

ON WORLD ORDER AND ITS FUTURE OUTLOOK

The phrase 'World Order' is married to adjectives such as new, old, emerging, and others often used in geopolitical and geostrategic matters without delving deeper into its fundamental inference. The casual use of the phrase "World Order" could be attributed to its pervasive presence in I.R discourse. The paper attempts to acquire conceptual clarity on the concept of the World Order and examine its meaning in the realm of international relations. The phrase is analysed from multiple dimensions: firstly, from a descriptive perspective that questions its meaning, and secondly, from a normative perspective that queries its application. The paper concludes with an examination of the possibilities of a future world order by contrasting the idea of the World Order and its historical construct since the World Wars against the geopolitical realities of the 21st century.

World Order in Definitional Terms

Robert Cox has argued that compared to the phrases 'inter-state system' or 'World System,' the phrase 'World Order' is better suited to describe the interplay of nation-states as other systems have durational and structural limitations. The word "'World' designates the relevant totality, geographically limited by the range of probable interactions," the word order in its literal sense could mean the absence of chaos, a system, and a methodical structure or system.¹ Hedley Bull defined 'order' to "say of a number of things that together they display order is, in the simplest and most general sense of the term, to say that they are related to one another according to some pattern, that their relationship is not purely haphazard but contains some discernible principle.". Headley opined that if, in societal terms, Order means a regular and streamlined mode of interaction between

¹ Robert W. Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (June 1, 1981): 151–52.

individuals, the same analogy can be extended to nations interacting in a pattern of regularity supported by specific structures.² The challenge would, therefore, pertain to identifying the stressors that would skew such a balance of Order and the structures that ensure Order. There are others, such as Robert Cooper, who have suggested a more normative meaning of Order. While Cooper does not offer a particular definition of Order, he infers that Order is essential to global well-being.³ He further opines that the erstwhile notions of hegemony and balance are not attractive solutions as the problems are global. Therefore, the securing of the Order will require a truly international solution.⁴ It is also worth examining the dictionary meaning of 'Order.' The examination of the meanings of the word 'order' in the Oxford English Dictionary germane to this discussion highlights that it is "the state in which the laws or rules regulating the relationship of an individual to the community, and the public conduct of members in a community are maintained and observed, and authority is obeyed."

Building on the central ideas of Ikenberry,⁵ George Sorensen defines World Order as: "a governing arrangement among states, the current demand for order in major areas of concern." However, he further goes on to outline the uncertainty of determining its contours as realists emphasise the balance of power; liberals stress the importance of global institutions; constructivists emphasise ideas and ideology; and finally, international political economy scholars stress the significance of the worldwide economy.⁶ Meanwhile, Cox opines that the world order is a global system with three interlinked concepts: a global political economy, an inter-state system, and the biosphere or global ecosystem.⁷ Kissinger

² Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 3.

³ Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), 26–27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, New edition, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23.

⁶ Georg Sorensen, "What Kind of World Order? The International System in the New Millennium," *Cooperation and Conflict* 41, no. 4 (2006): 344.

⁷ Robert W. Cox, "Multilateralism and World Order," *Review of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 161.

has propounded 'World order' as an idea centrally about two components: first, an agreement on a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action, and second, a balance of power that restrains countries when accepted norms break down. He further states that legitimacy and balance of power are the foundational pillars of the 'World order.' Whenever legitimacy is lost, and the balance of power is altered, the idea of world order needs to be revisited. Kissinger posits that true statesmanship invokes the ideal balance between power and legitimacy.⁸ He further highlights that progressive shifts in legitimacy and balance of power limit cohesion in a World Order.⁹ Haass, highlighting the amorphous nature of 'World Order,' infers that orders are neither "automatic nor self-sustaining even when they are patently in the interests of all who benefit from them."¹⁰

The above scrutiny infers that the word 'order' in isolation can be a simple arrangement based on a specific structure. However, when used with the word 'world,' it can have two distinct meanings. Firstly, in its literal sense, denoting the presence of a pattern or an arrangement. Secondly, in its normative sense, the world as such requires conformance to an arrangement that can be called the 'world order.' Such an arrangement, in turn, could be driven by structures that help support the notion of Order.

The World Order from the 1900s

After the devastating Thirty Years' War in central Europe, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia sowed the seeds of the legal principles that shaped the foundation of the European states' relations. The foundation of the Peace of Westphalia shaped the contours of the diplomatic interactions between nation-states.¹¹ These

⁸ Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, Penguin Politics (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹⁰ Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York, New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 27–30.

