Plato's Republic or Putin's?

Osborn Owusu

Doctoral Student, Diplomacy and International Affairs, EUCLID University.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a persistent puzzle in modern International Relations concerning the recurring tension between efforts to establish international order on moral and normative foundations and the empirical reliance on coercive power to sustain stability. Rather than interpreting this tension as a contingent failure of institutions or leadership, the article situates it within a deeper philosophical problem that has shaped political thought since antiquity. Contemporary international politics is thus framed as an ongoing struggle between the pursuit of moral legitimacy and the practical demands of security, authority, and survival. To explore this dynamic, the article employs Plato and Vladimir Putin as symbolic reference points rather than direct historical or conceptual equivalents. Plato is used to represent the classical philosophical aspiration to construct political order through virtue, reason, and moral harmony. At the same time, Putin illustrates a modern form of statecraft grounded in sovereignty, strategic control, and the prioritisation of stability over universal ethical claims. Through this analytical juxtaposition, the article demonstrates how foundational debates about authority, obedience, and human nature continue to inform realist practices in contemporary international politics. The analysis further suggests that modern international order remains deeply indebted to unresolved philosophical assumptions concerning fear, hierarchy, and the limits of moral governance. By integrating insights from political philosophy and International Relations theory, the article advances a conceptual framework for understanding why moral discourse and coercive power remain inseparable in global politics. In doing so, it challenges both idealist expectations of normative progress and realist claims that dismiss the enduring influence of moral reasoning in international affairs.

INTRODUCTION

International Relations is commonly portrayed as a modern and largely postwar discipline, emerging in response to the unprecedented destruction of the First and Second World Wars and the subsequent need to manage conflict in an increasingly interconnected world. This conventional account emphasises the rise of international institutions, the formalisation of diplomatic norms, and the development of theoretical frameworks designed to explain state behaviour under conditions of anarchy. As a result, International Relations is frequently treated as a field oriented toward contemporary challenges and grounded in modern historical experience. Such an assumption, however, risks obscuring the deeper intellectual traditions that continue to shape how order, stability, and authority are understood in global politics. At its most fundamental level, International Relations is concerned with questions that long predate the modern state system. Issues of political order, justice, legitimacy, and coercion were central to classical political philosophy, where thinkers sought to reconcile ethical ideals with the practical demands of governance. These debates were not confined to domestic politics but addressed broader concerns about human nature, power, and the conditions under which political authority could be justified. The persistence of these themes suggests that modern International Relations does not represent a clean break from earlier modes of political thought, but rather a reconfiguration of enduring philosophical problems within a new institutional and geopolitical context.

Plato's Republic stands as one of the earliest and most influential attempts to articulate an idealised vision of political order rooted in reason, virtue, and hierarchical harmony. Although the text is situated within the framework of the ancient city-state, its core preoccupation with aligning power and morality continues to resonate in contemporary debates about international order. The Republic offers a conceptual template for

understanding political authority as something that must be normatively grounded if it is to be legitimate and stable.

In contrast, the worldview associated with Vladimir Putin reflects a contemporary manifestation of enforced order, in which political stability is maintained through centralised authority, strategic coercion, and an explicit scepticism toward universal moral norms. While operating within a modern international system, this approach echoes older assumptions about the primacy of power in securing order.

This article, therefore, asks whether modern International Relations is driven more by moral philosophy or by power politics, or whether it is best understood as an ongoing negotiation between ethical aspiration and coercive necessity.

Plato's Political Philosophy

Plato's political philosophy, as articulated most systematically in The Republic (Adam, 1907), represents one of the earliest and most enduring attempts to understand the conditions under which political order can be both stable and morally legitimate. Unlike descriptive accounts of governance that focus on empirical observation of political institutions, Plato's work is normative, seeking to articulate the principles that make a society just, coherent, and enduring. Writing against the backdrop of Athenian democracy, which he associated with factionalism, moral decay, and political instability, Plato asks fundamental questions about authority, the structure of society, and the role of knowledge in governance. His reflections address not only the governance of a city-state but also the broader issue of how order can be sustained wherever human beings attempt to organise themselves politically (Helle, 2005; Newberger, 2024).

