GLOBAL CHALLENGES
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PARA O DESENVOLVIMENTO

A WORLD ORDER?

SHIVSHANKAR MENON

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

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

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

Most of the world functioned in its own regional orders or in multiverses, many of which traded and exchanged ideas, goods, people, and religions, but only occasionally impinged on each other's security and political calculus, if at all.

For most of history this was an interconnected, uncentered world, with multiple points of viewing in India, the Eurasian continent, South-East Asia, China and East Asia, west Asian civilisations, trans-Sahara and North Africa, and Europe. Most of the world functioned in its own regional orders or in multiverses, many of which traded and exchanged ideas, goods, people, and religions, but only occasionally impinged on each other's security and political calculus, if at all. India and China are probably the most salient example of this pattern of exchanges and connection in history.

Visions of global order emerged out of the British Empire, particularly in its final decades, as part of the end game of empire, and the ideology of the edifice of twentieth century institutions owes much to British imperial thought. For instance, the United Nations (UN) was designed and initially largely operated as an instrument of great power politics and as a means to preserve empire. That it did not remain so was despite the intent of its founders, men like Churchill, Smuts and others. What India,

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

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

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

The idea of a world order is part of a larger Western narrative of linear progress through history culminating in the Westernisation of the world as a result of the industrial revolution, (imperialism is rarely mentioned), and in the inevitable triumph of market capitalism and liberal democracy.

Indeed, the idea of a world order is part of a larger Western narrative of linear progress through history culminating in the Westernisation of the world as a result of the industrial revolution, (imperialism is rarely mentioned), and in the inevitable triumph of market capitalism and liberal democracy, that seemed possible after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[4] In actual fact, as we now know, the pre-modern was a world of not just a single scientific and industrial revolution that occurred once and exclusively in the West, but one that saw the recurrence of multiple scientific and industrial revolutions in the non-Western non-modern world.[5] The world can be imagined in many ways beyond the Westphalian gaze, and has been so in the East Asian Sinocentric order, the Islamic cultural-historical community, the collective imagination of the south east Asian polities, the Buddhist cosmology, and the Indian view of plural multiverses. And the IR theory linear narrative of history looks increasingly like what it is, a narrative, not necessarily history.

One historical fact that the nostalgia for a LRIO ignores is that the so-called LRIO was neither particularly liberal nor orderly for most of the world. There is a Cold War foundational myth in the West that persists today of the US setting up a "liberal rule-based order" after WWII to which is ascribed much of the good that followed, such as the long post-war economic boom and the peace between the superpowers.

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

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

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

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

But this is largely a myth. The world was neither liberal nor orderly nor rule-based for most of its inhabitants either then or now.[6] US behaviour in the Cold War and thereafter has been driven by the pursuit of her interests and not of some mythical order. If that order seems fragile today, it is because US will, its interest in order, and its relative power seem diminished.

The Cold War may be described as the "long peace" by some, but that peace only operated in Europe and North America. For the killing fields of the Cold War in maritime Asia it was anything but peaceful. The Cold War was certainly hot for those of us in Asia. During the Cold War, an average of more than 1,200 people died in wars of one type or another every day for forty-five years. While the primary focus and origin of the Cold War was in Europe, the Cold War's emphasis shifted steadily to Asia, and the most violent confrontations were between the Mediterranean and the Pacific, where most battle deaths linked to the Cold War occurred in what Chamberlin calls the Cold War's killing fields. Seven of ten people killed in violent conflict between 1945 and 1990 died in rimland Asia, in the almost contiguous belt of territory from the Manchurian plain, through Korea, Indochina, and west across central and west Asia, which formed the front lines of the Cold War. Here, along Asia's southern rim, more than 14 million people were killed in warfare. The superpowers flooded the area with foreign aid, sending 80% of it to the "Third World" here.[7] The Cold War also solidified the partitions of India, Korea, Palestine, Indochina, and Germany, often by local wars.

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

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

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

OUR DISORDERLY WORLD

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

Where then are we today? It seems to me that rather than pining for a mythical past "order" that was not and shall not be, we should deal with the fact of a disorderly world, just as we have done successfully for most of human history.

