

WINTER 2021 / ISSUE NO.18

\$ 15.00 | € 10.00 | 1500 RSD

HORIZONS

JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



THE (NOT SO) ROARING TWENTIES?



BREMMER • ČIČAK • DORSEY • FRIEDMAN • GENSER • GRLIĆ RADMAN
HERRMANN • KHAN • KHANNA • LANDSMAN • LO • MA
MINUTO-RIZZO • MYERSON • PETERSEN • RUDD • TROITSKIY • YUSTE

MASTERS OF OUR FATE

GLOBAL ORDER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA

Bobo Lo

JANUARY 2021: the start of the new decade. Picture the scenes. In the United States, a far-right mob takes over the U.S. Capitol, encouraged by the outgoing president. In Russia, leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny is arrested on his return to Moscow, just months after his attempted assassination by the Russian authorities. Chinese president Xi Jinping maintains his systematic persecution of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, while ramping up military activities in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. In New Delhi, the Hindu nationalist government of Narendra Modi sets about disenfranchising millions of Muslims through a revised Citizenship Law. In Europe, the EU is visibly struggling to cope with the consolidation of “illiberal democracies,” the rise of national populism, and Brexit.

It is hard to imagine a worse time for global governance since the end of

the Cold War. The liberal international order established in its aftermath is coming apart at the seams. Relations between Washington and Beijing are at their lowest level in half a century, as talk of a “new Cold War” becomes commonplace. The pace of global warming is accelerating, with little sign that the goals set by the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement will be met. The coronavirus pandemic continues to rage, as the number of fatalities worldwide reaches levels not seen in one hundred years. And the global economy faces its most serious crisis since the Great Depression.

So grim is the landscape that there seems little prospect of improvement in the foreseeable future. Indeed, things could get worse. U.S.-China animosity may escalate into direct confrontation. Russia’s relations with the West could see a further ratcheting of tensions over Ukraine. Global free

Bobo Lo is a Nonresident Fellow at the Lowy Institute, Australia’s leading think tank, an Associate Research Fellow with the Russia/NIS Center at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), and a Senior Fellow with the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Washington, DC. He was previously Head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House and Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow.



“Good Defeats Evil,” a sculpture donated by the Soviet Union in 1990 depicting St. George slaying the dragon and made from fragments of American and Soviet nuclear missiles

trade is under immense pressure from protectionist and mercantilist sentiments, and globalization may give way to “decoupling” and economic autarky. Pandemics could become more frequent and devastating. And the planet will certainly get hotter as most countries remain addicted to fossil fuels.

In these circumstances, it would be natural to lapse into fatalism, to accept the inevitability of major power conflict, deglobalization, and the fracturing of the world along ideological and normative lines. This essay, however, takes a different approach. It argues that, in focusing on the (admittedly

many) negative trends in the contemporary world, we surrender too easily to the “logic” of historical determinism and underestimate the importance of human agency and free will. For nothing is inevitable, and everything has the potential to change—for better as well as for worse.

Even today, there are indications that the 2020s could yet surprise us and prove a positive decade—whether it is a new urgency in addressing anthropogenic climate change, or a dawning realization among policy elites post-coronavirus that multilateral cooperation is key to problem-solving. The original

“Roaring Twenties” were characterized by frenetic escapism and the shelving of long-term problems—a course that led to global disaster. Our task, difficult but not impossible, is to ensure that the twenty-first century version is less “roaring,” more transformative, and more constructive.

THREE ARGUMENTS

This essay maps out a post-pandemic global order as it might evolve over the coming decade. It makes three arguments.

First, the liberal, “rules-based” international order in its classic, post-Cold War form is over. But a new, post-American system has yet to emerge in its place. Today’s world is characterized by power vacuums, fluidity, and ambiguity—not a new global order, but a *new world disorder*.

