

Reconstituting or Replacing the International Liberal Order?

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We are at an inflection point in world affairs. For several years now, analysts have commented on the possible demise of the liberal international order. As the centre of gravity of world affairs shifts to the Asia–Pacific and China continues its dramatic rise, questions have been raised about the capacity and willingness of Western powers to adapt to a new order which may have more Sinocentric characteristics. At the same time, the emphasis on the Indo–Pacific highlights the rise of India as a great power. These changes in the power constellation augur a world order in which Western liberal democracies, free market economies and the Anglosphere may lose their dominance. In both Europe and Asia, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the sharpening disputes over Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Korean peninsula, the security architecture is in contention. These developments coincide with the crumbling of the international arms control order and the partial eclipse of global and regional institutions. International institutions appear to lack sufficient capacity to manage challenges like pandemics and climate change, as well as the new global security challenges. What new norms and policy measures and institutional changes can bend the arc of history away from confrontation and towards a more desirable future? This workshop aimed to identify new research directions for institutes concerned with world affairs and global governance.

The Decay of the Post-1945 International Order

An international order comprises a constellation of states, the power relations between them, and the set of rules and institutions that manage their relations. The international liberal order set up in 1945 was designed to preserve peace and security, by giving the victors a decisive voice in the Security Council and setting up international financial institutions to prevent great depressions and foster development. It was intended to be a universal international order, but after the outbreak of the Cold War, it became a US-led order, operated to suit the liberal democracies. This continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The unipolar moment was President George H. Bush's world order, but this did not last long. The unsuccessful intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the financial collapse in 2008 undermined the US-led order.

In Western countries, China is seen as a disruptor of the liberal international order, but whether China actually poses a threat to the international liberal order, as the United States claims, is not clear. In many ways it has stakes in the liberal market system. Its wealth and power arise from its engagement with that order. It is not clear that China is seeking to write new rules that would transform the global order. Rather, it accepts the rules that serve its interests, goes along with other rules, and strongly resists rules it sees as a threat to its sovereignty. The United States is trying to limit China's role in the world order. China is a rising power and will not back down. So, they are on a collision course. China is able and willing to use force in pursuit of its objectives. But it is not more militaristic than the United States. The two are in a security dilemma.

The multilateral rules-based order was in fact not very multilateral. It included the United States and western Europe, but it tended to marginalise the Global South. The post-1945 order had a global agenda (in relation to peace and security, human rights, the rule of law and development) but was not very global. If we want a universal, pluralist, and global order, how do we bring in the Global South and other excluded powers, and develop an order that is more consistent with the early vision of the UN's founders and dedicated to a global agenda?

The main pillar of the post-1945 order was the sovereign equality of states and the inviolability of national borders. Since 1945, the number of states in the UN has grown from 51 to 193. International law has also expanded enormously over this period. What made this possible was strategic stability. Strategic stability is a fundamental requirement of international law. How can it be built in the current context? China's role is crucial here. Rules should be developed and shared by all, not imposed arbitrarily. The nonaligned should contribute to the creation of shared norms. International law should be foundational to the international order, whereas many current rules are somewhat arbitrary, and can be set and broken by hegemons.

International politics is a struggle for ascendancy between competing normative architectures, based on the interplay of military power, economic weight, diplomatic heft and ideas and principles of governance.

There are a number of questions that researchers might want to look at in relation to rules-based orders. Who are (and who wants to be) the rule-makers, rule-interpreters, rule-breakers and rule enforcers? What are the rules? What is the relationship between the rules and the order? How do the rules relate to power and to norms? How does the order put together norms, policies, institutions, compliance mechanisms, and ideas and principles of governance? Are the structural changes that we witness incremental changes within the order or transformative changes that will replace the order? What will be the place of violence or peaceful mechanisms in managing the transition from one order to another?

The politicians who operate the international order do not necessarily uphold it in the ways intended by its architects. US politicians claim that human rights and democracy promotion are key US foreign policy objectives. But human rights are not a US creation. They date back to the Hammurabi Code and before. In 1945, British and American policymakers initially resisted giving human rights too prominent a place in the international order. Even now, the promotion of human rights in the framework of a rules-based order is partial. The G7 summit in Hiroshima, which coincided with this policy retreat, made no mention of the abuse of women's human rights in Iran or elsewhere. In pursuing its human rights agenda, the US neglects the right to development, which the Latin American proponents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights argued for at the time of its drafting.

