

World Order and Arms Control

David Holloway

Introduction

Our current discussions about world order reflect a widespread sense that the present order is in decline. Whether it will collapse completely is unclear, and so too is what will replace it. But the trends to which analysts point – the rollback of democracy; the rise of populism; growing trade protectionism; the weakening of international organisations – suggest that something fundamental may be under way. The renewed interest in world order predates the Trump Administration, but US policies since 2017 have deepened the concern.

There is more to it than that. The consciousness that the world is undergoing profound and rapid transformation at several levels also shapes our discussion of world order. We are witnessing dramatic technological change, with far-reaching social and political consequences that we are still trying to come to grips with. Three examples will suffice: the popularity of social media has raised questions about our ability to keep elections free from outside interference; our debates about Artificial Intelligence (AI) demonstrate how conscious we are of new possibilities that inspire both great hope and great fear; gene-editing poses profound ethical issues. To add to that, we confront demographic shifts and climate change which are acquiring growing significance. The processes of change – technological, demographic, and climatic – present enormous challenges for governance at all levels, from the local to the global. These challenges give a new urgency to the question of world order.

We can think about world order historically, as a succession of different phases of the international system: post-Westphalia, for example, or after the Congress of Vienna. Our current debate is commonly framed in terms of the decline of the West or the rise of the East. A second approach is conceptual: we can describe a particular order as a concert, as an empire, as a bipolar system, as globalisation and so on. We use these terms when we are trying to characterise the order, not merely describe its temporal parameters. The world created at the end of World War II is now often described as “rules-based.” It is sometimes argued that this is now being replaced by a world order of great power politics. In other

words, American predominance is weakening and the power and influence of other powers is growing.

Whether or not we accept these characterisations of the world order, there is a sense that we are at a point of transition but do not know what we are transitioning to. How can we ensure that these processes do not threaten international peace and security? How can we direct the processes of change and transformation to our advantage while avoiding the dangers that they create? What adjustments do we have to make to ensure that the basis exists for cooperative security in the emerging world order? This paper will focus on nuclear weapons.

The Rules-Based Order

The origins of the “rules-based” world order are commonly traced to World War II and in particular to the Roosevelt Administration’s ideas for avoiding a repetition of the economic and political disasters of the interwar period. The Atlantic Charter, the United Nations Charter, and the Bretton Woods agreements were among the most important products of this endeavour. It did not take long, however, for this vision of a universal world order to be complemented, and partially supplanted, by the two competing models of the Cold War.

The world order was bipolar, dominated by the two superpowers and their respective allies. Each alliance shared, to a greater or lesser degree, a commitment to economic and political principles that it wanted to extend to the whole world, along with a common hostility to the principles espoused by the other alliance. When we speak of a rules-based world order after 1945, we have to bear in mind that there were competing orders as well as a shared order. Moreover, there were clashes of principle not only between the competing orders, but also between those orders and the universal order. That was the case when one or other of the superpowers infringed on the “sovereign equality” enshrined in Article 2 of the UN Charter by intervening in one of its own allied states. A notable example is the Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty, formulated in late 1968 to justify the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia: “the sovereignty of individual socialist countries cannot be set against the interests of world socialism and the world revolutionary movement.”

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc marked the end of the Cold War. Communist parties continue to rule in several countries but with significant differences from the Soviet model, notably in their economic policies. The United Nations, which had played an important role in decolonisation, now had new opportunities, for example in peacekeeping, which had been stymied by the tensions and rivalries of the Cold War.

It was widely assumed in the West that the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of communism: instead of competing orders there would now be just one order, which would eventually extend to the world. Barriers to globalisation would diminish. Market economies and democratic politics would become the norm. The “democratic peace” argument gained popularity in the United States: a democratic world would be a peaceful world.

Programmes to foster democracy, and even, in certain circumstances, to impose democratic rule, would lead to peace.

These hopes have not (yet) been realised: the third wave of democratisation has stalled and gone into reverse; globalisation has elicited strong political reactions; trade wars have overtaken efforts to liberalise trade; attempts to spread democracy by force have proved unsuccessful, not to say disastrous.