Second, the coronavirus has been a catalyst for pre-existing trends, exacerbating great power tensions and reinforcing nationalist impulses. But its most important legacy may be to highlight the universal nature of the challenges we face, and the vital need for collective action in response.

Third, the future, counter-intuitive though it may seem, is multilateral. The

2020s will further expose the limitations of the great powers. Geopolitics will remain important, but will lose ground to priorities of greater global resonance, such as combating climate change. Realist assumptions about order, power, and governance will become increasingly strained.

THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

It is a conceit of Western policymakers that they should equate global order with the “liberal international order,” also known as the “rules-based international order.” Consistent with this interpretation, the travails of the liberal order have become synonymous with the breakdown of global order *tout court*. But in reality the current condition of global order—what I call the new world disorder—extends far beyond a crisis of liberal values, norms, and institutions.

The new world disorder encompasses multiple other elements: a lack of clarity (or agreement) over the rules of the international system; the discrediting of multilateral institutions; the diminished authority of the great powers; systemic and personal failures of governance; and worsening conflicts over ideology, identity, and culture. The simultaneous action of multiple

Our task, difficult but not impossible, is to ensure that the twenty-first century version of the “Roaring Twenties” is less “roaring,” more transformative, and more constructive.

international order.” Consistent with this interpretation, the travails of the liberal order have become synonymous with the breakdown of global order *tout court*. But in reality the current condition of global order—what I call the new

destabilizing elements has meant that the very notion of a global order, of *any type*, is in question.

IRAQ AND THE DECLINE OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

The unravelling of the liberal international order has been an extended process over the past 15-20 years. With hindsight, the seminal event was the decision by George W. Bush to invade Iraq in 2003 in the face of concerted international opposition, including from NATO allies such as France and Germany. Crucially, Washington sidestepped the United Nations once the latter signaled that it would oppose armed intervention. The Iraq war demonstrated that, in the rules-based international order, the United States would decide what rules applied, when, where, and to whom.

The fateful decision to invade Iraq—what Zbigniew Brzezinski aptly described as “suicidal statecraft”—had two major implications for global order. *First*, it confirmed other major actors in their belief that the liberal international order was an artifice, designed essentially to put a gloss on U.S. self-interest. It possessed no particular moral legitimacy, but was upheld by American military and economic might. International norms and rules were all very

fine, but power mattered above all things. Those who had it were free to act as they pleased; those who did not were obliged to be rule-takers. This lesson resonated especially in Russia and China, two countries with long realist traditions and a strong belief in their own exceptionalism.

The *second* consequence was that American—and Western—power turned out to be much less formidable than first thought. Protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failure of the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, and the passive response to the civil war in Syria revealed the weakness of the liberal West. The United States was shown to be impotent as well as self-serving. There was a growing credibility gap in terms of both values *and* power.

The simultaneous action of multiple destabilizing elements has meant that the very notion of a global order, of any type, is in question.

Donald Trump’s one-term presidency accentuated these problems. His open contempt for liberal norms and institutions reduced the moral standing of the United States to a new low. The world witnessed a weird inversion of the normal: America’s democratic allies and partners were bullied and alienated, while authoritarian leaders were indulged. Trump’s behavior reflected an American exceptionalism with few boundaries. At the

same time, the limitations of American power were brutally exposed. For all his macho posturing, Trump was unable to contain the rise of Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific; prevent the expansion of North Korea's nuclear weapons program; constrain Iran; or defeat the Taliban. By the end of his four years in office, the liberal rules-based international order appeared a misnomer in every respect—being neither liberal, nor based on rules (other than those of power), nor orderly. Instead, it just looked weak.

It is both a cause and a symptom of the crisis of the liberal order that the future of a unitary West is in some doubt. Under Trump, transatlantic relations sunk to their lowest point since the Suez Crisis of 1956, while the European Union today faces unprecedented pressures. Long-held assumptions about common interests and shared values are being challenged. Democracy and the rule of law are under threat from the siren call of “strong” leadership and crude appeals to national, cultural, and ethnic identity.

