



The Future of the Rules-Based International Order

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ABSTRACT

THE FUTURE OF THE RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL ORDER

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NATO's Strategic Foresight Analysis 2023 report identifies the international order in transition as a key finding and as one of its driving forces. This research paper on the future of the rules-based international order contextualizes and analyses the 'transition' currently underway, by situating it as an interim phase between the well-known previous post-Cold War state of the world system, and an as-yet still-evolving unknown future state. It examines how geopolitical changes, emerging technologies, and evolving socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics have affected existing frameworks that are the backbone of the international order; the effect on global governance structures, institutions and norms; possible futures of the international system; and outlines some near-, medium- and long-term implications for NATO that flow from this.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper analyses the current transition occurring in the international order—one of the key findings in NATO's Strategic Foresight Analysis 2023 report—and examines the possibilities emerging in prospect for the future of the rules-based international order. It introduces an analytical framework designed to 'situate' the current transition as an interim phase between the well-understood previous post-Cold War state of the world system, and an as-yet still-evolving unknown future state, as a way to create analytical clarity for examining the dynamical forces at play and their possible future trajectories.

The approach is founded upon several well-known futures methods and techniques, chosen here for their particular utility in this case. The framework considers the overall combination of continuities from the past, dynamics of change in the present, and visions or ideas about the future that guide decision-making in the present, since all of these are aspects of and contribute to the eventual lived future that will ultimately emerge.

The historical context leading up to the immediate post-Cold War world is therefore established, with six key dimensions used to structure the analysis: security; economic; political; 'ideational' (including values, culture, ideology and identity); informational; and technological. The evolution of these dimensions is examined from the interwar period of the early 20th Century, through the postwar and Cold War era, to its eventual configuration in the immediate post-Cold War world, which represents the 'prior' system from which the 'transition' noted by multiple observers is occurring. In essence, the nature of the rules-based international order shifted from a generalized 'containment' character

during the Cold War to one of 'enlargement' immediately afterward.

The nature of the transition is then examined through the six dimensions, and the effects that geopolitical changes, emerging technologies, and socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics have had on the institutions and norms of the international order are described. In essence, the 'enlargement' dynamic of the post-Cold War rules-based order prompted a generalized resistance and 'pushback' dynamic, as well as an associated 'erosion' of the norms, institutions and even acceptance of the rules-based order that is increasingly evident today.

Present dynamics in early 2025 suggest a significant re-ordering of the international order is already occurring, with fragmentation, retrenchment, and perhaps even a return to a spheres-of-influence dynamic, as the emerging short-term future trajectory of the international system. Looking to the medium to longer-term, three main ideal types of world order are identified—constitutional (i.e. rules-based); balance-of-power; and hegemonic—with the actual eventual future state of the world system most likely to be some combination of these. Ten contextual framing scenarios for the future of world order are briefly described, ranging along a continuum from constitutional to balance-of-power to hegemonic, as well as two further scenarios dealing with the decline of the global environment and a breakdown of the international order into disorder. Present dynamics suggest the world may be shifting along the continuum away from the more constitutional forms of order, potentially into more balance-of-power spheres-of-influence structures, but the eventual extent of this

apparent shift remains to be revealed by time.

The 'layered' character of the norms, rules and institutions of the international system suggests that while some of the topmost largely 'liberal' aspects may be subject to and undergoing erosion, the deeper more 'conservative' aspects may well remain relatively unscathed. It remains possible that a future order may emerge that is also rules-based, albeit with rules that may have been altered or reformed by rising world powers.

The implications for NATO are then examined with respect to the broad timeframes of near-, medium-, and longer-term. Near-term, the most pressing issue is the degree of internal cohesion of the Alliance, given recent political changes, and a specific futures technique is suggested as a way to examine possible options given various contingencies that may arise. Medium-term implications have more to do with the nature and role of NATO in a world that has potentially shifted

in the type or character of the international order, likely bi- or multi-polar, including the form and extent that possible future enlargements to NATO might take in such a world. Longer-term implications also have to do with NATO enlargement, although potentially via the formation of a new more globally focused security organization using NATO as a model, if there should ever arise a recognition by world governments of the need to mitigate the existential threats faced by humanity that transcend and subsume all national interests and boundaries. In this view, NATO becomes the exemplar of how a truly global security organization might be implemented, such as was imagined in the founding documents of the United Nations. If nothing else, the concept of a global security organization properly designed and well-suited to protecting all the inhabitants of planet Earth from existential threats, whether endogenous or exogenous, provides a quite compelling normative guiding image or vision of the longer-term global future.

INTRODUCTION

The international order in transition has been identified as a key finding and one of the driving forces of NATO's Strategic Foresight Analysis 2023 Report.¹ Building from this, the main goals of this paper are two-fold: firstly, to introduce an analytical framework which can be used to 'localize' and make sense of the dynamics occurring during this turbulent 'transition time'—between an earlier system state (namely, the post-Cold War international order) and the as-yet still-unfolding unknown future of the international order—thereby creating some measure of analytical clarity for examining the dynamical forces at play, as well as their possible future trajectories.

