



A WORLD ORDER?

The nostalgia for a liberal rule-based international order ignores the fact that it was neither particularly liberal nor orderly for most of the world. The world has now returned to its normal state for most of history, namely, the absence of a world order. The signs of a disorderly world are all around us, but this should not make us lose heart.

Looking at the world today it is easy to lose heart. Wars, conflict, human displacement and suffering are at levels not seen since WWII and its immediate aftermath. To many, nostalgic for the certainties of the post-WWII world, the answer to our present discontents appears to be a return to something they call the “liberal rule-based international order” (LRIO).

This nostalgia is ahistorical and ignores inconvenient facts. It is ahistorical because for most of human history there has not been any world order.¹ World orders existed only when one power or a group of like-minded powers enjoyed overwhelming preponderance, and the balance of power was skewed enough to make it possible for them to impose their will and order on the known world. The Mongol empire in the 13th century, the period of west European domination in the late 19th century, and United States (US) hegemony after WWII, were the exception rather than the rule.

For most of history this was an interconnected, uncentered world, with multiple points of viewing in India, the Eurasian continent, South-East Asia, China and East Asia, west Asian civilisations, trans-Sahara and North Africa, and Europe. Most of the world functioned in its own regional orders or in multiverses, many of which traded and exchanged ideas, goods, people, and religions, but only occasionally impinged on each other's security and political calculus, if at all. Visions of global order emerged out of the British Empire, particularly in its final decades, as part of the end game of empire, and the ideology of the edifice of twentieth century institutions owes much to British imperial thought. For instance, the United Nations (UN) was designed and initially largely operated as an instrument of great power politics and as a means to preserve empire. That it did not remain so was despite the intent of its founders, men like Churchill,

Smuts and others. What India, the USA, and others achieved in dismantling the old European colonial empires through the UN must count as one of the great ironies and achievements of history.²

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The attractions of world order had grown in early twentieth century Europe, and not just among ‘internationalist’ progressives or adherents to One World ideologies. Neoliberals like Hayek, Mises, and their followers, with their experience of European fascism and disquiet at decolonisation, sought the building of a world order through institutions designed to insulate the market from democratic pressures. Their influence is evident in the post-war design of the Bretton Woods institutions. The triumph of neoliberal policies in the West in the eighties and nineties expanded international legal protections for foreign investors through a parallel global legal system, saw the emergence of ‘tax havens’ and zones of various types as safe harbours for capital, and reached its culmination in the founding of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Decolonisation was central to the emergence of the neoliberal model of world governance.³

Indeed, the idea of a world order is part of a larger narrative of linear progress through history culminating in the Westernisation of the world as a result of the industrial revolution (imperialism is rarely mentioned), and in the inevitable triumph

of market capitalism and liberal democracy, that seemed possible after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴ In fact, as we now know, the pre-modern was a world of not just a single scientific and industrial revolution that occurred once and exclusively in the West, but one that saw the recurrence of multiple scientific and industrial revolutions in the non-Western non-modern world.⁵ The world can be imagined in many ways beyond the Westphalian gaze, and has been so in the East Asian Sinocentric order, the Islamic cultural-historical community, the collective imagination of the south east Asian polities, the Buddhist cosmology, and the Indian view of plural multiverses. The nostalgia for a LRIO ignores the fact that the so-called LRIO was neither particularly liberal nor orderly for most of the world. A Cold War foundational myth in the West that persists today has the US setting up a “liberal rule-based order” after WWII, to which is ascribed much of the good that followed, such as the long post-war economic boom and the peace between the superpowers. But this is largely myth.⁶ US behaviour in the Cold War and thereafter has been driven by the pursuit of her interests and not of some mythical order. If that order seems fragile today, it is because US will, its interest in order, and its relative power seem diminished.

The “long peace” of the Cold War only operated in Europe and North America. The killing fields of the Cold War in maritime Asia were anything but peaceful. During the Cold War, an average of more than 1,200 people died in wars of one type or another every day for forty-five years. Most battle deaths linked to the Cold War occurred in what Chamberlin calls the Cold War's killing fields.⁷ Seven of ten people killed in violent conflict between 1945 and 1990 died in rimland Asia, in the almost contiguous belt of territory from the Manchurian plain, through Korea, Indochina, and west across cen-



tral and west Asia, which formed the front lines of the Cold War. Here, along Asia's southern rim, more than 14 million people were killed in warfare. The super-powers flooded the area with foreign aid, sending 80% of it to the "Third World" here.⁷ The Cold War also solidified the partitions of India, Korea, Palestine, Indochina, and Germany, often by local wars.