The US also sometimes uses the human rights agenda in an aggressive way to promote regime change, which challenges much UN practice. Moreover, in practice, US policymakers accept the idea of exceptionalism, and argue that in some cases, such as in its interventions in other states, the rules do not apply to the US. The parties to the Helsinki Final Act accepted human rights along with the principle of respect for differing social systems. This may have lessons for how to operate human rights in a more pluralist international order. The universal human rights legacy and the UN Charter do not belong to any state, but to humanity as a whole.

Smaller and medium-size states are the principal beneficiaries of rules and norms. For them it is not a matter of reconstituting the rules but of maintaining and respecting them. It is often the great powers who are rule infringers.

The Shifting Constellation of Power

It is clear that the structure of power relationships in the international system is changing. It is not clear yet what the new constellation will be. Who in 1937 could have anticipated the impact of decolonisation on the world order as it was then? Who in 1988 could have anticipated the end of the Cold War in three years? We lack the analytical tools to anticipate shifts in world order. It is clear, however, that the actors are changing, the issues are changing and the institutional arrangements required to manage these changes cannot stand still.

One view is that we are moving into a new bipolar order, with the US-China axis organising other relationships. If we measure power in the traditional way as a combination of population size, economic weight, military power, strategic purpose, and the will to use it, China and the US are strong on all dimensions. The UK and France are not. India's power is uneven. US military expenditure is three times that of China, and with its 35 allies no combination

of contenders can match it. It has a strategic purpose – to maintain the hegemony of the US-led rules-based order, and there is a domestic consensus on that. If the US is set to decline, its military strength will be the last pillar to fall.

However, the US has a fragmented and polarised political system, which makes it an unpredictable partner for its allies. The dominant position of the US in the world economy was based on its championing of a global system of free trade and the position of the dollar as the world's reserve currency. But the US has become a protectionist power and its financial dominance is under question as countries like Saudi Arabia consider writing oil in other currencies. If the US loses control of the world financial system, it will be less able to box above its weight. US allies have benefitted from US primacy but are vulnerable to the collateral damage from a US-China conflict.

The hollowness of Russian military power in Ukraine has weakened the Russian Federation's position, but the limitations of US power are also clear in the reluctance of the Global South to join an anti-Russian coalition.

The EU has lost its quality as a 'peace project' after Ukraine and is more divided than ever. The role of the non-aligned neutral states in Europe is diminished, with only Austria, Ireland and Malta left in this category.

China has a 5,000-year-old civilization, a big population, a strong state, a growing economy and more flexible access to capital. It is a 'world island' in geopolitical terms, with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as its umbrella – the world's largest regional organisation in terms of population and geographic scope. Lifting 600-700 million people out of poverty was a key achievement. China behaves like a responsible power in providing global public goods. China accepts many of the principles of the existing order. A more powerful China will seek to preserve the principles that are in its interests and change the rules that don't serve its interests. China and the US have to cooperate where they have shared interests, but they compete in other areas, including over the world order. This cooperative rivalry, some argue, will constitute the new order.

Others argue that a bipolar order no longer represents the world system, and that India's emergence as a rising power with a population that has overtaken China's and a rapidly growing economy might suggest a 'G3' world of the United States, China and India. India is defending its interests with self-confidence, maturity and clarity. Its Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar's call for a globalisation model sensitive to the needs of the Global South had great resonance there.

Another view is that the key global trend is regionalisation. This suggests not a new Concert of Powers, involving BRICS and the United States and Europe, but a more complex world of regions in the making, each with its own hegemon or leading powers. In the banking, financial and development sectors, new regional groupings are emerging. It is becoming a world of variable geometry with much cross-cutting membership.

The increasing complexity of the international system and the development of hyperconnectivity influence the nature of power and the ability to achieve outcomes in a complex system.

The Intersectionality of Issues

The issues that world order has to manage are growing more complex and more interconnected. They include the changing nature of security, the growth of inequality, the question of racism, the arms control challenge, the fraying of democracies, and the growth of polarisation.

The concept of security has changed. People are concerned now about human security threats, from climate change, biodiversity loss, pandemics. We live in a different world, not only because of the geopolitical issues, but because of the environmental and economic upheavals the world is facing. These issues intersect with many others.

A rules-based order must work equitably. The inequity of the economic system makes this a perennial issue. Inequality has got worse in most countries since 1990. Crime-related violence exceeds political violence worldwide and it is correlated with the inequality-adjusted Human Development Index.

