to analytically assess the resilience of the order understood as a social domain and to better understand the current crisis. Even this limited task is however challenging given the shifting and rather vague ideational foundations of the order and the complex interconnectedness between different levels of policy and lack of clarity about who might be said to be “members” of the liberal international order and which agents act on its behalf. What follows therefore is an illustrative example of a complex empirical field through the ideal-type approach outlined in the first half of this article.

Crisis is not a new experience for the liberal international order. A look at the history of the order reveals that it has experienced frequent and deep crises (Rae & Reus-Smit, 2013), major change and renewal, and that even its ideational foundations have changed fundamentally across time (Dunne & Flockhart, 2013). Therefore, if resilience is about the ability to reflectively govern in response to the inevitability of change (Chandler, 2014, p. 52; 2019), then the liberal order has been remarkably resilient. As persuasively demonstrated by Ikenberry (2009), the liberal order has shown its ability
to adapt, initially in the transformation from *Pax Britannica* to *Pax Americana* and subsequently following the Cold War. Paradoxically therefore, it seems that rather than a source of weakness, the constancy of crisis emerges as a source of the order’s strength, suggesting that past crises facilitated the order’s continuous renewal and resilience (Adler, 2013). Arguably, the oscillation between crisis and renewal has led to the expansion of the order’s geographic scope to reach outside the West, deepening of its constitutive ideas such as a commitment to democracy and human rights and widening of its participatory inclusiveness through the expansion of its multilateral institutions (Dunne & Reus-Smit, 2017, p. 25).

Today, the liberal international order is widely believed once again to be in crisis and its foundations to be contested (Ikenberry, 2009; 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Duncombe & Dunne, 2018), but where previous contestations and crises were ultimately productive in the sense that they led to reflection and adaptation and even expansion and renewal thus ensuring the continued resilience of the order, such an outcome does not seem to be in the making in the current crisis—or rather crises. Interestingly, with the three constitutive elements of the ideal-type social domain in mind, what is today thought of as “the” crisis in the liberal order, appears to be three interconnected crises that each go to the heart of the power, principles, and practice elements of the order. Moreover, where previous crises primarily have been caused by externally generated pressure and contestation—which certainly is still a factor—the current crises seem to originate from internally generated pressures and contestations. The three crises are well-documented in the expanding literature on the crisis in the liberal order, but they have not so far been brought together within one analytical framework such as the one presented in this article. The three crises are briefly outlined below.
The crisis of leadership

The first of the three crises can be found within the power element of the liberal order. The power element has long been considered in crisis as a result of global powershifts and increasing contestations against the American-led liberal international order from rising and resurgent powers such as China and Russia and from radical non-state actors and movements ranging from movements such as Daesh to Extinction Rebellion. In particular, the rise of China and the growing Russian hostility toward the liberal international order has been the focus of a literature, which argues that American power is in (relative) decline and that the relationship between the United States and China will define American foreign policy in the coming years (Mearsheimer, 2019; Jacques, 2009; Zakaria, 2011). However, although externally generated contestations and global powershifts certainly are important factors of influence in the power element of the liberal order, since the election of Donald Trump as President, crisis in the power element has taken quite a different turn. The leadership of the liberal order now appears to be in doubt, which in terms of ontological security may have far more severe implications than the always present external contestation and attempts by other powers in the system to balance against American power.

The power patterns in the current liberal international order are overwhelmingly associated with the position of the United States as the hegemonic power within the order. Despite its claim to be upholding the Westphalian states system based on sovereignty and the principle of equality, the liberal international order is unquestionably a hierarchical arrangement with social relationships that do not follow the patterns of behavior expected in an anarchic system (Zarakol, 2017, p. 273). Instead the behavior of states that are part of the liberal order has for the past seventy years been characterized by them willingly accepting the leadership of the United States in return for security sponsorship and economic benefits. In this bargain, the United States has agreed to limit the
exercise of its power by pledging to lead through negotiation and compromise (Peterson, 2004) and to be bound by the same rules as everyone else within the elaborate multilateral system set up in the aftermath of the Second World War (Ikenberry, 2001, p. 29). Therefore, although the United States might have eschewed formal empire, it forged an international order closely aligned with its own identity and interests (Reich & Lebow 2014, p. 137).