The other fact ignored by advocates of a LRIO is that world orders are the product of a great imbalance in power, when one power or state dominates the others as the US did the world economy after WWII, accounting for almost half of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at one point in the forties. That sort of imbalance no longer exists today. During the Cold War NATO and the Warsaw Pact accounted for over 80% of world GDP and a similar proportion of world military power. Today, the USA and China together account for less than 50% of world GDP and a similar proportion of world military power. Hard power is thus more evenly distributed, while South Korea has more soft power than China. Nor does domestic politics in the great powers support the emergence of a world order, for it relies increasingly on identity, emotion, chauvinism, and isolationist sentiment. The maritime order is fragile, as the South China Sea shows. And, more often than not, politics seems to trump the demands of a globalised economy, returning us to a world that is between orders or adrift, much more like what we have known for most of history. The distribution of power in the world is not such as to support a world order.

Our disorderly world

Today, rather than pining for a mythical past "order" that was not and shall not be, we should deal with the fact of a disorderly world, as we have done successfully for most of human history.

The signs of a disorderly world and of an absence of order are all around us.

- The era of the "West" as a geopolitical unit is over. The West remains the most powerful and influential actor in the international system. But the West is fighting within itself about the order in Europe, its home. The so-called "Western liberal rules-based order" died, not at the hands of its opponents, but of its creators. Changes within the US

and Europe have turned geopolitics upside down. The same Europe that is bemoaning the US abandonment of its allies and Ukraine, contributed to the decline of the Western order and its norms by standing with the US in supporting Israel's war in Gaza and Lebanon and against Iran, against the wishes of most of the world. In effect Gaza, Ukraine, and Iran further diminished the international order that the West created and led after WWII. Trump's diplomacy, if you can call it that, eliminates the legitimacy that gave Western power authority.

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- Multilateralism as we knew it is dead. It is now each one for itself and great power rivalry unmitigated by the pretence of norms or institutions. Unilateral military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia, Georgia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, the South China Sea, the Himalayas, Yemen, the Congo, Ukraine, Armenia, Iran and elsewhere have become the new normal. Don't look to the international system for solutions to transnational or bilateral problems. The WTO is an example of the long half-life of institutional decay and death. There has not been a binding international agreement on an issue of any real consequence for over a decade and a half.
- The US is reworking the purposes of her power in what amounts to a Cultural Revolution of her own. Transnational issues now do not interest the most powerful actor in the international system. The examples are legion. On climate and energy policy, for instance, it is "drill baby drill." Trump is not the "lone wolf" that his opponents portray him as. President Trump is not just a shock; he is indicative of longer-term historic trends. America has changed. The coalition that supported US glo-

balism in its liberal variant has collapsed. We should not underestimate Mr. Trump. In foreign policy terms, the coalition behind Mr. Trump includes three separate streams: US primacists like Rubio, prioritisers like Eldridge Colby, and restrainers shading into isolationists like Bannon. When two of these three unite, as did prioritisers and restrainers on Ukraine, you get clear policy directions, and very different ones from what we have got used to from US liberal globalists. This is a historic shift. Does President Trump have a doctrine or a strategy? No consistent long-term strategy or doctrine seems visible yet. There does seem to be ideology at work in his motley coalition. His neo-reactionary libertarian "Dark Enlightenment" supporters like Musk and Thiel believe in dismantling the state, support white supremacy in the name of "race realism," regard democracy as "horseradish" or worse, and want corporates and technocrats to exercise real power – "an acceleration of capitalism to the fascist point" (Benjamin Noys). For them technology is a revolutionary force that can liberate society from government and ultimately render the state obsolete. They propelled JD Vance into the Senate and the vice-presidency, and funded Mr. Trump's victory. There is also discussion of a Mar-a-Lago currency accord, bringing down the dollar's value, and then going beyond the Plaza Accords of the 1980s by continuing and escalating neoliberal ideas.

- The US drift to protectionism, isolationism, xenophobia (I dare say racism among some of Mr Trump's followers), and so on, is real and significant and will probably last for a while. President Trump's Middle East policy is not very different from Biden's, letting Netanyahu do what he wants, but without the pretence of even-handedness and even embracing ethnic cleansing. Nor is there any attempt to disguise disdain for the Global South. Europe's geopolitical significance has declined. The end of the Cold War enabled the US to dispense with old allies in favour of new ones more fit for the purpose of preventing China's rise as a peer competitor to the USA. What happens in Ukraine is primarily about the European security order. It has second order



effects on most of the world but won't affect the main contradiction between China and the USA. On China too, so far it is more of the same, though he may well seek a grand bargain. On Trade, Taiwan, Tariffs & Tech, the four terrible Ts of US China policy, the jury is still out, and Mr. Trump could go either way. More uncertainty.