The UN General Assembly has adopted more resolutions on racial equality than any other issue. Racial equality is a keystone of the international liberal order, but in practice racism is resurgent. Race intersects with issues of migration, poverty, climate change and health. It is an issue hiding in plain sight.

Liberal democracies have been instrumental in promoting the rules-based liberal order, but democracy is in decline worldwide. The global level of democracy has slid back to the level it reached in 1986, according to the V-Dem Institute.¹ More countries are becoming autocracies and fewer democracies. The share of the world population living in autocracies increased from 46 per cent in 2012 to 72 per cent in 2022. Countries with liberal democracies are now in a distinct minority and even in well-established democracies, the foundations of democratic life have been shaken by populism, attacks on judiciaries, increased surveillance, and the polarising effects of the social media. Partisan differences are hardening in many countries.

Human rights are under threat along with an increase in censorship and harassment of journalists, a growth in disinformation and a decline in freedom of expression.²

Existing mechanisms to protect security are being eroded. New defence pacts such as AUKUS threaten to breach the NPT. The old arms control architecture has almost completely

¹ Evie Papada, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Lisa Gastaldi, Tamara Köhler, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Marina Nord, Yuko Sato, Felix Wiebrecht, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2023. "Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023." University of Gothenburg: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute).

² Ibid.

broken down. There is no agreement on what should replace it, which states should be governed by it, or what its scope should be. Multiple states have nuclear weapons and there is no parity in numbers or capabilities or in conventional weapons. New technical developments in cyber, space, and electronic warfare and AI impinge on the prospects for deterrence stability and arms control. Technical developments are also making warfighting a more credible strategy. In the context of a trust deficit, poor treaty compliance and in the absence of a consensus for arms control, prospects for making progress are extremely challenging.

The AUKUS agreement was made without consultation with ASEAN or the South Pacific states. The optics of the agreement were extremely unfortunate. Giving nuclear technology to a white western ally, while forbidding it to others, reinforces the perception of double standards. It seemed to restate the idea of western privilege and hyper-militarism and undermined for many observers the legitimacy of the rules-based liberal order.

Other issues like food security and energy security need to be addressed within the context of climate change.

Hyperconnectivity brings issues together and the speed of change adds to their urgency. Tipping points can then generate crises. Resilient, polycentric governance with requisite complexity is needed in response.

Global Governance and Global Norms

Societies function through norms, which create expectations for behaviour. Effective global governance depends on some fundamental norms. Most states accept the norms which constitute international society, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, but many contest how norms are applied. A particular bone of contention at present is the argument between the West and the Rest over the failure to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The West argues that the defence of territorial integrity is vital to the rules-based order. The Rest accept the principle of territorial integrity but do not accept the Western agenda on Ukraine. Public opinion polls suggest a new global divide between countries that approve of the US challenge to the autocratic great powers, those that remain neutral, and those who are willing to align with a Eurasian sphere of influence.³

The United States champions the liberal rules-based order yet is willing to adopt unilateral trade sanctions, protectionist policies and a selective approach to international protocols.

Russia promotes its adherence to the principles of the UN Charter, the OSCE and other international standards, but is widely seen to have violated them in its invasion of Ukraine.

³ Foa, R.S., Mollat, M., Isha, H., Romero-Vidal, X., Evans, D., & Klassen, A.J. 2022. "A World Divided: Russia, China and the West." Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.90281>

In Europe, the OSCE is paralysed, the Council of Europe is side-lined and the EU, which was based on the norms of peace and economic cooperation, has become a leader in a war effort.

Japan has lost the normative direction set by its peace constitution. It is turning back to becoming a sovereign state with usable military power. Under the conservative government, Japan is preparing to engage in collective defence, export weapons, and double its defence budget.

China accepts and promotes the principles of the UN Charter, especially sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in states' internal affairs, and has also accepted the 'Responsibility To Protect', but rejects western interpretations of human rights principles as they apply to China. China emphasises its commitment to the norms and principles laid out in the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative and the Global Intercivilizational Initiative, but critics argue these are declaratory norms, and that China (like the US) considers itself an exceptional power, entitled to interpret how international norms apply to its own behaviour and to contest their application to its own minorities and the territories it claims.

The Global South as an emerging normative actor has its own distinct approach

One possible area for future research would be to examine which norms are accepted and which are contested in different international groupings. Who are the actors with the vision and normative capacity to identify a desired destination and a pathway towards it? Who are the norm entrepreneurs in today's world? Is there a single normative basis for global governance, or are several normative orders in contention?