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

- The era of the "West" as a geopolitical unit is over. The West remains the most powerful and influential actor in the international system. But the West is fighting within itself about the order in Europe, its home. The so-called "Western liberal rules-based order" died, not at the hands of its opponents, but of its creators. Changes within the US and Europe have turned geopolitics upside down. The same Europe that is bemoaning the US abandonment of its allies and Ukraine, contributed to the decline of the Western order and its norms by standing with the US in supporting Israel's war in Gaza and Lebanon and against Iran, against the wishes of most of the world. In effect Gaza, Ukraine, and Iran further diminished the international order that the West created and led after WWII. Trump's diplomacy, if you can call it that, eliminates the legitimacy that gave Western power authority.

- Multilateralism as we knew it is dead. It is now each one for itself and great power rivalry unmitigated by the pretence of norms or institutions. Unilateral military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Serbia, Georgia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, the South China Sea, the Himalayas, Yemen, the Congo, Ukraine, Armenia, Iran and elsewhere have become the new normal. Don't look to the international system for solutions to transnational or bilateral problems. The WTO, a good example of the long half-life of institutional decay and death. There has not been a binding international agreement on an issue of any real consequence for over a decade and a half.

- The US is reworking the purposes of her power in what amounts to a Cultural Revolution of her own. Transnational issues now do not interest the most powerful actor in the international system. The examples are legion. On climate and energy policy, for instance, it is "drill baby drill." Trump is not the "lone wolf" that his opponents portray him as. President Trump is not just a shock; he is indicative of longer-term historic trends. America has changed. The coalition that supported US globalism in its liberal variant has collapsed. We should not underestimate Mr. Trump. In foreign policy terms, the coalition behind Mr. Trump includes three separate streams: US primacists like Rubio, prioritisers like Eldridge Colby, and restrainers shading into isolationists like Bannon. When any two of these three unite, as did prioritisers and restrainers on Ukraine, you get clear policy directions, and very different ones from what we have got used to from the liberal globalists in the US.

This is a historic shift. Like all historic shifts it is the culmination of several trends and factors in the US and abroad. Does President Trump have a doctrine or a strategy? No consistent long-term strategy or doctrine seems visible yet. But we now know what he wants, and he is in a much stronger position to get it than last time around. There does seem to be ideology at work in his motley coalition. His neo-reactionary libertarian "Dark Enlightenment" supporters like Musk and Thiel believe in dismantling the state, support white supremacy in the name of "race realism," regard democracy as "horseradish" or worse, and want corporates and technocrats to exercise real power—"an acceleration of capitalism to the fascist point" (Benjamin Noys). For them technology is a revolutionary force that can liberate society from government and ultimately render the state obsolete. They propelled JD Vance into the Senate and the vice-presidency, and funded Mr. Trump's victory. There is also discussion of a Mar-a-Lago currency accord, bringing down the dollar's value, and then going beyond the Plaza Accords of the 1980s by continuing and escalating neoliberal ideas of taxing capital, redressing the chronic US trade deficit, and maybe even exchanging US treasuries for perpetual bonds.

- The US drift to protectionism, isolationism, xenophobia (I dare say racism among some of Mr Trump's followers), and so on, is real and significant and will probably last for a while. President Trump's Middle East policy is not very different from Biden's, letting Netanyahu do what he wants, but without the pretence of even-handedness and even embracing ethnic cleansing. Nor is there any attempt to disguise disdain for the Global South. Europe's geopolitical significance has declined. The end of the Cold War enabled the US to dispense with old allies in favour of new ones more fit for the purpose of preventing China's rise as a peer competitor to the USA. What happens in Ukraine is primarily about the European security order. It has second order effects on most of the world but won't affect the main contradiction between China and the USA. On China too, so far it is more of the same, though he may well seek a grand bargain. On Trade, Taiwan, Tariffs & Tech, the four terrible Ts of US China policy, the jury is still out, and Mr. Trump could go either way. More uncertainty.