Central to Plato's theory is the idea that justice is best understood as a form of harmony, both within the individual and across society. In the Republic, he defines justice as a state in which each part of the city performs its appropriate function and refrains from interfering with the roles of others. This principle is mirrored in his conception of the human soul, where reason must govern spirit and appetite to maintain internal coherence. Disorder, in Plato's view, arises when this hierarchy is inverted, when desire dominates reason, ambition overrides knowledge, or when social roles are confused or ignored. Justice, therefore, is inseparable from structure: a well-ordered society is one in which every individual occupies the place suited to their abilities, contributing to collective stability while minimising conflict. In emphasising functional differentiation, Plato challenges modern assumptions about equality and popular sovereignty, insisting that the health of the political system depends on aligning power with capacity and moral insight (Sangster, 2023). This emphasis on knowledge as the foundation of political authority is embodied in the figure of the philosopher-king. Plato argues that those who govern must possess a profound understanding of the good, an intellectual grasp of justice, and the ability to apply moral reasoning in the administration of public affairs. The philosopher-king is not a ruler motivated by personal ambition or subject to the whims of the populace but is guided by wisdom and virtue. Authority, in this framework, is epistemically grounded: the legitimacy of rule depends on knowledge rather than popularity, tradition, or coercive power alone. Plato's insistence on rule by knowledge reflects a profound concern with the fragility of political order. Without leaders capable of discerning the true interests of the state, societies risk descending into corruption, factionalism, or tyranny.

Plato's scepticism toward democracy is a direct consequence of this framework. He views systems that prioritise mass opinion over expertise as inherently unstable, prone to demagoguery and short-term decision-making (Schofield, 2006). In democratic systems, freedom is elevated above order, and the collective voice can easily be swayed by desire and emotion rather than reason. This vulnerability creates conditions for instability and opens the door for tyrannical leadership, which Plato identifies as the ultimate corruption of political life. Democracy, in his account, becomes a transitional form that is likely to give rise to disorder precisely because it subordinates knowledge and hierarchical organisation to widespread approval.

Despite its prescriptive and normative orientation, Plato's political philosophy provides enduring insights into the dynamics of authority, obedience, and social stability (Melling, 1987). By insisting that political order requires moral and epistemic foundations, he challenges any conception of governance that is merely procedural or coercive in nature. His ideas resonate with contemporary debates in International Relations about the balance

between legitimacy and power, the role of expertise in policy-making, and the conditions under which stability can be sustained without resorting to oppression. Plato's vision highlights the tension between ethical aspirations and practical necessities, revealing that questions about the justification of authority and the structuring of social hierarchies are not merely historical curiosities but ongoing concerns in the governance of human societies (Hegel, 1870).

In addition, Plato's insistence on aligning roles with capacity and moral insight highlights the enduring problem of obedience. Political authority, for Plato, is not simply a matter of issuing commands; it requires that those subject to governance recognise the legitimacy of the social hierarchy and the competence of those who rule (Zelcer, 2017). Stability is achieved when the governed accept the moral and rational basis of authority, not merely when force is used to enforce compliance. This insight remains highly relevant in modern contexts, where questions of legitimacy, public trust, and adherence to institutional norms continue to shape both domestic politics and global governance. The enduring relevance of Plato's philosophy lies in its treatment of human nature. By recognising the inevitability of desire, ambition, and moral weakness, he frames political order as a proactive achievement rather than a natural state. The challenge of governance is to design institutions and leadership structures that channel human behaviour in ways that support collective stability while minimising disorder. Plato's approach anticipates contemporary concerns in International Relations about the relationship between human nature, political authority, and the construction of resilient social orders. His insistence on moral knowledge as the foundation of governance provides a conceptual benchmark for understanding why questions of justice, legitimacy, and hierarchy have remained central to political life throughout time.