- China's trajectory has become critical to international developments. China is entering a period of major domestic adjustment: economic, social and political; as did the miracle East Asian economies (Japan, Korea, Taiwan) after a 30–40-year growth spurt. As Russ Doshi points out: China's 'strategy is working. Since China joined the WTO, the U.S. share of global manufacturing fell by roughly half while China's share quintupled from 6% to 30%. Beijing can leverage this incredible manufacturing dominance to gain advantage and innovate. China is at the leading edge in robotics, AI, and quantum computing. It leads the U.S. in high-impact scientific papers and patents. And it accounts for half of all industrial robot installations worldwide, 60% of global EV production, 75% of global battery production, and 90% of solar panel, rare earth, and antibiotic production. In the military domain, the PRC has two hundred times more shipbuilding capacity than the US and is leading in new technologies like hypersonics. As Beijing's economy slows and its population ages, it is pouring money into industry and exports to fund growth and to reduce reliance on its dwindling supply of cheap labour.'
- Both China and the US are likely to be domestically preoccupied and driven for some time to come.
- A redrawing of regional balances is underway throughout Asia. In West Asia, Iran's influence has been limited in Syria and Lebanon by Israeli military interventions abetted by the US, and that influence is now confined to Iraq and Yemen. Iran's proxies have been defanged. The effects of the bombing of Iran by Israel and the US are still to become clear. Shifts are also underway in South Asia, Central Asia, SEA and other parts of Asia.

Today our world is adrift, and it is hard to see a new order emerging. We are in an era of great power rivalry and competi-

tion, and the balance of power is shifting. This is evident from: the pathetic international response to the COVID pandemic; from the retreat from globalisation, which can only go so far; from tensions in hot-spots ringing China from the East China Sea through Taiwan, the India-China border, and to the Mediterranean; in the faltering or absent or ineffective response to transnational issues like developing country debt, climate change, and terrorism. The last coherent international response to a transnational challenge was fifteen years ago in April 2009 when the London G-20 summit prevented another Great Depression and stabilised the world economy. There has not been a binding international agreement of any consequence on a major transnational issue for decades.

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We see signs of the absence of an international order everywhere: in migration, in local conflicts, and in the space that middle powers and revisionists see to pursue their own agendas – Israel in Gaza, Hamas in Israel, Russia in Ukraine, China in the Himalayas, Congo, Sudan, Libya...the list is long.

According to the United Nations, since October 7, 2023, over 1.9 million Gazans – almost all of the strip's population – have been forced to flee their homes but remain trapped in the Gaza Strip. Their plight contributes to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the globe. Amid war and conflict, climate-related disasters, and other humanitarian crises, tens of millions of people each year flee their homes to escape danger – but the majority of them never cross international borders. According to the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022 saw a record 71.1 million internally displaced people, more than double the number in 2012.

In this situation to speak of an international order, and to use adjectives such as 'liberal' or 'rule-based' to describe it, seems to me to be inaccurate, to say the least. What we see around us is a world between orders, where major powers disagree on the rules of the system and their own inter se hierarchy. What keeps us going is the limited agreement among major powers on what Kurt Campbell calls an operating system, namely, a few general rules of the road that the great powers respect so long as there is no cost to themselves, such as peaceful settlement of disputes, freedom of the high seas, and so on. This is the operating system that enabled the rise of China and other Asian powers during the globalisation decades. It is fraying, and the absence of an agreed global order since 2008 has resulted in growing great power rivalry. And yet, one can probably say that with President Trump's return to office the risks of direct great power conflict have actually become lower than before.

Competition among major powers is inherent to an international system of sovereign states. It has always been so. Some of us may have been lulled by the fact that competition was muted for about twenty years after the end of the Cold War in 1989 by overwhelming US predominance, but this was a relatively short period and a historical anomaly. Most of the 20th century and the Cold War saw fierce contestation in the international order.

We are now back to a more normal time of a contested order. The main competition is between the US and China, with Russia as a lesser partner of China, and is centred on Asia. It involves diplomatic, military and economic manoeuvring and a struggle for the minds of everyone else, though the ideological divide is nowhere as sharp as it was in the Cold War. The rise of China and others in Asia has naturally evoked pushback by established powers and balancing by others in the region. And, as in previous rounds of great power rivalry, we see a concomitant rise in nationalism in the medium and great powers.

Today nationalism is alive and well, and not just in post-colonial states. The idea of a world order, of the nations and state being conjoined, of a community of like-minded liberal and democratic

states, and of the remaking of the world in its own image, was part of the evolving origin story of European nationalism and imperialism. After World War II, it morphed into and took on aspects of both liberal and proletarian internationalism. To the extent that it reflected a post-WWII reality of a steadily globalising world, integrating economically, composed for the first time of similar units, the idea worked, was useful, and brought benefits to many across the globe. For instance, it made the UN possible and far more long-lasting and effective than the League of Nations.