The new crisis in the power element of the liberal international order is an internally generated crisis, which undermines the established patterns of power and authority in the order. The crisis has been characterized as a “crisis of leadership” (Lute & Burns, 2019) or as the “crisis of the empty throne” (Daalder & Lindsay, 2018) brought on by the abdication of the Trump Administration from the leadership of the order. In quite an unprecedented way, the President of the leading state of the order appears to not value the order and its multilateral institutions and to express views that are sometimes disrespectful and essentially incompatible with the values and practices underpinning the order and in opposition to some of America’s closest allies. Given that the power patterns of a social domain are what defines the essence of the ordering domain and that all consent-based domains require a high degree of trust in those wielding power and that the power arrangements are legitimate, a lack of respect between the core members of the domain is a serious condition. Crisis in the power element in the form of the “crisis of leadership” is therefore likely to be linked with extensive ontological-security-seeking processes and the potential for a marked decline of the ontological security of those agents who are associated with the order.

The crisis of democracy

The second crisis is located within the principles element of the liberal order and has been described as a “crisis of democracy” (Lute & Burns, 2019) which has been brought on by the advent of
illiberal politics in a growing number of liberal order states, which some argue could spell the end of democracy as the governing principle in liberal states (Runciman, 2018). Of course, the very nature of liberal democracy is that there is room for political disagreement and freedom to challenge and contest the views of the incumbent political power—a freedom that has been frequently exercised in liberal democracies either through the electoral process or through other forms of political expression and participation. Nevertheless, despite the room for political divergence in liberal democracies, all hegemonic social domains depend on a legitimizing ideology that must be consistent with the identity at both the elite and mass level (Allan, Vucetic, & Hopf, 2018). In the liberal international order such a dominant ideology has rested on a set of liberal values such as personal freedoms, capitalist economics, free trade and the rule of law applied to both domestic politics and the relationships between the states within the order. In the last seven decades, the legitimizing ideology has rested primarily on American power and identity, but with a wide scope for difference, especially between American and European nuances in their conception of the “good life” and always with voices of contestation against the prevalent vision of the “good life” (Kupchan, 2012, p. 71). Moreover, on both sides of the Atlantic, the domestic political processes have been characterized by a cross-party political consensus at the elite level supporting the liberal international order (Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007), whilst the mass level showed limited interest in foreign policy or in the liberal order. Today, the elite-level cross-party consensus has come to an end in several liberal order states—including in the United States, and mass level interest in the liberal order has been awakened through populist politics that has drawn attention to the (many) failings of the order and its institutions.

As outlined above, internal contestation against the liberal order now comes from the leader of the liberal order as the Trump Administration openly challenges many key features of the liberal
international order, including the importance of multilateral institutions and the value of NATO and the transatlantic relationship (Stelzenmüller, 2019). Moreover, with the electoral success of those who contest the liberal order and its foundational principles, we are currently witnessing a move of those who contest the legitimacy of the liberal international order from the fringes of politics to government positions. The arrival in government of parties such as Jobbik and Fidesz in Hungary, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland and the Justice and Development Party in Turkey—all members of NATO—are bound to have a significant impact on the salience and acceptance of the core values underpinning the liberal international order and the cohesion of its institutions. This is indeed a worrying development because it represents a sudden surge in contestation from within the liberal order and questions the identity of the order and its conception of the “good life.”

The crisis of multilateralism
The third crisis is located within the practice element of the liberal order and is widely referred to in the literature and at policy conferences as the “crisis of multilateralism” (Lupel, 2019; Munich Young Leaders, 2019). The multilateral institutions of the liberal international order have of course for long been argued to be in crisis as for example shown in the Princeton Project from 2006, which declared that the liberal order’s institutions “were broken” (Slaughter & Ikenberry, 2006). Until recently, the crisis was mainly assumed to be a function of underfunding and the political deadlock on the question of reforms to allow rising powers a greater say in global governance. Lately however more concrete manifestations of the “crisis of multilateralism” have emerged, such as fewer treaties being signed and ratified, a higher drop-out rate of existing multilateral agreements, lackluster implementation of existing treaties or conclusion of those that have been on the drawing board and poor oversight of treaty obligations and monitoring of compliance (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2018). These manifestations are important because they have very real implications for the ability
of the multilateral institutions to fulfill their obligations and for the liberal international order to remain “fit for purpose” which was clearly displayed in the inability to act decisively in the financial crisis, the migration crisis, the Syrian civil war, the Russian annexation of Crimea and incursions in Ukraine. Each displayed a worrying lack of capacity to fulfill the defined roles of the institution in question.