Putin's Political Philosophy

Vladimir Putin's political philosophy can be understood as a contemporary reflection of enduring concerns about political order, authority, and stability, albeit grounded in the pragmatic realities of modern statecraft rather than abstract moral ideals. Unlike Plato, whose focus is normative and idealised, Putin's worldview is grounded in historical experience, domestic crises, and the perceived vulnerabilities of the Russian state (Eltchaninoff, 2018). Nevertheless, at its core, it shares with classical political philosophy an emphasis on maintaining order through disciplined authority, strategic control, and the subordination of individual or collective interests to the perceived needs of the state. Examining this philosophy sheds light on the modern tension between moral legitimacy and coercive power in international politics, highlighting how authority, obedience, and hierarchy are operationalised in contemporary governance.

Putin's approach to governance emphasises the centrality of power and sovereignty as the foundations of political stability. In his public statements, writings, and policy actions, he consistently prioritises the state's capacity to enforce order over abstract appeals to universal norms or ethical principles. Political authority, in this view, is legitimate not primarily because it embodies a moral ideal but because it preserves cohesion, deters internal and external threats, and sustains the integrity of the state. Hierarchy is not an intellectual abstraction but a practical necessity: strong, centralised leadership is presented as essential for maintaining order in a society perceived as historically vulnerable to fragmentation, crisis, or foreign interference. Obedience, therefore, is both expected and cultivated, not as an end in itself but as a mechanism to ensure that the state's objectives are achieved efficiently and consistently.

The logic of enforced order in Putin's philosophy is closely tied to a scepticism of liberal democracy and mass participation (Lipovetsky, 2023). Echoing Plato's concern with the dangers of unbridled widespread influence, Putin frequently critiques Western-style democracy as destabilising, prone to chaos, and susceptible to manipulation. He frames liberal individualism and pluralism as threats to social cohesion, arguing that excessive emphasis on personal freedom and participatory governance can undermine the authority of the state and weaken the conditions for collective security. Mass opinion is acknowledged, but it is largely instrumentalised: public support is valuable insofar as it reinforces the legitimacy of centralised authority, rather than as a determinant of policy or governance decisions. In this sense, Putin's model of rule reflects a consistent prioritisation of stability over procedural inclusivity, reflecting a worldview in which order is maintained through both strategic coercion and the careful management of perception.

Knowledge and expertise are central to Putin's conception of political authority, although in a markedly different sense than Plato's philosopher-king. For Putin, the legitimacy of decision-making rests less on abstract moral insight and more on practical competence, strategic calculation, and experience in navigating domestic and international challenges (Robinson, 2020). Effective governance is measured by the state's ability to project strength, control internal dissent, and achieve strategic objectives rather than by adherence to universal ethical standards. Intelligence, bureaucratic skill, and the capacity to manipulate institutional and geopolitical levers are therefore critical components of effective leadership. Power is both a tool and a metric: those who wield it successfully reinforce the hierarchy upon which stability depends.

At the international level, Putin's political philosophy reflects a realist orientation that emphasises the primacy of state sovereignty and the limits of moral universalism. Global norms and ethical frameworks are acknowledged to the extent that they can be leveraged to advance state interests, but they are subordinated to strategic imperatives. Russia's foreign policy, in this light, is framed as a defence of national sovereignty and a projection of strength in a competitive global system (Sakwa, 2020). Coercion, deterrence, and the calculated use of force are understood as legitimate instruments to secure both domestic and international order. The centrality of security and hierarchy thus extends beyond domestic governance to encompass broader conceptions of global stability.