The West has never appeared so ineffectual, or restricted in its capacity to shape global governance. This has been rammed home by the pandemic. The United States and the United

Kingdom—the standard-bearers of liberal values—have the highest per capita mortality rates among large nations. In the early months of the pandemic, the much vaunted solidarity of the West was conspicuously absent, as the United States and a number of European countries adopted a devil-take-the-hindmost attitude. More recently, we have seen the hoarding of vaccines by rich Western countries, delaying distribution of vital supplies to the developing world. Such behavior highlights the disjunction between the often pious rhetoric of liberal internationalism and the self-serving actions of Western governments.

THE TROUBLES OF MULTILATERALISM

The troubles of the liberal order are paralleled by a crisis of multilateral institutions. The United Nations and its various bodies, from the Security Council to the World Health Organization, have rarely seemed so dysfunctional. The World Trade Organization faces significant protectionist and mercantilist headwinds. And the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are under mounting strain.

The need for multilateral cooperation is self-evident, yet nation-states—the

The West has never appeared so ineffectual, or restricted in its capacity to shape global governance. This has been rammed home by the pandemic.

great powers most of all—have made it almost impossible for international institutions to function effectively. The difficulties are not limited to well-established structures. Organizations and frameworks such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) have done little to fill the gaping void.

It is emblematic of the troubles of multilateralism that the breaking of, or withdrawal from, international agreements has become routine. Trump's decisions to pull the United States out of the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and to abrogate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action over Iran's nuclear program, are the most salient examples of this trend. But Beijing's rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 ruling on South China Sea territoriality has been no less damaging. Moscow's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donbass rode roughshod over its obligations under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which had committed it to safeguarding Ukraine's territorial integrity.

The disregard of multilateral institutions and agreements by the great powers is not new. What is different is the scale and frequency of such

breaches. The former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has spoken of an “age of impunity.” National governments no longer feel bound by previous commitments, let alone imbued by a sense of the larger good. This is evident even within institutions such as the EU, where Hungary and Poland have acted in open defiance of the Union's core values.

DIMINISHED AUTHORITY OF THE GREAT POWERS

It is fashionable to speak of a new age of great powers and geopolitical rivalry. Liberal internationalism is dead, realism is back. If there is to be a global order, we are told, then it will emerge out of the struggle between the great powers, most obviously the United States and China.

However, the truth is that the great powers have seldom been more impotent than they are today, either in their ability to impose their will on others, or in their capacity to deal with the enormous challenges facing humanity. The United States, for example, has floundered in the face of multiple geopolitical challenges and the degradation of its moral authority. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative faces growing pushback as countries become increasingly apprehensive about Chinese ambitions. And Moscow's attempts to reassert Russian primacy over the post-Soviet space have been largely frustrated.

The major powers are able—sometimes—to obstruct the objectives of others. But they have shown no capacity to take charge of global order, either singly or in “Concert.” Over the past decade, various schemes for great power governance have been floated—“a new type of great power relationship” (U.S.-China), “Yalta 2.0” (U.S.-China-Russia), and, most recently, Putin’s proposal for a “G-5” summit (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) to establish international rules of the road. But such ideas have failed to take root for various reasons: Washington’s refusal to compromise on American primacy; the dismal state of U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relations; and the weakness and divisions of the major European states. Most crucially, the problems of today’s world are too complex and challenging to be stitched up through “grand bargains.” The “golden age” of great powers, when they co-managed the world and smaller nations did as they were told, is long gone. The great powers can barely manage themselves, let alone anyone else.