The end of the Cold War has not removed tensions among the rules to be applied in the “rules-based” order. Sovereignty has been one of the focal points of tension. In 1999 NATO decided that it could not stand by in the face of a possible humanitarian disaster in Kosovo and launched a military attack on Serbia in defense of the Kosovar Albanians. The UN Security Council did not authorise NATO action, and would not have done so if asked. The Kosovo intervention sparked widespread discussion about the circumstances under which the international community (however defined) would be justified in intervening forcibly in a sovereign state.

This discussion pushed toward a redefinition of sovereignty from control over territory to state responsibility: states enjoy sovereignty only to the extent to which they conduct themselves responsibly in their relations with other states as well as toward their own citizens. The idea of *The Responsibility to Protect* implies that states are liable to intervention if, for example, they violate in an egregious manner the human rights of their citizens. That raises serious questions: who besides the UN Security Council can authorise such intervention? And is the system not inherently inequitable, given the disparities in power among states and the weakness of enforcement and adjudication mechanisms in international relations?

The point here is not to offer a judgment on Kosovo or on the principle of the responsibility to protect, but to note that the rules in the rules-based order are not always unambiguous and consistent. They may be open to different interpretations. The fact that rules can be contentious is perhaps a tribute to their importance. Otherwise why have arguments about them?

Cooperative Security in the Rules-Based World Order

The first attempt to regulate atomic energy took place under the auspices of the United Nations. Negotiations to bring atomic energy under international control began in the UN Atomic Energy Commission in June 1946. The advocates of international control regarded it as the best way to head off a dangerous arms race. But even in a period of great institutional innovation, international control proved too ambitious. Nor did agreements result from negotiations in the late 1940s and 1950s on general and complete disarmament. Change began in the mid- to late 1950s, with negotiations on partial issues – the comprehensive test ban treaty, surprise attack. The first formal nuclear agreement in which the US and the Soviet Union both took part was the Statute for the International Atomic Energy Agency, which was set up in 1957 and has been a vital institution in the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

In the 1960s, arms control replaced disarmament as the guiding concept for negotiations. Rather than aiming for the elimination of nuclear weapons, arms control sought to make the US-Soviet nuclear rivalry less dangerous by enhancing strategic stability (defined as the situation in which neither side, in striking first, could destroy the other's ability to strike back). Preliminary discussions about strategic arms control began in the 1960s, with formal talks starting in the fall of 1969. These resulted in the SALT agreements of 1972: the ABM Treaty and the Interim Agreement on Offensive Missiles. From then until 2010, more or less continuous negotiations led to a series of agreements (in 1979, 1987, 1991, 1993, 2003, and 2010) regulating the strategic nuclear balance of forces between the US and the Soviet Union/Russia. These agreements changed in character over time: from limits to reductions; from launchers to launchers and warheads; from monitoring and verification by "national technical means" to on-site inspections. In both Washington and Moscow, these negotiations were often highly contentious, but their net effect was to see a reduction to 1550 in the number of deployed strategic warheads on each side from totals of over 10,000 in the early 1980s.

Not everything went smoothly: the SALT II Treaty was not ratified, for example, but the two sides did agree not to undermine its provisions. The US withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, over strong Russian objections and continuing unhappiness. Nonetheless, the almost fifty years of strategic arms control was one of the most important security innovations of the post-World War II world order. Apart from limiting and reducing strategic nuclear forces, arms control helped in the management of the US-Soviet/Russian strategic nuclear relationship by providing an element of predictability and reassurance. The agreements also created institutional mechanisms for the resolution of disputes over the implementation of the agreements.

Following William Walker, we can think of the global nuclear order as consisting broadly of two main elements.¹ The first is the "managed system of military engagement with nuclear technology." US-Soviet/Russian arms control, which seeks to ensure that deterrence is stable, is a prime example of that element. Management of the US-Soviet/Russian nuclear relationship has been one of the key examples of cooperative security in the post-World War II period. Two intense rivals, armed with enormous destructive power, have so far managed their relationship in such a way as to prevent a nuclear war, which they understand would be catastrophic for both and for the world as a whole.

The second element in the nuclear order, in Walker's words, is the "managed system of military abstinence from, and civil engagement with, nuclear technology." This refers to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the associated agreements, which seek to stop the spread of nuclear weapons even while encouraging the development of nuclear power. This too is closely linked to the idea of world order. The literature on the "rules-based order" ascribes to the United States the dominant role in the formation and maintenance of that order. There is a key paragraph in the 1965 Gilpatric Report on nuclear nonproliferation

¹ William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace* (New York: Routledge, 2012) pp. 23-24.

that connects the American role in world order with nuclear nonproliferation. The report, which was commissioned by President Johnson after the Chinese nuclear test in October 1964, states: “as additional nations obtained nuclear weapons, our diplomatic and military influence would wane, and strong pressures would arise to retreat to isolation to avoid the risk of involvement in nuclear war.”² A proliferated world might make it impossible for the US to retain its central position in world politics.