Putin's political philosophy, when analysed alongside classical models, sheds light on the persistent tension between moral ideals and the imperatives of power (Solovyov, 2017). While Plato envisioned authority as grounded in knowledge of the good, Putin demonstrates a contemporary logic in which authority is grounded in the effective exercise of power and the maintenance of order. Both frameworks share an underlying concern with hierarchy, obedience, and the conditions necessary for stable governance, yet they diverge sharply in their treatment of morality and normative legitimacy. Plato's model emphasises ethical alignment, whereas Putin's emphasises practical necessity and strategic control. Understanding this divergence is essential for analysing contemporary International Relations, as it reveals how coercive power continues to coexist with, and often overrides, normative considerations in global politics.

Putin's philosophy showcases the enduring significance of the state as a primary actor in maintaining social order. Whether through centralised governance, managed public opinion, or strategic deployment of force, political stability is achieved not through idealised moral reasoning but through disciplined authority and careful orchestration of hierarchical structures. This approach reflects an awareness of human behaviour, historical contingency, and the limits of ethical governance, echoing classical concerns while situating them firmly within the exigencies of the modern international system. In doing so, Putin provides a practical, albeit morally ambivalent, blueprint for the exercise of authority in an era defined by complexity, uncertainty, and persistent threats to political cohesion.

Modern International Relations Theory as a Philosophical Inheritance

Modern International Relations theory is often presented as a scientific and secular endeavour, concerned with explaining patterns of state behaviour through empirical observation and rigorous analysis. However, beneath its formal models and theoretical divisions lies a deeper intellectual inheritance that draws heavily from ancient philosophical debates about human nature, power, morality, and order. Rather than resolving these foundational questions, modern IR theory rearticulates them in secularised and systematised forms. The discipline can therefore be understood not as a departure from classical political philosophy but as its continuation under modern historical and institutional conditions.

Classical realism, particularly as articulated by Hans Morgenthau, reflects a profoundly pessimistic view of human nature that closely parallels earlier philosophical traditions (Morgenthau, 2014). Morgenthau's emphasis on power as the central currency of international politics is grounded in an assumption that human beings are driven by ambition, fear, and the desire for domination. For Morgenthau, political conflict is not an aberration but a natural consequence of these enduring human traits. Moral principles are not dismissed outright, but the realities of political necessity constrain them (Jervis, 1994). Ethics, in this framework, must be tempered by prudence, as the survival of the political community takes precedence over abstract moral commitments. This

perspective echoes classical concerns about the limits of virtue in political life and reflects a continuity with ancient scepticism regarding the possibility of sustaining moral order without coercive authority.

Structural realism, most notably developed by Kenneth Waltz, shifts the focus away from human nature and toward the architecture of the international system itself. By emphasising anarchy as the defining condition of global politics, Waltz reframes the problem of order as one of systemic constraint rather than individual moral failure (Telbami, 2002). States are compelled to prioritise survival because no overarching authority exists to guarantee their security. In doing so, structural realism abstracts the ancient problem of disorder into a systemic logic that operates independently of ethical intention. While this move appears to depersonalise politics, it does not escape the philosophical dilemma of order. Instead, it relocates it, suggesting that even well-intentioned actors are forced into competitive and self-help behaviours by the structure of the system (Waltz, 2000). The result is a modernised version of an old argument: that insecurity and conflict arise not only from moral ignorance but also from the conditions under which political units coexist.

Liberal theories of International Relations attempt to challenge this pessimism by reintroducing moral considerations into the analysis of global politics. Emphasising institutions, interdependence, and norms, liberalism suggests that cooperation and ethical progress are possible despite anarchy. International law, democratic governance, and economic integration are presented as mechanisms through which states can mitigate conflict and align political behaviour with moral principles. In this sense, liberalism represents a partial revival of the philosophical aspiration to reconcile power with justice. However, this revival remains incomplete. Liberal theory often assumes conditions of relative stability and shared interests, and it struggles to account for situations in which survival imperatives override normative commitments. When confronted with existential threats, even liberal states frequently revert to realist behaviour, revealing the fragility of moral politics under pressure (Steinberger, 1987).