In considering norms for the international system, it is helpful to distinguish between the short-term need to survive the dangerous trends of the immediate future and the longer-term need for a new normative framework that can enable societies to better respond to the challenges we face.

In the short term there is a need for new normative and security architectures in Europe, to bring the Ukraine war to an end, and in East Asia, to prevent a violent conflict over Taiwan. New agreed codes of conduct and dispute settlement mechanisms are needed.

With regard to international norms on peace and security, the top priorities are nuclear risk reduction and confidence building measures. States need to acknowledge their mutual vulnerability and undertake joint studies of what would happen if deterrence broke down. Those who have made no first use declarations should formalise these in dyadic agreements, perhaps starting with China and India. States should agree to refrain from attacks on each other's command and control systems and accept that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter other states' nuclear weapons.

It is unclear whether a crisis is needed to bring about conditions for moving ahead with arms control. It could come about through a bottom-up approach, if civil society could force

governments to engage, or through a top-down approach, if visionary leaders took the initiative. In the shorter term, military-to-military engagement should be revitalised. A dialogue between former strategic commanders from different states could be helpful.

In the longer term, reform of the existing frameworks of global governance is needed. On the occasion of the UN's 75th anniversary, the Secretary General's report on 'Our Common Agenda' was quite visionary. Member states are happy to discuss rules on the implementation of sustainable development, but they are cautious to speak about the long-term future. For many, the immediate priority is the existential need to stop things getting out of hand, and in this context, it is difficult and risky to think about the long term. Despite that, the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism has prepared a detailed report to feed into the UN Summit for the Future. It defined six shifts in norms:

- the need to rebuild trust, strengthen legitimacy and improve representativeness in global decision-making bodies (which they recognised is a difficult task at the moment);
- the need to protect climate, planet and people;
- the need to reform the financial architecture;
- the need for digital and data governance;
- the need for peace and prevention; and
- the need for anticipatory action, for example in preventing future pandemics and biohazards. The challenge is how to move from the present, a moment of fear, towards a more creative and progressive approach.

Faced with a world that cannot easily be changed, reasonable people adapt their behaviour to the world. But history is made by unreasonable people who set out to change the world. There is a tension between path dependence and a more visionary way forward.

Faith in multilateralism is declining, but the need for global governance is more pressing than ever. Existing global governance institutions are creaking under the weight of the myriad challenges that face them. All international organisations are confronting questions about their power, legitimacy, and effectiveness. The UN Security Council needs reform, since the P5 reflects the vanished world of 1945. It is a difficult body to reform, but reforms or workarounds remain urgent, nonetheless. The multilateral economic institutions, international financial institutions and the G20 also need reform. They have not kept pace with developments in the world economy. The voting system in the IMF gives insufficient weight to the emerging market economies. The global financial system is used as an instrument of foreign policy control. A package of balanced reforms is needed. The G20 is a premier forum for global economic cooperation, capable of combining the main economies with multilateral rules. But it too needs reform. South Africa is its only African member. There are calls for the African Union to have a seat, to represent the 1.5 billion people in Africa. Effective leadership is essential for multilateral organisations. Kofi Annan was a quintessential norm entrepreneur. Leadership is needed to reconcile interests and promote reforms.

In East Asia, ASEAN plays the role of a norm entrepreneur, and has shown that small states can be a force for peace, through deepening regional economic cooperation and a shared

normative structure, based on mutual respect for sovereignty. In the early years of this century, there was much admiration for the way ASEAN was pursuing practices that favoured comprehensive and common security, through the ASEAN Regional Forum. In 2011 Hillary Clinton even described this as the fulcrum of institution-building in the Asia–Pacific. With its 27 members, including extra-regional powers such as the United States, Russia, China, the DPRK, South Korea, Japan, the EU, Australia and New Zealand, it offered the prospect of socialising powers which have interests in the whole Asian Pacific region into the practices of the ‘ASEAN Way’.

Much has changed since then. Whether ASEAN will be able to cope with the impact of the US-China rivalry and the potential flashpoints over Taiwan and the south China Sea remains to be seen. The coup in Myanmar in 2021 also brought external powers into the region. To remain credible on the peaceful settlement of disputes and craft a regional agenda for global security in this context, ASEAN needs an agenda of reform. This should address its institutional mechanisms and its lack of crisis management machinery. The relevance of common and comprehensive security should be restated not only in response to the nuclear threats but also to the challenges of economic insecurity, inequality and climate change, which necessitate the cooperation between all the ARF’s members.