These two elements in the nuclear order are the result of cooperation between United States and the Soviet Union, the leading protagonists in the Cold War. They are also based on divergent premises. Strategic arms control aims to stabilise nuclear deterrence. (But the danger remains of accidents, miscalculation, and terrorism.) The nonproliferation regime aims to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, on the grounds that the world would be more dangerous if more states had nuclear weapons; i.e. it does not see nuclear deterrence as a guarantee of peace. Kenneth Waltz made the argument that if deterrence worked, then more nuclear weapons states would lead to a more peaceful world because nuclear deterrence would spread its beneficent effects more widely. That argument shocked many people and is not widely accepted by governments. Article 6 of the NPT suggests the opposite by committing parties to the treaty “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.”

The Decline of the Rules-Based Order

Sometimes the transition from one world order to another is marked by a clean break, like the final defeat of Napoleon, for example, or the end of World War I. But our transition seems more gradual and ambiguous: one state of world order is fraying, and another is beginning to emerge. How clean the break will be is not clear; nor is it clear what will follow it. When we look back, what will we identify as the key date – the end of the Cold War or the financial crash of 2008 perhaps? One thing is clear: we do not have a Congress of Vienna or a Paris Peace Conference to map out the new world order. That may – or may not – be a bad thing.

Nuclear weapons have not been used in war since 1945, and fewer states than anticipated have acquired them. The nuclear order outlined above has made its contribution to these outcomes; so too has a fair measure of luck. That order is now facing serious problems. We appear to be coming to the end of one particular way of dealing with nuclear weapons – arms control treaties between the US and Russia. The INF Treaty is no longer in force since August 2019. Since the signing of New START in 2010 there have been no negotiations between the United States and Russia on a new strategic arms treaty. New START could be extended for five years until 2026 by agreement of the US and Russian governments; no

² Report by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, January 1965, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, vol. XI, Arms Control and Disarmament*, Document 64, p. 174.

ratification by the Congress or the Duma would be needed. It is, however, not clear that that will happen.

There appears to be little interest on either side in a resumption of arms control negotiations. One reason seems to be that strategic stability (in the sense defined above) has lost its salience in the discussion of arms control. That concept offered a way of quantifying deterrence by making it possible to calculate the destruction a retaliatory strike needed to be able to inflict on an aggressor in order to deter him. Calculations of the capacity to inflict assured destruction could be made for different scenarios, thus providing criteria for decisions about force levels and force structure.

Now, however, many experts believe that strategic stability can no longer be defined in that way. Ballistic missile defenses, precision-guided munitions, non-nuclear strategic ballistic and cruise missiles, hypersonic missiles, anti-satellite weapons and space-based weapons, and cyber weapons all have to be factored in, not to mention under-water drones and nuclear-powered cruise missiles, as well as the technological potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI). If we redefine strategic stability in this way, it loses the clarity that the earlier conception had. It makes arms reductions more difficult because it introduces elements of uncertainty and incalculability into the negotiations.³ An additional complication is that the United States and Russia have called for a shift to multilateral negotiations so that the nuclear forces of other countries (especially China) can be taken into account.

Strategic arms control has played a useful role in the management of the US-Soviet/Russian nuclear relationship. It has provided a certain measure of predictability, but it is now in crisis. Arms control, as we have known it, may be at an end. A new period of technological competition, qualitative rather than quantitative, appears to be under way. The optimism of Obama's April 2009 Prague Speech is now far in the past.

Will this have an impact on the NPT, given the commitment to disarmament in Article 6 of the treaty? Will the nuclear nonproliferation regime lose its legitimacy if moves toward disarmament are postponed *sine die*? The Ban Treaty is an expression of the disillusionment and frustration that many feel at the slow progress toward a world free of nuclear weapons. The opposition of the nuclear weapon states and the slow pace of ratification by states that have signed it suggest that the Ban Treaty will not lead quickly to the desired goal of the prohibition of nuclear weapons. It is possible, however, that in a world without arms control of any kind, the Ban Treaty would gain more support in protest against the lack of efforts to deal with the dangers posed by nuclear weapons.