¹¹ Hendrik Spruyt, "The End of Empire and the Extension of the Westphalian System: The Normative Basis of the Modern State Order," *International Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (2000): 87–88.

structures centred on the principle of sovereignty have evolved over the last four hundred years to shape what we recognise as a system of state interaction centred around a separation between international and domestic affairs and the sanctity of sovereignty.¹²

In the early 1900s, the unification of Germany and the altering of the power balance in Europe, coupled with the increased militarisation of Europe, began to fray the European Order, eventually leading to the Great War. After World War I, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, while echoing the idea of the League of Nations, used the phrase 'New World Order.' Using the words meant creating a system of states interacting in manners to preserve international security and secure peace. The Order proposed by Woodrow Wilson was essentially the European Order extended to the globe. He outlined his vision in his famous 14-point speech.¹³ Although the League of Nations had mechanisms for the resolution of disputes, no country was willing to enforce them, and defaulters such as Italy, Japan, and Germany quietly pulled out. The Versailles order disturbed both legitimacy and equilibrium. The imbalance was further compounded by the Treaty of Versailles being "too punitive for conciliation and too lenient to keep Germany from rearming." Eventually, before the Second World War, the European Order had been effectively dismantled.¹⁴

The Second World War ended with the world perched on the threshold of the Cold War with the emergence of a bipolar order. Still, unlike the Peace of Versailles, the defeated were admitted into the global system of Order. The World Order created after the Second World War was shaped by the U.S.-led political, economic, and strategic structures to prevent the outbreak of another great war.¹⁵ The vision of the World Order after the Second World War was supposedly global;

¹² Kissinger, *World Order*, 3.

¹³ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson, Alliances, and the League of Nations," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5, no. 2 (2006): 142–43.

¹⁴ Kissinger, *World Order*, 82–86.

¹⁵ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 180.

however, it was weighed down by the U.S. and the West's desire to contain the Soviet Union and, therefore, ended up being a "Western-centred system."¹⁶ One of the key differences from the World Order after the Second World War was its division into two halves: one centred on the U.S. with a liberal democratic outlook. In contrast, the second half, led by the erstwhile USSR, was supported by countries with communist leanings. Furthermore, the creation of NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation led to the creation of two military blocks. Another distinct nature of the Order was the sharp ideological differences forcing nations to choose to settle in one of the blocks.

The U.S.-led World Order after the Second World War has also been called *Pax Americana*. The Order was centred on four pillars. Firstly, reconstruction of the world including the defeated, secondly; the stability of two ideological orders coexisting with an understanding of the limits of interference, thirdly, U.S. internal unity based on the fight against communism and the "end of racial segregation" and lastly the slow decolonisation of the world.¹⁷ This Bipolar world, along with the ideological clatter of communism versus liberal democratic thought, was the default World Order till the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. Surprisingly, this was a four-decade period of stability for Europe, with the ideological struggles and battlegrounds being relegated to the 'Third World.'¹⁸

Charles Krauthammer has argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the creation of a truly "Unipolar moment" with the U.S. as the single pole. He suggested that the transition to multipolarity was imminent as other countries in both Europe and Asia narrowed the power gap with the U.S.¹⁹ Commenting on the contours of the World Order post-Cold War, Francis Fukuyama postulated that the end of the Cold War was "the ultimate triumph of the Western Liberal

¹⁶ G. John Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2011): 60–61.

¹⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein, "The World-System after the Cold War," *Journal of Peace Research* 30, no. 1 (1993): 1–2.

¹⁸ James C. Hsiung, "The Post-Cold-War World Order and the Gulf Crisis," *Asian Affairs* 18, no. 1 (1991): 32.

¹⁹ Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 24–25.

democracy was the final form of human government."²⁰ Meanwhile, others have argued that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was the beginning of the rise of multipolarity and the creation of a diffused global order.²¹

Future Outlook of World Order

The **Hegemonic theory** advocated by Krasner and Web has often been used to describe the construct of the World Order. They argued that "a hegemonic distribution of power, defined as one in which a single state has a predominance of power, is most conducive to the establishment of a stable, open international economic system."²² However, this theory has been criticised for fundamental incongruities such as flawed interpretation of power as a guarantor of economic Order and ethnocentricity.²³ Furthermore, the fervent charge of globalisation supported by international trade structures and bilateral trade agreements no longer needs the security guarantee of a hegemon, nor can a single power provide a guarantee on such a gargantuan scale, effectively negating the Hegemonic Theory.