- Globalisation's significant consequences are still working themselves out: The Keynesian welfare state was abandoned for a globalisation of capital that moved manufacturing to Asia, fragmented the old industrial working class in Europe and America, and changed their social structure and politics. Terrorism and migration too, were globalised and the lines between internal and external issues have been blurred.

- China's trajectory has become critical to international developments. China is entering a period of major domestic adjustment: economic, social and political; as did the miracle East Asian economies (Japan, Korea, Taiwan) after a 30–40-year growth spurt. As Russ Doshi points out: China's 'strategy is working. Since China joined the WTO, the U.S.

share of global manufacturing fell by roughly half while China's share quintupled from 6% to 30%. Beijing can leverage this incredible manufacturing dominance to gain advantage and innovate. China is at the leading edge in robotics, AI, and quantum computing. It leads the U.S. in high-impact scientific papers and patents. And it accounts for half of all industrial robot installations worldwide, 60% of global EV production, 75% of global battery production, and 90% of solar panel, rare earth, and antibiotic production. In the military domain, the PRC has two hundred times more shipbuilding capacity than the US and is leading in new technologies like hypersonics. As Beijing's economy slows and its population ages, it is pouring money into industry and exports to fund growth and to reduce reliance on its dwindling supply of cheap labour.'

We see signs of the absence of an international order everywhere: in migration, in local conflicts, and in the space that middle powers and revisionists see to pursue their own agendas.

- Both China and the US are likely to be domestically preoccupied for some time to come.

- A redrawing of regional balances is underway throughout Asia. In West Asia, Iran's influence has been limited in Syria and Lebanon by Israeli military interventions abetted by the US, and that influence is now confined to Iraq and Yemen. Iran's proxies have been defanged. The effects of the bombing of Iran by Israel and the US are still to become clear. Shifts are also underway in South Asia, Central Asia, SEA and other parts of Asia.

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

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

According to the United Nations, since October 7, 2023, over 1.9 million Gazans – almost all of the strip's population – have been forced to flee their homes but remain trapped in the Gaza Strip. Their plight contributes to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs)

across the globe. Amid war and conflict, climate-related disasters, and other humanitarian crises, tens of millions of people each year flee their homes to escape danger—but the majority of them never cross international borders. According to the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2022 saw a record 71.1 million internally displaced people, more than double the number in 2012.

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

We are now back to a more normal time of a contested order. The main competition is between the US and China, with Russia as a lesser partner of China, and is centred on Asia.

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

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

Today nationalism is alive and well, and not just in post-colonial states. And those nationalisms construct myths and origin stories for themselves, which is why modern history writing is contemporary with the rise of the nation-state. The idea of a world order, of the nations and state being conjoined, of a community of like-minded liberal and democratic states, and of the remaking of the world in its own image, was part of the evolving origin story of European nationalism and imperialism. After World War II, it morphed into and took on aspects of both liberal and proletarian internationalism. To the extent that it reflected a

post-WWII reality of a steadily globalising world, integrating economically, composed for the first time of similar units, the idea worked, was useful, and brought benefits to many across the globe. For instance, it made the UN possible and far more long-lasting and effective than the League of Nations.

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

While the world economy remains globalised despite the best efforts of some leaders, politics has fragmented the world order. The pillars of the post-WWII order are crumbling: the non-proliferation regime in north-east Asia and the Middle East; the Bretton Woods institutions; the WTO; and the multilateral system based on the UN.

Nor is this a world riven into two blocs, or where democracies and autocracies are pitted against each other. Some Chinese scholars are wont to say that this is a bipolar world, for the wish is often the father of their thought. After President Trump's return they present China as the status quo power defending an open international trading order and the post-WWII settlement. But this does not correspond with the reality that most of the rest of the world experiences.

China-US relations have not brought us into another Cold War. China and the US are mutually dependent economically, joined at the hip as it were, and are part of the same globalised economic system centred on the West. Therefore, there are limits to their decoupling. Besides, the balance of power between them is still asymmetric in America's favour in significant respects. That is why China, for all her unhappiness with the US and protestations and friendship with Russia, until recently maintained the appearance of respecting the letter of Western sanctions on Russia after the Russian invasion of the Ukraine.