We will lose some transparency in the nuclear field if on-site inspections no longer take place, but other forms of intelligence will make up for some of that. Restraints and restrictions on nuclear weapons development and deployment will be weakened, as the aftermath of the ending of the INF Treaty already suggests. If arms control ends, do the assumptions that underpinned agreements also go, or do they remain in force? Will there

³ Alexander Savelyev, "Russia-US: On the Brink of a New Nuclear Arms Race," (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, August 2019).

be a continuing understanding of: the catastrophic nature of nuclear war; the dangers of crises; the interconnection between offense and defense at the strategic level?

Besides arms control, there are two other nuclear issues that should at least be noted here. The first is the safety and security of nuclear materials. Since the end of the Cold War, this has become an important focus of arms control efforts. The second is the apparent adoption (or at least accusations of the adoption) of military doctrines that may make the use of nuclear weapons more likely, creating the danger of escalation to nuclear war. US-Russian and Indo-Pakistani relations are marked by such claims and counterclaims. This can contribute to mutual misunderstanding and to miscalculations, thereby increasing the danger of an inadvertent war.

Thinking about the Future

Some elements of the current world order are likely to persist: it will still be an international states system. Tariffs and trade wars may change the pattern of economic globalisation, and additive manufacturing too may affect supply chains. But there are elements of globalisation – cyberspace for example – that will remain, even if national governments come to exercise greater control over social media. The global challenges we face provide another element of continuity. Climate change; demographic change; pandemics to name but three – cannot be dealt with only at the national level.

Notwithstanding these elements of continuity, the world order is in flux and it is not clear what will replace it. In such a situation, Kissinger notes, “everything depends ... on some conception of the future.”⁴

To elaborate on this point, four questions may be useful.⁵ The first qualifies Kissinger’s statement. The question is not whether a shared vision of the future can be formulated and implemented. That might only encourage efforts to impose a particular conception of the future on the world. The more productive approach is to explore not a shared vision of the future but a vision of a shared future. This distinction is crucial. Are the relevant parties able and willing to articulate a future that other parties would find bearable?

What is important here is not so much the answer as the question. We should not assume that a new world order would embody a single conception of the future. There might be multiple orders, as in the Cold War, based perhaps on ideological or confessional identities or on regional orders dominated by great powers. What matters then to each party is some assurance that the shared future provides it with a place it can live with. As Lee Kwan Yew

⁴ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014) pp. 371-372.

⁵ Colleagues at the Stanford Center for International Conflict and Negotiation have devised these questions to help in framing discussions about conflict. See Bland, B., Powell, B., & Ross, L, “Barriers to dispute resolution: Reflections on peacemaking and relationships between adversaries,” in R. Goodman, D. Jinks, & A. K. Woods (Eds.), *Understanding social action, promoting human rights* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 265-291.

remarked some years ago, “the concern of America is what kind of world they will face when China is able to contest their predominance.”⁶

This raises a second question: that of trustworthiness. Can the relevant parties trust one another to honor commitments and to take the steps necessary toward that shared future? Trust is an essential ingredient in cooperative relations. It may be based on the belief that those who are cooperating have shared interests. But there is a richer conception: “I trust you because I think it is in your interest to attend to my interests in the relevant manner. This is not merely to say that you and I have the same interests. Rather it is to say that you have an interest in attending to my interests because, typically, you want our relationship to continue.”⁷ If trust derives not merely from a coincidence of interests but from a commitment to a continuing relationship, then the enactment of a vision of a shared future might precede rather than follow the creation of trust.

The third question is that of loss acceptance. A new world order will mean that not every party can get what it wants. Are the relevant parties ready to make the necessary compromises in fashioning a new order? According to one account, the current transition in world order is a consequence of the decline of the United States’ dominant position. Would the United States be willing to accept the compromises necessary for a world order in which it enjoyed a less dominant role? Or would China be willing to accept restraints on its ambition to be a “nation with global influence” by 2050? Has Russia accepted the losses it suffered with the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The fourth question concerns justice. Can the parties accept an agreement that does not meet what they see as the requirements of justice; are they willing to work together to alleviate or rectify the most serious injustices that are apt to remain in a new world order? Order does not entail justice. One might want to argue that justice requires order, but the reverse is not true. Hitler’s “New Order for Europe” was not a just order. Order can, in principle, just be enforced, but to be stable it will require legitimacy, either in line with some principle of legitimacy or in terms of its capacity to deliver certain public goods.