Some political scientists have also argued that the Liberal World Order and the Rules-based World Order have not served the interests of the Global South. It is an order run by the privileged West and discounts the majority's interests. Therefore, the need of the hour is the evolution of a "**Multiplex World Order.**" Such an Order would have no hegemony by any single power or bloc, would respect cultural diversity and multiculturalism and reject the clash of civilisations idea; would be connected by economic and other exchanges that would not be led by the West but by the Rest; and would feature a multi-level governance system

²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–4.

²¹ Charles W. Kegley and Gregory A. Raymond, "Must We Fear a Post-Cold War Multipolar System?," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 3 (1992): 573–74.

²² Michael C. Webb and Stephen D. Krasner, "Hegemonic Stability Theory: An Empirical Assessment," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 183.

²³ Isabelle Grunberg, "Exploring the 'Myth' of Hegemonic Stability," *International Organization* 44, no. 4 (1990): 44–47.

in which regionalism would play a central role.²⁴ While the debates alluding to such an egalitarian World Order abound, the underlying principle for its creation is that the West would have to surrender its privileged position on the high table. The Multiplex World Order appears to be a non-starter from the get-go.

The World Order has also been considered an extension of the U.S.-led **Liberal Order**. The Liberal Order comprises suborders such as the security, political, and economic Order.²⁵ The rise of revisionist and revanchist powers is challenging the security order, and the security scenario is becoming increasingly convoluted and unstable.²⁶ The political Order, while tilted towards democratic forms of governance, has witnessed the rise of autocratic regimes. The economic Order faces pressures with increasing instances of economic coercion, conditional loans, protectionism, and manipulation of international trade regulatory bodies.²⁷ The Liberal Order, in its classical sense, is no longer a valid proposition.

World Order could also be viewed as a **function of the politico-military balance of power, effectiveness, and relevance of international institutions, competition of ideas and ideology, and lastly, the economics of globalisation**. Accordingly, it is possible to outline specific trends that suggest the probable shape of the World Order. Firstly, the political and economic clout of the U.S. is ebbing, and its position as a singular hegemon is no longer guaranteed. However, there is no country of equivalent power to replace it. Furthermore, the consistent sparring between the U.S.-led West and Russia and China also undermines its purported hegemonic status. Secondly, the position of the U.S. in terms of its clout in world affairs and comparative power is gradually slipping downwards. Thirdly,

²⁴ Joaquin Matamis, "A [New] World Order: What, Why, and How? • Stimson Center," *Stimson Center* (blog), July 12, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/a-new-world-order-what-why-and-how/>. Accessed 14 Mar 24.

²⁵ Scott Lawless, "American Grand Strategy for an Emerging World Order," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (2020): 127–28.

²⁶ Barbara Pisciotta, "Regional and Global Revisionism: Russia and China in a Comparative Perspective," *The International Spectator* 58, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 108–9.

²⁷ Lawless, "American Grand Strategy for an Emerging World Order," 130.

China's geopolitical clout and global influence are on the rise. Fourthly, the middle powers, such as India and others, continue to rise and will play a more significant geopolitical role. Lastly, the global institutions, supposedly the guarantors of the liberal world order, are beginning to lose their relevance.

In essence, the two fundamentals of World Order, as outlined by Kissinger, **legitimacy and balance of power**, are witnessing a churn. Nations are increasingly questioning the legitimacy of Western-led institutions, and the rise of the Middle Powers is slowly but steadily altering the balance of power. Global institutions begin to lose their relevance when the power of decision-making does not conform to the distribution of power in the world. Notably, examining the legitimacy of international organisations on yardsticks of moral acceptability, epistemic grounds, inclusiveness, accountability, governance, and comparative benefit, Keohane has argued that the United Nations Security Council is legitimate only by the default nature of its origin.²⁸ As the locus of economic wealth shifts away from the U.S. and the West, the balance of power shifts in tandem. Bringing change into international institutions with increasing stakes shifting to the rising powers while not disturbing the position of the existing players is difficult.²⁹

In his examination of the World Order, Richard Haass dismissed the idea of **multipolarity**. He argues that the power differential amongst nation-states does not translate to the classical interpretation of multipolarity as witnessed before the First World War. Haass opines that the new Order is that of nonpolarity comprising a "world dominated not by one or two or even several states but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power."³⁰ He

²⁸ Robert O. Keohane, "Global Governance and Legitimacy," *Review of International Political Economy* 18, no. 1 (2011): 104–5.