The persistence of this pattern underscores the unresolved tension between ethics and survival that pervades International Relations theory. Despite their differences, realism, structural realism, and liberalism all grapple with the same fundamental question: whether moral principles can meaningfully constrain political action in an environment defined by insecurity (Rosenberg, 1994). None of these approaches fully resolves the dilemma. Realism accepts the limits of ethics, structural realism sidelines morality altogether, and liberalism aspires to ethical progress without entirely escaping the logic of survival. This unresolved tension mirrors ancient philosophical debates about whether justice can endure without authority and whether order can be sustained without coercion.

Modern IR theory thus secularises classical philosophical concerns by translating them into technical language and analytical frameworks. Concepts such as anarchy, power balancing, institutional cooperation, and normative constraint serve as contemporary equivalents to older discussions about human nature, hierarchy, and moral order. In stripping these debates of their metaphysical language, IR theory does not eliminate their philosophical content; instead, it renders it implicit. Understanding International Relations as a philosophical inheritance rather than a purely modern science allows for a deeper appreciation of its enduring contradictions. It highlights why questions of morality and power remain central to the study of global politics.

Liberal Internationalism as the Fragile Middle Ground

Liberal internationalism occupies an uneasy position within International Relations theory, situated between the moral aspirations of political philosophy and the coercive realities emphasised by realism. At its core, liberal internationalism represents an attempt to reconcile order and morality by arguing that political stability can be achieved without relying exclusively on force, hierarchy, or fear (Johnston, 1996). Instead, it advances the claim that institutions, norms, and shared rules can moderate state behaviour and gradually align power with ethical restraint. This project reflects a longstanding philosophical ambition to tame power through reasoned cooperation, suggesting that international order can be constructed without abandoning moral purpose (Rawls, 2010).

The liberal vision rests on the belief that institutions can reduce uncertainty and mitigate the security dilemma that arises under conditions of anarchy. International organisations, legal regimes, and diplomatic frameworks

are designed to provide predictability, encourage transparency, and facilitate cooperation among states with divergent interests. By embedding state behaviour within rule-based systems, liberal internationalism seeks to transform conflictual interactions into managed competition or peaceful coexistence (Mises, 1985). Norms such as sovereignty, non-aggression, and human rights are not merely descriptive but prescriptive, shaping expectations about legitimate conduct. In this sense, liberalism offers a procedural conception of order, one grounded in consent, reciprocity, and the gradual internalisation of shared values.

Closely linked to this institutional emphasis is the liberal promise of peaceful change. Liberal internationalists argue that economic interdependence, democratic governance, and normative convergence reduce the incentives for violent conflict. As states become more interconnected, the costs of war increase, and cooperation becomes more attractive than confrontation. According to this view, political disputes can be resolved through negotiation, arbitration, and institutional reform rather than coercion. This belief echoes earlier philosophical hopes that rationality and mutual interest could overcome the destructive tendencies of power politics, allowing moral considerations to shape political outcomes without the constant threat of force.

However, liberal internationalism has consistently struggled when confronted with hard power and revisionist states. Its institutional mechanisms depend on a baseline level of compliance and a shared commitment to the system's rules (Pateman, 1980). When powerful actors reject these norms or selectively adhere to them, liberal institutions often lack the capacity to enforce compliance. Economic sanctions, legal rulings, and diplomatic pressure can exert influence, but they rarely compel behaviour when core security or strategic interests are perceived to be at stake. In such cases, the liberal emphasis on procedure and consensus appears fragile, unable to restrain actors willing to accept the costs of defiance.

This vulnerability has become increasingly evident with the return of spheres of influence and the reassertion of great-power politics. Strategic competition among major powers has revived older patterns of territorial control, geopolitical bargaining, and coercive diplomacy. States seeking to revise the existing order often frame their actions in terms of historical entitlement, security necessity, or civilizational autonomy, rejecting liberal norms as instruments of domination rather than universal principles. In this context, liberal internationalism appears ill-equipped to address challenges that are rooted not in misunderstandings or institutional gaps but in fundamental disagreements over authority, hierarchy, and the distribution of power.