The coronavirus has cast an unflattering spotlight on their failings. The abject response of the Trump Administration made the United States

more an anti-model than model. But the crassness and ineptitude of other great powers has also been in evidence. China has touted its approach to managing the pandemic as exemplifying the virtues of its model of governance. But it, too, has been guilty of multiple missteps. First, it sought to cover up the original outbreak, and was less than

The “golden age” of great powers, when they co-managed the world and smaller nations did as they were told, is long gone. The great powers can barely manage themselves, let alone anyone else.

transparent with the WHO. Then it launched a primitive propaganda campaign that alienated not only Western countries, but also some of its neighbors. It used the distraction of the coronavirus to step up its naval activities in the South China Sea, in-

crease pressure against Taiwan, and conduct border operations against India. Unsurprisingly, the international pushback against the rise of China—already strong before the pandemic—intensified and broadened over the course of 2020. Xi Jinping’s vision of a “shared future for humanity” appeared no less hollow than the “rules-based international order.”

THE FAILURES OF GOVERNANCE

The unravelling of the liberal order, the weakness of multilateral institutions, and the incapacity of the great powers add up to a crisis of governance. This, in turn, has been aggravated by a collective failure of leadership. It

is a cruel coincidence that at this time of extraordinary challenges the world should be cursed with the worst generation of political leaders since the 1930s. Trump’s gross excesses (now gone but certainly not forgotten), Xi’s strategic overreach, Putin’s loutish behavior, Modi’s repressions, Boris Johnson’s evasions—these are only a few prime examples of deficient leadership around the world.

They reflect a larger systemic problem, which is that the culture of leadership and responsibility—not to mention basic competence—has become an endangered species. Political expedi-

It is a cruel coincidence that at this time of extraordinary challenges the world should be cursed with the worst generation of political leaders since the 1930s.

ency is no longer just a means to the end, *it is the end*. Gaining and holding on to power has become its own virtue, and governing secondary. Governments and leaders are trapped in a vicious circle. Aware that their legitimacy is fragile, they resort to ethno-nationalism and culture wars, deal out “bread and circuses,” and manipulate media and historical narratives. In doing so, they neglect the real challenges, which as a result become more intractable.

Such an approach is supremely shameful to global order. Leaders and governments are programmed to pander to domestic constituencies, not to think about the international condition.

The sense of being part of a global society is evaporating. The response to the pandemic has confirmed that most governments—democratic as well as authoritarian—take a narrow, and short-term, view of the national interest. This was typified by the EU’s agonies in negotiating a Union-wide economic recovery package. In the face of a common existential threat, member states focused almost entirely on themselves.

The coronavirus has revealed a fundamental disconnect between the global nature of many contemporary problems and national (and nationalist) approaches to

problem-solving. The world has never been more globalized, but the mindset of policymakers has rarely been more parochial. To the extent that they engage with multilateral institutions and structures, they do so with the purpose of socializing the risks and individualizing the gains—just like many banks did around the time of the 2008 global financial crisis.

THE END OF GLOBAL ORDER?

This phenomenon of national self-interest on steroids is largely responsible for the blowback against globalization and the principle of an international society based on agreed norms and rules. It has encouraged the

fetishization of history and identity, and a corresponding xenophobia. It has aggravated geopolitical tensions and widened normative divisions. It has fostered a winner-take-all mentality. It has led to a world more unequal than in decades.

Given these circumstances, it makes little sense to talk about the liberal international order as if it were still the holy grail. Equally, it is idle to pretend that a new “multipolar order” or “polycentric system” is taking its place.

Humanity today is experiencing a general crisis of global order—the *new world disorder*. Yes, a certain amount of anarchy is part of the human condition, and the contemporary world is a far cry from the brutal “state of nature” imagined by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century. There are *some* rules, norms, and functioning structures.

Nevertheless, the decline of global order is profoundly concerning. Not just because global order is desirable in itself, but because its degradation severely handicaps our ability to address concrete and universal challenges such as climate change, pandemic disease, global poverty, technological transformation, and the information revolution. Without revitalizing global governance, imperfect as it must be, there will be no effective problem-solving

—as the international response to coronavirus has so vividly illustrated.