²⁹ Daniel W. Drezner, "The New New World Order," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2007): 39.

³⁰ Richard N. Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 44.

suggests that nonpolarity muddles diplomacy and challenges the erstwhile linear connection between power and influence.³¹

Globalisation has led to the world becoming increasingly connected, and therefore, the first- and second-order economic effects of geopolitical arrangements are increasingly difficult to comprehend and factor in. The conditions of globalisation in the world economy have also led to a distinct shift to an interconnected global governance model, widening the number of stakeholders and limiting their ability to shape the World Order.³² Haass has opined that globalisation has led to the dilution of power, further contributing to the non-polar nature of the world.³³

Technological hegemony is the notion that countries that dominate and monopolise high-end dual-use technology have the power to shape the international Order.³⁴ New technologies shaping the world today are controlled by a few and used by millions. The skewed nature of the chip manufacturing industry, with 70 per cent of total manufacturing capacity lying in South Korea, Taiwan, and China, is a prime example.³⁵ A select few also hold critical technologies such as lithography techniques. U.S. and China are at the forefront of technological competition in as many as 14 domains, as outlined in the United States Export Control Reform Act. Amongst these, AI, Quantum computing, biotech, advanced materials, space, and brain-computer interfaces can potentially alter our very existence.³⁶

³¹ Ibid., 47.

³² David Held and Anthony McGrew, "The End of the Old Order? Globalization and the Prospects for World Order," *Review of International Studies* 24 (1998): 242–43.

³³ Haass, "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance," 51.

³⁴ European University Institute, C Jones, and A Piebalgs, *U.S.-China Technological Hegemony and Japan's Economic Security* (European University Institute, 2021), 2.

³⁵ "Infographic: Where Can the Most Chips Be Manufactured?," Statista Daily Data, December 5, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/chart/31371/distribution-of-global-semiconductor-fabricating-capacity>. Accessed 19 Mar 24.

³⁶ European University Institute, Jones, and Piebalgs, *U.S.-China Technological Hegemony and Japan's Economic Security*, 4.

Epilogue

The world has arguably transitioned to a diffused state of disorder or even the absence of an order. This vacuum in the World Order is punctuated with the spasmodic diffused demonstration of power centred on economic and political competition. At the same time, the nation-states seek a position in the World Order based on their comparative assessment of power. While the desire is for a system of World Order that is more representative and inclusive, it would also be appropriate to recognise that rising nation-states such as China and others may not want to create a separate order but seek to harness the present obfuscated World Order to their advantage.³⁷ The rise of the Middle powers is also not written in stone; significant geopolitical conflagrations and economic downturns could cause premature termination of their rise. Under such circumstances, considering the U.S.'s inherent resilience and comprehensive national power, the world could also transition towards unipolarity, with the U.S. functioning as the Singular pole. The world could also move to bipolarity based on alliances and groupings, with one group being led by a grouping of nations that support the Westphalian idea of nation-state sovereignty coupled with the West-led liberal world order and the other led by the so-called revisionist powers. The Westphalian notion of the immutability of sovereignty has also largely stood the test of time. However, some revisionist nation-states have recently been using slow and sustained minor territorial transgressions to alter state boundaries in a gradualist fait accompli manner.³⁸ This trend is likely to continue.

The power of the U.S appears to be waning, and middle powers are on the rise; globalisation is altering the shape of state interactions, the influence of the non-state actors is on the rise, the global south is awakening to the disadvantageous international systems, international technological hegemony is

³⁷ Ikenberry, "The Future of the Liberal World Order: Internationalism After America," 57.

³⁸ Van Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Redlines, and Conflicts before War," *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 3 (2017): 54–57.

altering the shape of the world, geopolitical tensions in the Middle-East are at an all-time high, the divided EU is regaining its foothold, Russia -Ukraine war has reached a state of impasse along with increased geopolitical churn between Russia and the West, oil is still as crucial to the world as it ever was, the geopolitical situation in the South China Sea continues to simmer; in essence, the disorder appears to be the new Order.

The world order of the day and the near future are more bifurcation points with multiple possibilities. The present period may be viewed as an interregnum; the Old Order has not been dismantled completely but is slowly morphing; however, the New Order has yet to take shape.³⁹

³⁹ Sorensen, "What Kind of World Order? The International System in the New Millennium," 358–59.