It is of course true that multilateral diplomacy is always a slow and difficult process, which is why the inability to respond to very complex and politically toxic crises such as those mentioned above, should not on its own lead us to conclude that the liberal order is at an end. However, in combination with the growing realization that the Trump administration has no enthusiasm for multilateralism, the crisis of multilateralism acquires more significance. It now seems beyond doubt that the crisis of multilateralism has deepened because the crucial sponsor of the multilateral system—the United States—has been unwilling to support the system in its hour of need. In fact, it has become abundantly clear that the Trump Administration does not support the multilateral foundations of the liberal order at all. This was clearly displayed when U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, gave a speech in Brussels in which he extolled the virtues of nationalism, criticized multilateralism and the EU, and said that “international bodies” which constrain national sovereignty “must be reformed or eliminated” (as cited in Stelzenmüller, 2019). The sentiment expressed by Pompeo is completely in line with the behaviour by Trump at multilateral gatherings, and the withdrawal of the United States from several key multilateral agreements including the Paris Climate Agreement, the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA), the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Agreement (INF), and from the United Nations Human Rights Council.
The analysis in this section has shown that not only is the liberal order in crisis in all its three constitutive elements, but also that the nature of each of the three crises has changed recently from being primarily externally generated to now being internally generated. In particular, the analysis revealed that the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House has added to the intensity of all three crises with significant implications for the liberal order’s ability to remain fit for its traditional purpose. The analysis suggests therefore that the resilience of the liberal international order is in substantial danger and that urgent adaptive action is needed in all three constitutive elements to regain coherence between the elements—or alternatively to fundamentally redefine the order’s purpose. No action under the current circumstances is likely to inflict perhaps irreparable damage on the order. However, whether the order will adapt, transform, or collapse is not easy to predict as it will depend on what action agents of relevance for the liberal order are able—or willing—to undertake. The next section will seek to outline how the three crises may have influenced the ontological security of agents of relevance to the liberal order, which should provide some scope conditions for what kind of reflective self-governing processes may be possible under the current conditions.

**Resilience and ontological security in the liberal order**

The concept ontological security was developed to better understand individuals with severe psychologic disorders. However, as suggested in this article, the concept may also be useful for saying something about how individuals react to change and disruptions in social contexts that are important to them. It also raises the question if the ontological-security-seeking processes at the personal level, can be assumed to take place in collective entities such as states, international organizations, epistemic policy communities, and even in the liberal order or the global international society (Dunne & Reus-Smit, 2017). I side with Maull (2019) in believing that
international orders do not just haphazardly come and go but are constituted, sustained, and renewed through the daily activities of thousands, even millions of individuals going about their personal and professional business (Maull, 2019, p. 7). To be fair most of these individuals play a minimal role—in many cases they simply act appropriately and give or withdraw their support for the order. However, some play a bigger role through their professional position in many different collective entities such as international organizations or bureaucratic- and policy networks that in one way or another are part of, or relevant to the liberal international order (Debre & Dijkstra, 2019; Grey, 2018).

The liberal international order as a social domain does not have full agency, because as a social fact, its existence and actions are tied up with shared knowledge and practice that is articulated and performed by “real people” rather than by the entity as such. However, even though the actors who undertake practice on behalf of the order are “enactors of scripts” rather than self-directed actors (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 150), they have some wiggle room for more independent and emotional agency, and it is well known that representational practices can be influenced by emotions such as enthusiasm and pride or frustration and shame, which can also resonate collectively (Hutchison, 2018, p. 294; Hochschild, 1979). In the context of the three crises outlined above, it seems entirely plausible that when the order lacks leadership, when its values are contested or when practices become dysfunctional, that people who are policy-makers, bureaucrats, and voters will develop cognitive dissonance and anxiety with negative consequences for their ontological security. In the past, they seemed better able to maintain their agency and ability to undertake adaptive action when required, but this begs the question if the current crisis affects agents differently than previous crises, and if so how? These are big questions that cannot be fully explored in a brief article, so below, I look briefly at “if and why” the current triple crisis affects the ontological security of those who are connected to the liberal order in an adverse manner. I focus on three necessary conditions...
for maintaining ontological security as outlined at the beginning of this article: a stable identity, a strong narrative, and reinforcing practice.

**Maintaining a stable identity**

The literature on ontological security demonstrates the importance of a stable identity for maintaining ontological security and I have already pointed out that changes in the power patterns of the liberal order seem to have had significant effects on the order’s identity and its associated norms, values, rules and principles that together define appropriate behavior and the vision for the “good life.” In the current situation, the power element of the liberal international order is undergoing significant and multiple forms of change, which are partly a result of external global powershifts and partly a result of internal changes in the American approach to its leadership of the order. Both affect the order’s identity and they interact in ways that seem to have detrimental effects on ontological security.