GLOBAL ORDER IN THE 2020S

The legendary American baseballer and wit Yogi Berra observed that “it’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” There are two temptations in particular. The first is to follow a linear logic, to extrapolate from existing trends and assume that change will be essentially incremental. This approach is rightly criticized by thinkers such as Nassim Taleb, who argue that change often takes the form of big shocks (“Black Swans”) that we should have seen coming, but failed to do so because we were trapped by conventional thinking.

The second temptation is to cover as many contingencies as possible by offering a range of scenarios, an approach I myself have used several times in the past. But this has always struck me as faintly pusillanimous. So instead I am going to commit to a number of predictions about global order and governance in the 2020s, at the obvious risk of being embarrassed by events.

First, *the liberal international order is over, at least as we know it*. The election of Joe Biden has revived hopes in the West for a renewal of U.S. global leadership, a strengthening of transatlantic relations, and a fresh lease of life for the liberal, rules-based international

order. Biden himself has foreshadowed a “summit for democracy” and committed America to engaging once again with international institutions. There is no reason to doubt his sincerity or determination.

Nevertheless, the liberal international order is unsustainable in light of contemporary realities. The most influential is the changed balance of power in the world today. The United States lacks the capacity to realize its vision of global order, unlike in the immediate post-Cold War years when American power was at its zenith, China was in the very early stages of its rise, Russia was crippled by state collapse, Europe was beholden, and much of the planet was in awe. Three decades later, none of these conditions apply. The world has moved on, and will not accept American leadership in its previous dominant form or take lessons from it in international morality.

Indeed, Washington will find it hard enough to preserve the idea of the West. Liberal internationalism will survive as a policy and philosophical approach, but in a diminishing number of capitals. There are already clear signs of this. India, much touted as the world’s largest democracy, has become noticeably more authoritarian and nationalistic. Across the world, democracies are giving way to elected dictatorships and majoritarian regimes. Even within

the EU, liberal values are under threat. The Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2020 Democracy Index found that only 8.4 percent of the world’s population lived in what it called a “full democracy,” while more than one third lived under authoritarian rule.

This is not to say that Biden will be dissuaded from spreading the liberal internationalist message. He stands as the anti-Trump, the opposite of the cynical amorality of the past four years. His credibility is on the line. But he will also have to deliver on a hugely challenging domestic and foreign policy agenda. A far from comprehensive list includes addressing the public health emergency in the United States; rebooting the economy; mending some of the fissures in American society; combating climate change; engaging and competing with China; containing Russia; and managing Iran and North Korea.

Given these consuming priorities, there is only limited bandwidth for promoting democratic values and a liberal international order. Moreover, Biden (or a successor) will have to make difficult choices, for example, whether to ignore the bad behavior of others in order to secure key objectives. Although he has explicitly disavowed such transactionalism, that is easy to say and much harder to avoid—as illustrated by the fudge over Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s

role in the murder of the journalist Jamal Kashoggi. (The U.S. government concluded that MBS had ordered the operation, but refrained from sanctioning him.)

Second, *the United States remains the preeminent global power.* The various setbacks and humiliations of the United States during the Trump presidency have reinforced a declinist narrative whereby China supplants it over time and imposes its authoritarian model of global governance. Although nothing can be definitively ruled out, this scenario is unlikely to unfold in the next decade at least. While the gap between the United States and China has narrowed, America will remain the preeminent global power by every meaningful criterion—military, economic, technological, cultural.

In fact, it will not be close. Today, the United States has a nuclear warhead inventory (5,800) 18 times larger than China's (320). It can project conventional military power almost anywhere on earth. It dominates the global economy and finance. It is the leading gas exporter in the world, and in the big three (along with Saudi Arabia and Russia) for oil. Its technological power is unmatched, despite China's dramatic

improvement in this area. Its soft power is immeasurably superior. And, unlike China, the United States is supported by a network of political and security partnerships around the world.