The reemergence of these dynamics raises a deeper philosophical question about the nature of liberal International Relations theory itself. Is liberalism philosophically naïve in its expectation that moral norms can meaningfully constrain power, or is it historically contingent, dependent on specific material and political conditions that no longer hold? One interpretation suggests that liberal internationalism underestimates the persistence of insecurity and the centrality of survival in political life. From this perspective, its faith in institutions and norms reflects a misplaced optimism about human nature and state behaviour (Muoneke & Nnani, 2023). Another interpretation views liberalism not as naïve but as conditional, effective only under circumstances of relative power equilibrium, economic integration, and shared interests.

Seen through a broader philosophical lens, liberal internationalism represents a fragile middle ground between moral aspiration and coercive necessity. It neither abandons ethics in favour of raw power nor fully resolves the problem of order without resorting to force. Instead, it manages the tension temporarily, translating ethical ideals into procedural mechanisms that function unevenly across time and space. Its recurring crises do not simply reflect policy failure but expose the enduring difficulty of reconciling morality and survival in international politics. In this sense, liberal internationalism does not escape the ancient philosophical dilemmas that animate the field but rearticulates them in modern institutional form, revealing both the promise and the limits of moral order in a world shaped by power.

The Enduring Question: Order At What Cost?

The tension between order and morality has never been fully resolved in the study or practice of International Relations. Rather than constituting a transient theoretical dispute or a byproduct of particular historical moments, this tension represents a permanent dilemma embedded in the foundations of political life itself. Across time and political systems, efforts to secure stability have repeatedly confronted ethical limits, while moral aspirations

have often collided with the realities of power, insecurity, and survival. Modern International Relations theory inherits this dilemma not as an abstract puzzle but as a practical and recurring challenge that shapes how states act, justify authority, and respond to disorder.

Reframing the contrast between Plato and Vladimir Putin as a symbolic and enduring dilemma rather than a historical comparison allows for a deeper understanding of this problem. Plato represents the aspiration to ground political order in moral knowledge, rational hierarchy, and ethical coherence. His vision assumes that order is legitimate only when it reflects a deeper moral structure, one that aligns authority with virtue and reason. Putin, by contrast, embodies a contemporary logic in which order is valued primarily for its capacity to prevent chaos, fragmentation, and vulnerability, even if it must be imposed through coercion. This is not a contest between ancient idealism and modern cynicism but a recurring choice between competing conceptions of legitimacy. One emphasises moral justification, while the other prioritises stability, regardless of the ethical cost.

International Relations as a discipline continually oscillates between these poles. At moments of relative stability, moral arguments gain prominence. Norms of human rights, self-determination, and global justice are foregrounded as guiding principles of international conduct. During periods of crisis, however, the language of survival, sovereignty, and necessity resurfaces with force. States invoke security imperatives to justify actions that contradict normative commitments (Litfin, 1997), revealing the conditional nature of moral politics under pressure. This pattern suggests that the tension between Plato and Putin is not merely theoretical but structural, arising whenever political communities confront existential threats.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in debates surrounding sovereignty and non-intervention. Sovereignty has long been treated as a cornerstone of international order, providing a framework for political independence, territorial integrity, and mutual recognition among states. From a realist perspective, sovereignty functions as a protective barrier against external domination, allowing states to pursue their interests without constant interference. From a moral standpoint, however, sovereignty raises troubling questions when it shields injustice, repression, or systemic violence from external scrutiny and oversight. The principle of non-intervention, while stabilising in theory, often conflicts with ethical imperatives to prevent harm and protect vulnerable populations (Abbott, 1989). This conflict exposes the moral limits of sovereignty. If sovereignty is absolute, then any internal action taken by a state becomes immune from external judgment, regardless of its ethical accountability. However, if sovereignty is conditional, subject to moral evaluation and intervention, then the very structure of the international order is destabilised. Who decides when sovereignty has been forfeited? On what authority are interventions justified? These questions reveal the fragility of attempts to reconcile moral responsibility with political independence.