What I see today is a world that is multipolar economically as a result of globalisation; it is still militarily unipolar but challenged in some regions; and it is politically confused. Economically we see three big blocs or areas of activity: the USMCA in north America, the EU in Europe and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) centred on China in Asia. Militarily there is only one power that can project military force where it will, when it will, across the globe, and that is the USA. And politics is increasingly local, populist and authoritarian, and local political considerations are driving foreign policy decisions to an extent not often seen before. So while the world economy remains globalised despite the best efforts of some leaders, politics has fragmented the world order. The pillars of the post-WWII order are crumbling: the non-proliferation regime in north-east Asia and the Middle East; the Bretton Woods institutions; the WTO; and the multilateral system based on the UN.

Some Chinese scholars are wont to say that this is a bipolar world, for the wish is often the father of their thought. After President Trump's return they present China as the status quo power defending an open international trading order and the post-WWII settlement. But this does not correspond with the reality that most of the rest of the world experiences. China and the US are mutually dependent economically, joined at the hip as it were, and are part of the same globalised economic system centred on the West. Therefore, there are limits to their decoupling. Besides, the balance of power between them is still asymmetric in America's favour in significant respects. That is why China, for all her unhappi-

ness with the US and protestations and friendship with Russia, until recently maintained the appearance of respecting the letter of Western sanctions on Russia after the Russian invasion of the Ukraine.

Asia has risen but has yet to find its own equilibrium both in the world and within itself. There is disquiet and dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements in the Global South.

All in all, we are amidst a recalibration of geopolitics and the global economy, marked by great power competition, with no end in sight. Asia has risen but has yet to find its own equilibrium both in the world and within itself. There is disquiet and dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements in the Global South. There is also no gainsaying the growing importance of the Global South. More than half of global trade now involves a non-aligned country. The Global South matters more. The South is the beneficiary of reduced FDI into China by the West, with about half of announced FDI projects before 2024 in non-aligned countries. With great power rivalry, the leverage of middle powers and the Global South on the major powers' increases. Today's geopolitical flux opens space and opportunity for regional powers. West Asia is a good example, with new initiatives by a host of local powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, UAE and others. There are balancing, hedging and other options for independent action today that did not exist in Cold War bipolarity or the unipolar moment when China and the US worked closely together. This is an era of coalitions rather than alliances, of un-alignment rather than nonalignment. The world is between orders and has returned to its normal state for most of history, namely, the absence of a world order. In such a fragmented and uncertain order, the means and methods to cope will also be ad hoc, tentative and impermanent. My mantra is issue-based

coalitions of the willing and able, as we see in the Quad, I2U2, AUKUS and other formations.

A liberal rule-based order would be a wonderful idea if it were ever realised, (to paraphrase Gandhiji's response to a question about what he thought of Western civilisation). But we are a long way away from that today. And until we address this reality in policy, we will continue to be surprised by unintended and unexpected events and consequences.

Don't lose heart

But this depressing description of the world should not make us lose heart.

To the historian's eye, this appears to be a hinge moment, a time of fundamental change in the international system. For instance, AI is a hint of the momentous changes that technology will bring to our lives. Like previous hinge moments, this is a time of frightening change for some, of dislocation and conflict. It is also a time when ideas make a difference and affect our trajectory for a very long time to come. Uncertainty about power structures, and unhappiness with past or current definitions of interests, create opportunities for fundamental rethinking of our assumptions about order and the nature of international society. This is a time when ideas form preferences and shape identities. This is thus a time when ideas matter. And in that there is hope. ●

Notes

¹ I speak here of a world order in both senses: as an attempt to order the known world, and as an ordering of international affairs on a global scale. A practical definition of the international order would be: the interconnected set of rules, norms, and institutions established by the great powers for managing conflict and cooperation.

² Mazower, Mark (2009). *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the UN* (Princeton, 2009) p.7, p14.

³ Slobodian, Quinn (2018). *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Harvard, 2018) pp.2-24.

⁴ A recent example of such historical telling is Fareed Zakaria, *Age of Revolutions: Progressive and Backlash from 1600 to the Present* (Allen Lane, 2024).

⁵ Heng, Geraldine (2021). *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2021) p. 4-9. See also Janet Abu-Lughod, Wallerstein, Andre Gunther Frank and other world-system theorists.

⁶ Allison, Graham (2018). *The Myth of the Liberal World Order*, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018 issue.

⁷ Chamberlin, Paul Thomas (2018). *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (Harper Collins, 2018).