All in all, we are amid a recalibration of geopolitics and the global economy, marked by great power competition, with no end in sight. Asia has risen but has yet to find its own equilibrium both in the world and within itself. There is disquiet and dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements in the Global South. There is also no gainsaying the growing importance of the Global South. More than half of global trade now involves a non-aligned country. The Global South matters more. The South is the beneficiary of reduced FDI into China by the West, with about half of announced FDI projects before 2024 in non-aligned countries. With great

power rivalry, the leverage of middle powers and the Global South on the major powers' increases.

Today's geopolitical flux opens space and opportunity for regional powers. West Asia is a good example, with new initiatives by a host of local powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, UAE and others. There are balancing, hedging and other options for independent action today that did not exist in Cold War bipolarity or the unipolar moment when China and the US worked closely together. This is an era of coalitions rather than alliances, of un-alignment rather than nonalignment. The world is between orders and has returned to its normal state for most of history, namely, the absence of a world order. In such a fragmented and uncertain order, the means and methods to cope will also be ad hoc, tentative and impermanent. My mantra is issue-based coalitions of the willing and able, as we see in the Quad, I2U2, AUKUS and other formations.

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

DON'T LOSE HEART

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

Is the absence of a world order necessarily an undesirable state with dire consequences? Hegemons, real or aspirant, would like us to believe so. But in history, periods of transition, of political churn, and even times of chaos and anarchy, have been periods of intense technological and philosophical creativity and innovation. One has only to remember the Axial Age of 6th century BCE in India and elsewhere, the Warring States and Spring and Autumn period and, later, the Song dynasty in China, the Abbasid Caliphate and 10-12th century central Asia, the Renaissance, and industrial revolution in Europe, to see that some of the most far-reaching advances in human welfare and in our understanding of the world were divorced from the so-called stability and peace that the imposition of order is said to bring. The late 20th and early 21st century may well be another such seminal period.

Today, with the fragmentation of world politics and the coming to power of President Trump, the real risk of direct conflict between the greatest powers, the USA, China and Russia, has probably diminished. Even at lower levels of violence, what we are seeing is that middle and smaller powers see opportunity in disorder to pursue their own agendas, using force, as in Gaza, the West Bank, Iran, Syria, Congo, Nagorno-Karabakh, the South China Sea, the Himalayas, Jammu and Kashmir and so on,

It is also a time when ideas can make a difference and affect our trajectory for a very long time to come. Uncertainty about power structures, and unhappiness with past or current definitions of interests, create opportunities for fundamental rethinking of our assumptions about order and the nature of international society.

but also that these do not necessarily lead to the broader conflagrations that alliance systems and interlocking security arrangements would produce, as they did in WWI.

Secondly, despite the higher incidence of violence and displacement caused by state and non-state actions across the globe, more people live longer, healthier, more prosperous, and better lives than any human generation before us. This is the true paradox of our times. Why and how is this possible? To my mind the explanation can be found in the basic rules of the road that countries follow in their own self-interest. For instance, despite the disputes and conflicting claims in the South China Sea, it is in everyone's interest to allow freedom of navigation to civilian maritime traffic. The second reason is the existence of a globalised economy, enabled by technology, which ties countries' interests together. Indeed, technology has directly changed the political and security calculus in fundamental ways, not least the atom bomb.

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shivshankar Menon is a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) in India and Chairman of the Centre for China Studies at Ashoka University. Shivshankar was National Security Advisor to the Indian Prime Minister (2010-2014), India's Foreign Secretary (2006-2009) and India's Ambassador and High Commissioner to several countries. He was a Distinguished Fellow at Brookings India. He published Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy (2016) and India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present (2021). He was Richard Wilhelm Fellow at the MIT Centre for International Studies and Fisher Family Fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center. In 2010, the Foreign Policy magazine chose him as one of the "100 best global thinkers in the world".

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Author
Shivshankar Menon

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