There is little doubt that the current global powershifts are widely experienced as unsettling because they seem to have brought an end to centuries of liberal expansion (Dunne & Reus-Smit, 2017) and they challenge the widespread understanding that the liberal international order has universal appeal. In the current situation, the expected adaptive behavior would be to seek to strengthen the identity and social cohesion of the order by reiterating its positive distinctiveness in comparison to the rising powers and to seek to “double down” in preserving and strengthening those aspects of the order that are of most importance to its identity (Kupchan, 2014). The global powershifts have quite understandably given rise to a widespread perception of decline and loss of influence and prestige. The perception is found both at the mass and elite levels, but rather than being met with the expected “doubling down” adaptive behavior, the powershifts have fed into political agendas that
not only emphasize a sense of victimhood and threat but which blame the liberal order’s values and institutions for all manner of problems and which voice a desire to return to a (mythical) past form of the “good life.” The phenomenon can be observed in several industrial democracies, and although it may have other causes than just global powershifts such as the negative impact of globalization, technological, demographic and other forms of change, the outcome is that the liberal order and its institutions are held responsible for not having lived up to expectations. Promises to “make America great again” and “to take back control” clearly offer an attractive alternative to what is perceived as the order’s failed policies.

The changes in the American approach to its leadership of the liberal order is a factor that makes the aim of a stable identity unrealistic, at least for the time being. Whilst the liberal order has experienced changes in its power structure before, especially in the transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana and following the end of the Cold War, these transitions did not fundamentally contest the order’s values and idea of the “good life” and they were characterized by broad support in the postwar cross-party consensus on defense and security issues (Kupchan & Trubowitz, 2007). The cross-party consensus meant that it was easier to maintain a stable identity and as the change was associated with feelings of pride and euphoria, the occasion served to strengthen the social cohesion of the order. Today, the “triple crisis” does the opposite in an environment where the cross-party consensus has been replaced with new political cleavages between what can be described as Liberal Internationalism advocating open societies, free trade and multilateralism and Illiberal Nationalism, advocating tightly controlled borders, trade restrictions coupled with a preference for unilateralist action and transactional forms of diplomacy.
The concerns expressed by those who voted for Trump, Brexit, Orban, Marine Le Pen, and others, cannot just be rebuffed as reflecting a perhaps general state of anxiety in response to the rapid and extensive change that characterize modern society (Giddens, 1991). The views expressed in populist politics reflect valid concerns and deep contestations arising from a sense of betrayal by the political establishment for continuing to underwrite an order which plainly does not address the concerns that matter to them. The overall effect is that the identity of the liberal order has been destabilized and rather than strengthening the identity of the order, the order has become associated with emotions of frustration, anger and shame, which are likely to impact negatively on agents’ sense of “unreality” and therefore on their ontological security.

**Constructing a strong narrative**

Constructing a strong narrative that can ensure biographical continuity, whilst making sense of the past and providing answers for the future has always been challenging in the case of the liberal international order because the principles underpinning the order have been fraught with internal contradictions, tensions and historical ruptures (Rae & Reus-Smit, 2013). Moreover, liberalism’s lofty principles about liberty, fraternity, and equality and its implicit promise of security, prosperity, and dignity coupled with a clear commitment to democracy and human rights are often relegated to a secondary position in practical policy. For example, when the United States backs repressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia, or banks are protected but individual houseowners face foreclosure, a disconnect between the narrative and practices emerges. It is therefore increasingly difficult for proponents of the liberal order to maintain the salience of the vision of the “good life” because in places torn apart by war, the vision for the “good life” no longer seem attainable and in peaceful and prosperous societies, the vision for the “good life” no longer seem desirable for the younger climate-aware generations.
A strong narrative was easier to construct and maintain in earlier versions of the liberal international order because the order’s identity and narrative were constructed in opposition to a clearly defined other and the values and sense of the “good life” could be narrated in opposition to what they were not. However, in the current international environment, it is not clear who or what is the “other,” although Russia, China, and Islamic State are strong contenders for the position. The result is that it is currently difficult to forge a coherent, let alone a strong narrative about the liberal order because it has become virtually impossible to convey a unified view of the order’s identity and conception of the “good life.” It also must be said that the international policy community has been slow and inept when it comes to articulating a narrative about the liberal order that can challenge the narrative of the populists. Inadvisably, they have continued to emphasize liberal order’s main achievement as the transformation from conflict to cooperation during the mid-twentieth century. However, despite the achievements of the past it is questionable to what extent this narrative is still relevant to young domestic audiences or how well it resonates with those who feel overlooked and unfairly treated. The failure to rearticulate the narrative to allow for a more prominent role of more relevant and timely issues, such as climate change, inequality and more openly acknowledging the negative consequences and challenges of globalization, migration and automation, which could emphasize liberal order’s centrality for these issues, arguably represents a missed opportunity of huge proportions.