The only power capable of defeating the United States is not China, much less Russia, but the United States itself. Trump systematically if unwittingly

American power is not strong enough to restore the liberal international order, but it is not so weak as to allow anyone else to implement an alternative vision.

undermined its global influence during his four years in office, and a future president could preside over further self-harm. Other powers will be quick to exploit any weaknesses and failures to strengthen their position. Yet even this would

not be sufficient to knock the United States off its number one perch.

American power is not strong enough to restore the liberal international order, but it is not so weak as to allow anyone else to implement an alternative vision. This is implicitly understood by the Chinese, which is why they prefer to operate within the existing international system, for all its imperfections. Tellingly in this connection, Xi's 2050 vision speaks of China becoming *a*, not *the*, global leader.

Third, *China's difficulties accumulate, but its rise continues.* For decades, China-watchers in the West

have predicted that China's rise would hit the buffers at some stage. Either it would be caught in the "middle-income trap," or the lack of democratic accountability would undermine the regime, or its leadership would succumb to the temptations of strategic overreach. In the 2020s, the most plausible scenario is the last. Xi has badly mismanaged the politics of the coronavirus. Just as he underestimated the pushback against the Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing's overly-aggressive actions in the Western Pacific. The cumulative effect of these misjudgments is that anti-Chinese sentiment around the world is greater than at any time since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

Anti-Chinese sentiment around the world is greater than at any time since the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

Nevertheless, China's "friendlessness" will not prevent its rise as the next genuine superpower. One braking scenario is a possible U.S.-China conflict in the Western Pacific. However, if there is conflict, it is unlikely to assume the character of a protracted major war. China would most likely be defeated, Xi might be ousted as a result, but the country itself would recover quickly. It is important to emphasize here that democratization and liberalization in China would scarcely constrain Beijing's ambitions. For many Chinese, there is nothing incompatible between democratic aspirations, nationalism, and an abiding belief in civilizational

destiny. China will compete with the United States, regardless of what direction its politics takes. And the gap between them will narrow over the coming decade.

Fourth, *the European Union remains a geopolitical pygmy.* European concerns about the reliability of the United States as an ally have prompted much talk of "strategic autonomy." The challenges presented by a rising China and disruptive Russia have also forced European policymakers to pay more attention to geopolitical considerations and hard power. The old days of the EU focusing almost exclusively on economic and normative priorities are over.

This new geopolitical consciousness will be heightened in the 2020s. Yet European strategic autonomy will remain an illusion, and the EU a geopolitical pygmy. European nations have neither the capacity nor, excepting the United Kingdom and France, the ambition to play significant geopolitical roles. The United States will be the guarantor of European security, and NATO's viability will depend on Washington and a substantial American military commitment to Europe.

There is a more fundamental problem. Over the coming decade, the European

project will further unravel, even as politicians seek to rationalize this by talking of a “multi-speed” Europe. In the post-Brexit era, divisions within the EU will become chasms. The EU will continue to be a formidable economic bloc, and “European-ness” an identifiable cultural and normative phenomenon. However, a political Europe, disaggregated and directionless, will steadily lose traction in international affairs.

Fifth, *geopolitics becomes less important, as the nature of power evolves.* This is the most counter-intuitive prediction of all, given the escalation of great power rivalries over the past decade, China’s intensive military modernization and obvious strategic ambition, and Russia’s military interventions in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. Of course, geopolitics will still matter; the vision of a geopolitics-free world is as fantastical in the 2020s as it was in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, other priorities will move to center stage, and start to displace traditional foreign policy goals.

Chief among these is the universal imperative of addressing climate change, an issue that is of far more direct relevance to the mass of humanity than geopolitical power projection,

the balance of power, and spheres of influence. The human losses from global warming (150,000 deaths per annum according to the WHO) and air pollution (7 million deaths per annum) vastly exceed those from all military conflicts since the Second World War. As we look ahead, climate change will also be the trigger for other major challenges, such as mass migration and

refugee outflows, that will impact increasingly on the developed world.