These are very broad and complex questions and they raise many issues. If we treat them in a very schematic way, we can make the following points about cooperative security. First, there is a commitment to a shared future, in the sense that the political leaders of the main nuclear weapon states understand that the consequences of a nuclear war would be catastrophic. Second, there has been an element of trust between the leaders of the major nuclear powers, who have shared a mutual understanding that a nuclear war would be a catastrophe and wanted their relationship to continue. Third, loss acceptance is very difficult, partly because international politics are fluid, allowing the hope that losses can be

⁶ Lee, K. Y. (2013). *The Grand Master's insights on China, the United States, and the world* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013) p. 4.

⁷ Russell Hardin, *Trust and trustworthiness* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004) p. 4.

recouped. Fourth, the nuclear nonproliferation regime is a discriminatory regime. It creates two classes of states, but it has functioned now for almost 50 years because it does something almost all states want: it helps to set limits on the spread of nuclear weapons.

That does not mean that limited nuclear wars will not happen, or that a major nuclear war might not happen even though no one wants it. Such a war could happen by accident or miscalculation, especially through escalation from limited use of nuclear weapons. The nuclear danger is in some ways greater than in the Cold War because power relations appear to be shifting, boundaries of influence are being contested, and mechanisms of consultation weakened.

What is to be Done?

In light of this discussion, what recommendations can one make?

1. Extend New START to 2026. This may seem perverse in view of the discussion above, but there is one very strong argument for it. Extension of the treaty would signal that the two major nuclear powers are willing to stay engaged in the effort to manage their nuclear relationship. Even though the world is no longer bipolar in the way it was during the Cold War, Russia and the United States are still by far the dominant nuclear powers, possessing between them over 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons. During the period of the extension the United States and Russia should discuss other possible topics for bilateral and potentially multilateral talks: cooperation in space (dealing with space debris, or clarification of codes of conduct) or cooperation in early warning of ballistic missile attacks, for example. It would be good if other countries could be drawn into such discussions.
2. The prospects for bilateral arms control may be limited, but there appears to be a place for multilateral negotiations. The four Nuclear Security Summits between 2010 and 2016 offer a model that could be adapted to other security purposes. The aim of the summits was to lessen the threat from nuclear terrorism. Much was done (though much remains to be done) to secure weapons-usable civilian nuclear materials, enhance international cooperation, and take steps to strengthen the global nuclear security system. More than fifty countries took part.
3. A proposal for a multilateral approach to disarmament emerged from the 2007 call of the "Gang of Four" for a world free of nuclear weapons. The idea is to create a "joint enterprise" dedicated to nuclear disarmament. The initial impetus could come from a summit meeting of 20-25 states. Ultimately all nuclear weapon states would have to be included, and significant work done over a protracted period, to implement such a programme.⁸

⁸ James E. Goodby and Steven Pifer, "Creating the Conditions for a World without Nuclear Weapons, in George P. Shultz and James E. Goodby, eds., *The War that Must Never Be Fought* (Stanford California: Hoover Institution

4. The Trump Administration has launched an initiative called Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND). This is a response to the Ban Treaty and evidently designed to provide evidence of US good intentions with respect to Article 6 for the NPT Review Conference in April 2020. What it will ultimately amount to is unclear. 42 countries (including Russia and China) took part in a meeting in Washington DC in July 2019 to discuss ways to improve the security environment and reduce the likelihood of war among nuclear-armed states. This overlaps somewhat with #3.
5. Moves in the direction of nuclear disarmament and efforts to improve the security environment would provide more favourable conditions for sustaining the nuclear nonproliferation regime. This is an issue in which the leading nuclear weapon states would seem to have a common interest. There are dangerous nuclear trends in the Middle East and it is perhaps not inconceivable that new states might enter into a nuclear arms race. Cooperation to maintain and strengthen the nonproliferation regime should be a high priority for the leading powers.

There is a paradox here. I am recommending that the way to keep the possibility of cooperative security alive when the rules-based order has fallen into disrepair is to adopt procedures that can be seen as characteristic of a liberal democratic conception of world order.

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