The relationship between the UN and regional security organisations needs to be reconsidered. Chapter 8 of the UN Charter was creatively ambiguous on this point. In recent years, regional bodies have taken enforcement actions without UN authorisation, albeit with post-hoc authorisation in some cases. NATO never wanted to be described as a regional organisation and has pretensions to be a global security actor. The QUAD and AUKUS are security organisations of a special kind, operating out of region. Is the international system changing towards one in which the regional security organisation might have primacy?

Between Sovereignty, Regionalism and Globalism

State sovereignty has revived in ways that recall the past. We are back in an era of territorial conflicts and malleable rather than fixed borders. International war is no longer seen as a thing of the past. States have asserted their authority forcefully, especially in the context of the pandemic. Populism and nationalism are endemic.

Yet sovereignty remains limited by interdependence and vulnerability to trans-border threats. These can only be addressed through global cooperation. There has been much discussion of overhauling international institutions, recrafting them, or devolving responsibility to regional organisations. Groupings like the G7 and G20 have evolved in part as a response to the failings of the formal intergovernmental organisations. International institutions depend on shared understandings, values and norms. If it is true that China can work with international institutions, then, through rebalancing and proper representation, they could be made to work. A pluralist pre-1989 type order could develop, which lets countries address human rights at their own pace and respects the difference between social systems. But if China and other emerging powers have more fundamental differences with the international organisations, the international order may need a more transformational change. This might suggest going back to something closer to the Concert of Powers, with agreement on only a minimum agenda as a basis for global order.

The present system of sovereign states and international order creates a number of sources of difficulty for global governance. First, states have the power and resources, but the problems are global and require multilateral solutions. Second, the UN system suffers from the gap between expectations of what it can do and the resources and powers to act; the failures of reform have exacerbated this difficulty. Third, threats to peace and security and to development come primarily from within states, but intergovernmental organisations cannot deal with that. Fourth, greater recognition is given to the individual as both the subject and object of international activities, reflecting an internationalised human conscience, but the basic unit of international order remains the sovereign state. Fifth, there are growing threats located in non-state actors and uncivil society, but these are out of the reach of intergovernmental bodies. Sixth, weapons of mass destruction challenge the whole existence of the territorial state. Seventh, every international organisation faces challenges of legitimacy, representativeness and effectiveness. Eighth, there is a mismatch between the number and variety of actors playing roles in civil, social and economic affairs and the concentration of authority in intergovernmental institutions.

Global governance can advance by filling the gaps between sovereign states and the international order. First, by overcoming the knowledge gap – for example, in the case of climate change, by providing data, and by analysing the causes and correlates of the problem. Second, by overcoming the normative gaps – for example, by setting the norm of staying within 1.5 degrees C above the average pre-industrial global temperature. Third, by overcoming policy gaps, for example, in decarbonisation and the introduction of renewables. Fourth, by empowering institutions, through embedding knowledge, norms and policies in them. Fifth, by creating compliance mechanisms, such as monitoring and enforcement.

If states join international organisations voluntarily, they can gain sovereignty rather than lose it.

International organisations could return to a new vision, similar to Roosevelt's four freedoms. We should renew the objective of creating societies which are free from want and free from fear. A universal basic income would address basic economic needs and underpin dignity, security, and survival. Young people should consider re-imagining the UN Charter.

Looking forward, the existing actors and groupings in the current international system are likely to be overwhelmed by the challenges of climate change and migration. State capacity may weaken as parts of the planet become more hostile to human habitation and existing institutional arrangements are seen to be insufficient. These factors will have a key influence in driving the constitution of a new international order.

Conclusion

'The Earth is one but the world is not', as the Brundtland Report said in 1987. How can we make the world one, at a time of fragmentation in world economies and politics, rapid shifts in the constellation of power and contestation over the norms of international order? No country can afford to see the existing tensions slide into outright violence and war. All countries benefit from sustaining peace and stability. We need to find new institutional arrangements in which peace and a common, comprehensive human security can be anchored.

The policy retreat suggested the need to sustain the consensus on the foundational norms of the international order, and to develop new norms which are underpinned by a recognition of the universality of human needs, human dignity and human rights. At the same time, it is prudent to acknowledge the differences in distinct systems of governance and norms, and to accept a pluralist approach to living with different systems with mutual respect. A rules-based international order is needed, but it must be one that is based on principles of equity, dignity, tolerance, a people-centred approach, and an ethic of care for all living things.

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