The coronavirus emergency likewise puts into perspective the secondary importance of geopolitics. In the United States alone, the number of deaths from the pandemic is already

greater than the total number of American combat fatalities during two World Wars and the Vietnam War. Even in countries where geopolitical priorities resonate, populations are experiencing great power fatigue. In Russia, for instance, opinion surveys show that economic and environmental goals matter more to the public than the assertion of strategic influence in foreign lands.

Public attitudes are all the more critical as foreign policy becomes “democratized” and less elitist. Greater accountability is changing the balance of priorities and sometimes the direction of

policy. The case of Brexit in the United Kingdom is a notable example of this. Similarly, the attention the Chinese government has devoted to climate change and other environmental issues in recent years is a consequence of the domestic backlash over levels of industrial pollution. The world may, or may not, become more democratic in the 2020s. But authoritarian regimes, too, crave popular legitimacy in foreign as well as domestic policy.

It is not just a matter of changing goals, but also of the evolving nature of power. Military might is likely to become less important in relative terms, that is, compared to economic influence, technological innovation, cyber and informational power, and political functionality. America’s prospects of engendering a post-Trump bounce in the international system are not contingent on its military capabilities. Russia’s ready resort to force has done little to strengthen its strategic position in the post-Soviet space. And China’s military activities in the Western Pacific have ranged a growing number of countries against it.

None of this is to say that military power will become redundant. However, it will be contingent on other forms of power. The competition for

regional and especially global influence will be fiercest in the economic and technological realms, because it is success (and failure) there that will decide who is rising, who is stagnating, and who is in decline. That is why, over the next decade, the United States will still be the number one power in the world, China will continue to rise, and Russia will stagnate (if not decline).

Over the next decade, the United States will still be the number one power in the world, China will continue to rise, and Russia will stagnate (if not decline).

Sixth, *multilateralism rides again.* The 2020s could turn out to be a golden decade for multilateralism. The coronavirus exposed serious flaws in the operation of the WHO and its relations with key players, such as China.

But more significantly it underlined the need for multilateral approaches to problem-solving. It is no coincidence that the worst affected nations have been those most skeptical of (or hostile to) multilateral cooperation: the United States under Trump, the United Kingdom under Johnson, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and Mexico under Andres Obrador (AMLO). To adapt a famous Churchillian aphorism, multilateralism may be the worst form of cooperation, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time. Without it, humanity has no hope of tackling an array of global threats—from climate change, global poverty and inequality, and

pandemic disease, to regional conflicts and nuclear insecurity.

The case for multilateralism is strengthened by the sheer impracticality of conventional great power arrangements and “grand bargains” in a twenty-first-century global environment. Great powers and their relationships will remain important. But there will be no twenty-first century Concert of Great Powers along the lines of the 1815 Congress of Vienna or a Yalta 1945 2.0. Any attempts to replicate such oligarchic arrangements will be futile.

At the same time, catching the “multilateral moment” is conditional on a significant improvement in the performance of international institutions. This will not be easy. Multilateral organizations are only as effective as nation-states allow them to be. During the coronavirus, it was the WHO’s misfortune, first, to be held hostage by Beijing, then scapegoated by the Trump Administration, and finally to suffer collateral damage from the further rapid deterioration of U.S.-China relations.

We will most likely see significant changes in the way multilateralism functions in the next decade. The United Nations may retain its formal status as the primary body of global decisionmaking, but in practice multilateral authority and influence will be devolved far and wide. We can

expect, in the first instance, to see a process of regionalization, a trend that has already been underway for some time—witness the emergence of groupings such as the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership).