Performing reinforcing practice

This article has defined resilience as the ability to take the necessary adaptive action to remain fit for purpose even in a rapidly changing environment. However, if there is no agreement on the liberal order’s values, norms and principles or on what constitutes the idea of the “good life,” it is
difficult to articulate what “fit for purpose” means and therefore also difficult to identify the appropriate adaptive action for the situation. Moreover, in the “hyper-modern” world (Charles, 2009, pp. 390–392), it seems that it has become more challenging than in the past to undertake reinforcing practice and adaptive action. In the past most challenges to resilience could be identified as specific threats or concrete problems to which there would be a solution, but in the modern future-oriented “risk society” (Beck, 1992) resilience must be ensured through anticipatory governance (Fuerth, 2012) in response to risks rather than threats. Given that a risk is an imagined scenario of something that might unfold in the future, the task is to prevent the imagined future from materializing rather than to provide a solution to a “real” problem. This raises several issues, but in relation to ontological security, the problem is that having successfully prevented an imagined scenario from unfolding cannot be demonstrated as either successful or reinforcing and therefore cannot have a positive influence on the agents’ ontological security.

An added problem is that risks that were either not anticipated or mitigated in a way that could limit their damage, are highly visible and likely to be perceived as reflecting incompetence and incapacity of those who were supposed to have been able to have anticipated and prevented the calamity from unfolding. The problem here is that in terms of constructing a convincing narrative that resonates in the wider public, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate achievements by claiming to have avoided an imagined outcome, but easy to be blamed. In the current environment it is therefore difficult to demonstrate success and to claim that the liberal order’s institutions are in fact doing their job under difficult circumstances. The result is that action in today’s context is less likely to be reinforcing of the identity and narrative, whereas it is all too easy to point to challenges that were not met successfully in time. The outcome is that even though many achievements could be highlighted, the counter narrative by the populists can point to undermining (rather than
reinforcing) practice that cannot be seen to support a claim that the liberal order is in fact fit for purpose.

**Conclusion**

The issues addressed in this article may seem abstract. However, the question of what we mean by resilience and why the liberal order may no longer be resilient are questions of considerable political urgency and relevance. This article has outlined a conceptual and theoretical framework that may help us to better understand the very complex issues that face us today and which can make us better prepared to meet the risks and challenges that clearly are facing the liberal international order today and in the future.

By introducing the ideal-type social domain and by linking it to the liberal international order, the article has shown that the widespread concern about the liberal order’s resilience has not been exaggerated. The liberal international order is severely challenged in all its elements, and the challenges to its power, principles, and practice patterns interact with each other in ways that further deepen liberal order’s crisis. At the same time the conditions for acting to meet the challenges and renew the order so that it can remain fit for purpose have become less favorable. Ironically therefore, where the traditional stickiness of institutions in the past was a benefit that would ensure stability and longevity, the very same stickiness is today preventing action to undertake urgently needed action because those who are charged with restoring liberal order’s resilience are facing pressures and uncertainties with negative impact on their ontological security and their ability to invoke their agency. And just to make matters worse, if the ontological security of those acting for the liberal order has been reduced, the opposite is the case for the populists acting against the liberal order.
It is indeed tempting to conclude that the resilience of the liberal international order is in a bad state and that its resilience is unlikely to be restored. However, although the analysis certainly paints a grim picture, it also points to where action should be taken and where big mistakes have been made that can be rectified. Most importantly however, the analysis shows that if the liberal order is to survive, it needs to urgently “find its mojo” to be able to transform and adapt to the new environment. This will necessitate acceptance that the liberal international order will not be a universal order with global reach but is more likely to be just one of several orders, each with their own conception of the “good life”. In particular, it needs to be realized that to be fit for purpose in the coming multi-order world (Flockhart, 2016b) may be very different from what “fit for purpose” means under the current circumstances. The future of the liberal order is by no means certain, but by having a clearer understanding of each of its elements and why those who should act on its behalf sometimes are unable to do so, there is still a chance for a managed transformation into a new, smaller, leaner and resilient liberal international order.

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