The liberal internationalist response has been to articulate doctrines such as humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect, which seek to balance sovereignty with ethical obligation. These frameworks attempt to preserve order while acknowledging that non-intervention cannot be morally absolute. However, in practice, their application has been inconsistent and contested (Freeden, 2024). Interventions justified on moral grounds are often perceived as selective, politically motivated, or instrumentalised by powerful states. This perception undermines their legitimacy and reinforces scepticism toward moral claims in international politics. As a result, efforts to soften sovereignty through ethical constraints frequently generate new forms of instability rather than resolving the underlying dilemma.

The question of when disorder becomes preferable to imposed order further complicates this dynamic. While order is often treated as an unquestioned good, history suggests that certain forms of imposed stability can be deeply destructive. Political systems that maintain order through repression, coercion, and the systematic denial of agency may prevent immediate violence, but they sow the seeds of long-term instability (Holsti, 1964). In such cases, order becomes brittle, dependent on continuous enforcement rather than genuine legitimacy. When authority collapses, the resulting disorder is often more severe than the instability it replaced.

From this perspective, disorder can appear preferable to a false or imposed order that suppresses political expression and moral accountability. Revolutionary movements, decolonisation struggles, and popular uprisings have often embraced instability as a necessary cost of political transformation. These moments reflect a judgment that the ethical deficiencies of the existing order outweigh the risks of uncertainty and conflict. However, this

judgment is itself fraught with moral ambiguity. Disorder disproportionately harms the most vulnerable, disrupts social cohesion, and creates opportunities for violence and exploitation. Choosing disorder over imposed order is therefore not a morally pure alternative but a tragic choice between competing harms. This tension is particularly evident in contemporary conflicts, where external actors must decide whether to prioritise stability or justice. Intervening to uphold moral principles may prolong conflict, weaken existing institutions, or create power vacuums. Conversely, supporting existing regimes in the name of order may entrench repression and undermine long-term peace. These trade-offs highlight the challenges of translating ethical commitments into effective political action within an anarchic system. They also reveal why International Relations theory struggles to offer definitive guidance. The discipline can illuminate patterns and consequences, but it cannot eliminate the underlying moral uncertainty.

Global governance institutions face similar challenges. Organisations designed to manage conflict, promote cooperation, and uphold norms operate within a system that lacks centralised authority. Their effectiveness depends on the willingness of states to comply, which in turn depends on calculations of interest and security (Baldwin, 2016). When major powers perceive global governance mechanisms as threats to their autonomy or strategic position, they resist or bypass them. This resistance weakens institutional authority and reinforces realist critiques of moral governance. However, the absence of effective global institutions leaves a vacuum that is often filled by unilateral action and the use of coercive power.

The emergence of a multipolar world intensifies these challenges. As power becomes more dispersed, achieving consensus on norms and rules becomes increasingly tricky. Competing visions of order coexist, reflecting different historical experiences, political cultures, and strategic priorities. Some states emphasise sovereignty and non-intervention, viewing moral universalism as a vehicle for domination (Bartelson, 2006). Others advocate for normative frameworks that constrain power and protect individual rights. These competing visions reflect more profound philosophical disagreements about the nature of political order and the role of morality in international life.