Multilateral mechanisms will become more informal and flexible. Organizations such as NATO and the EU will survive the decade, although with difficulty. But tightly institutionalized partnerships and binding commitments will give ground to more open arrangements. These, in turn, will be more interests- and issues-based than united by common values. They may also be somewhat temporary, lasting only as long as a particular issue stays current and participating states continue to identify a stake in engagement.

Perhaps the greatest change will be the erosion of the dominance of the great powers in multilateral institutions. Middle powers and smaller nations will assert themselves. Non-state actors—tech companies, renewable energy providers, media networks, civil society organizations of various types (environmental, human rights, etc.)—will become increasingly influential. The norms and rules of multilateral engagement will be fluid and subject to various, and loose, interpretations.

There may be ideological conflicts, but ideology itself will play only a peripheral role, as state and non-state actors alike are preoccupied by the immediacy and scale of the threats confronting the world.

Seventh, *the world becomes more disorderly, but not necessarily worse off.* The term “new world disorder” was coined by the political scientist Ken Jowitt to describe an environment where the lines were blurred, rules were unclear, and there were “blank spots” or vacuums of power. Crucially, though, he did not apply the term pejoratively. He was describing the aftermath of the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. This “disorder” was a marked improvement on the oppressive Soviet-led order that preceded it. Disorder, too, did not imply military conflict, although it did not exclude it. Indeed, the post-communist transition turned out to be considerably more peaceful than many predicted.

The 2020s are likely to prove more disorderly than the last decade. The struggles of the liberal international order, the limitations of the great powers, the enormity of challenges such as climate change and the coronavirus, the growing involvement of non-state actors are all factors that

will shape world order/disorder. There will be some “rules of the road,” but the hallmarks of the decade will be fluidity and lack of clarity. This might seem a recipe for anarchy, and yet there will be multiple self-regulating elements, and perhaps a surprising unity of purpose and sense of urgency in the face of existential threats. Not all “disorder” is bad. What matters ultimately is a commitment to better, more inclusive governance.

Perhaps the greatest change will be the erosion of the dominance of the great powers in multilateral institutions.

The phenomenon of globalization will reflect this messy reality. Contrary to the expectations of some,

it will not be reversed. There will be no overall process of de-globalization, although individual states may sometimes seek refuge in autarky and “decoupling.” What will change, though, is the meaning and character of globalization.

The era of Western-led, predominantly economic globalization is past, just like the liberal international order. It will not be replaced by a putative ‘China model,’ but by multiple co-existing and competing variants. Globalization will signify different things to different audiences, and be managed or adapted to accordingly. The term will lose many of its normative connotations, and be understood more

generously and literally: as denoting globalizing trends in information, technology, the physical environment, and problem-solving. It will lose its “Western” and elitist character.

OVERALL DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

Nothing is inevitable. Free will, not historical determinism, is key to the future. The 2020s could see the aggravation of negative trends over the past decade—the systematic gutting of a rules-based international order, the escalation of great power tensions, the rise of extreme national egoism and populism, and a general degradation of global governance. International society could go down the same path as in the 1920s, a decade of enormous creativity and dynamism, but also of complacency and procrastination. If this turns out to be the case, the consequences would be disastrous—a replay of the 1930s, only more global in scale and even more lethal.

The era of Western-led, predominantly economic globalization is past, just like the liberal international order. It will not be replaced by a putative ‘China model,’ but by multiple co-existing and competing variants.

Or humanity could learn some of the lessons from a hundred years ago, from the last decade, and especially from the past year. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted what should have been plain to everyone: that good governance really matters, and that the absence of it carries terrible human and material consequences.

The 2020s, then, could turn out to be a transformative decade, when humanity finally comes to grips with the great challenges of our time—climate change, global poverty and inequality, technological transformation, the information and telecommunications revolutions, pandemic disease, accessible public health. There would still be serious conflicts. Many problems would remain unresolved. Global order would be a relative concept. But the overall direction of travel would be positive. For we are not condemned to live in an “age of impunity” or impotence. We can be the masters of our fate. ●