In a multipolar context, the question of order at what cost becomes even more pressing. Without a dominant power to enforce rules, international order depends on negotiated hierarchies, mutual restraint, and shared understandings that are increasingly difficult to sustain. Moral claims are contested not only in practice but in principle. What one actor frames as justice, another interprets as interference. What one sees as stability, another experiences as oppression. These divergences limit the possibility of a universal moral order and reinforce the centrality of power in shaping outcomes. At the same time, multipolarity does not eliminate the demand for legitimacy. Even coercive orders seek moral justification, whether through appeals to history, security, or cultural identity. This suggests that morality cannot be entirely excluded from international politics, even when power dominates. Instead, moral reasoning adapts to political constraints, producing justificatory narratives that blend ethical language with strategic interest. This dynamic mirrors Plato's concern with the alignment of power and virtue, albeit in a secularised and contested form. The enduring relevance of the Plato versus Putin dilemma lies in its exposure of a fundamental truth about political order. Stability achieved through coercion alone is fragile, yet morality without enforcement is often ineffectual. International relations unfold within this tension, not as a problem to be solved once and for all, but as a condition to be managed and navigated. The discipline's theories reflect different strategies for coping with this reality, emphasising structure, institutions, norms, or power depending on context and purpose.

Looking to the future, the prospects for international order will depend less on the triumph of a single philosophical vision than on the capacity to navigate this dilemma pragmatically. Efforts to impose a universal moral order are likely to encounter resistance, while retreats into pure power politics risk generating cycles of instability and conflict (Hurrell, 2016). A more modest and realistic approach may lie in recognising the limits of both morality and coercion, and in designing institutions and practices that mitigate harm rather than eliminate conflict. Such an approach does not resolve the question of order at what cost, but it acknowledges its permanence. The international order is not a final achievement, but an ongoing negotiation between competing values and interests. The tension between ethical aspiration and political necessity is not a flaw in the system but a reflection of the human condition as it manifests at the global level. In this sense, modern International

Relations remains haunted by ancient philosophy not because it has failed to progress, but because the problems it confronts are enduring and timeless.

Plato's insistence on moral order and Putin's emphasis on enforced stability represent two responses to the same underlying anxiety about disorder. Neither offers a complete solution, yet both illuminate essential dimensions of political life. The challenge for International Relations is not to choose decisively between them, but to understand the costs and consequences of each. Only by confronting this tension directly can scholars and practitioners grasp the actual stakes of order in an uncertain and multipolar world.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that International Relations cannot be understood solely as a technical or empirical discipline; instead, it must be approached as a site of enduring philosophical struggle. At the heart of global politics lies a persistent tension between moral aspiration and coercive necessity. This tension has shaped political thought since ancient times and continues to structure the contemporary international order. Modern IR theory does not resolve this dilemma. Still, it reframes it through secular concepts such as anarchy, sovereignty, norms, and power, revealing the continuity between ancient philosophy and present-day statecraft.

Plato and Vladimir Putin have been employed not as historical equivalents but as symbolic representations of competing logics of order. Plato embodies the aspiration to ground political authority in moral knowledge, rational hierarchy, and ethical coherence. In contrast, Putin represents a modern logic in which order is secured through centralised authority, strategic coercion, and the prioritisation of stability over universal norms. Together, they illustrate the enduring choice faced by political communities between legitimacy rooted in justice and stability enforced through power. The analysis demonstrates that it is impossible to escape philosophy in global politics. Even the most pragmatic exercises of power rely on moral justification, while the most principled ethical projects must contend with material constraints and security imperatives. International Relations theory, whether realist, liberal, or critical, implicitly advances assumptions about human nature, authority, and the conditions of order. Ignoring these assumptions does not eliminate their influence; instead, it renders them unexamined and potentially misleading.

For this reason, IR theory must remain ethically self-aware. Such awareness does not require abandoning realism or embracing moral idealism but demands a recognition of the values embedded within analytical frameworks and policy prescriptions. Only by confronting the ethical dimensions of power can scholars and practitioners gain a deeper understanding of the consequences of their political choices. The fate of the international order will be shaped by how this tension between power and justice is managed rather than resolved. Stability without legitimacy is fragile, yet morality without enforcement is often ineffective. International Relations unfold within this unresolved space, reflecting both the limits and possibilities of political life on a global scale.

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