And secondly, to produce an initial assessment of the 'baseline' emerging trajectory of the international order so that future investigations of these dynamics can be compared with this first-cut assessment and any subsequent changes more readily identified. It is intended that this framework be utilized to form the basis of periodic re-examination of global dynamics, thus aiding future analyses as they inform each new re-



conceptualization of the geostrategic decision context as we move further into the global future. To understand where we may be heading, it is useful to be clear about our starting point.

Terminology: 'world order', 'international order' and "the" 'rules-based international order'

Henry Kissinger distinguished three levels of 'order'²: world order "describes a concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world". Thus, an international order is "the practical application of these concepts to a substantial part of the globe—large enough to affect the global balance of power", while regional orders "involve the same principles applied to a defined geographic area". Furthermore, these systems of order are based on an "extremely complex" balance of legitimacy and power, where legitimacy derives from "a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action", co-extant with "a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others". He also notes that "no truly global [i.e. global in scope or reach] 'world order' has ever existed".³

In this way it is possible to speak of different world orders—e.g. Islamic,⁴ Chinese,⁵ "liberal",⁶

¹ NATO ACT, *Strategic Foresight Analysis 2023*.

² Kissinger, *World Order*, 9.

³ Kissinger, *World Order*, 2.

⁴ Kissinger, *World Order*, 97.

⁵ Zhao, *All Under Heaven*.

⁶ Ikenberry, "The Future of Liberal World Order."

American,⁷ “Western”, “Eastern”, Russian,⁸ Socialist, and so on, and even of their “clashing”⁹—as concepts of how the world should be ordered, even as they may not actually be, or have ever been, fully global in scope. This terminology can be confusing when some observers discuss ‘world order’ as the order that actually exists in the world at a particular time.¹⁰ We shall be careful to use the modifiers to distinguish the different concepts of world or international order from the actual order(s) extant in the world. Finally, Kissinger notes that: “Every international order must sooner or later face the impact of two tendencies challenging its cohesion: either a redefinition of legitimacy or a significant shift in the balance of power”.¹¹

Expanding on Kissinger’s snapshot definition, international order is now more generally used “to refer to the collection of organizations, institutions, treaties, rules, and norms that are intended to organize, structure, and regulate international relations during a given historical period.”¹² These “relatively stable patterns of relations and practices in world politics ... emerge from the behaviour of states, international institutions, transnational movements, and other important actors.”¹³ These patterns may have initially been unplanned or even ad hoc, but may have subsequently acquired some form of regular structure over time. “The existence of international order does not presume intentionality or coherence. But it does presume the eventual existence of a structured pattern of relations.”¹⁴

Another key idea to consider is that since order is not a static ‘thing’ but rather something that is continually being created through the actions and behaviours of the actors, whether with intentionality or not, “it would probably be better

to think in terms of a verb rather than a noun: international ordering rather than international order.”¹⁵ Indeed, one might fairly uncontroversially be able to characterize early 2025 as a time of very considerable re-ordering of the international order. These same observers also argue that “there is no single international order” because “international ordering takes place across various issues and specific relationships”, and so “to the extent that there is an overarching international order, it takes the form of an assemblage of many different orders at different scales.”¹⁶

A recent RAND report noted that:¹⁷ “international politics has given rise to many different forms of order over the centuries. The version most in evidence today, however, is an elaborate and deeply institutionalized concept of order based on U.S. post–World War II visions for world politics. It is typically referred to as liberal and rules-based.”¹⁸ The key thing to notice here is that it is only since just over a century ago that a rules-based international order has existed which has included liberal rules as constitutive of it. That is, in the history of international ordering, the “Liberal Age”, which replaced the prior “Age of Power Politics”, has only existed since 1919.¹⁹

Analytical Framework The Futures ‘Triangle’

The Futures Triangle approach to analysing futures is predicated upon the view that ‘the future’ which eventually emerges as the ultimate lived reality arises from three main dynamical factors: continuities from the past (the ‘weight’ of history); current change processes (the ‘push’ of the present); and images of, or ‘visions’ or ideas about,

⁷ Acharya, *The End of American World Order*.

⁸ Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*.

⁹ Sakwa, “The International System and the Clash of World Orders.”

¹⁰ E.g., Haass, “How a World Order Ends.”

¹¹ Kissinger, *World Order*, 357.

¹² Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition*, 1.

¹³ Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*, 31.

¹⁴ Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, 8–9. The lack of presumed intentionality is what provides the rationale for the intentional vs spontaneous dimension in their analyses of international orders by Lascurettes and Poznansky along with whether power is concentrated or dispersed (Figure 4 here). Combined with Kissinger’s concept of legitimacy, e.g., high or low, this could provide a 2x2x2 schema for considering international orders, based on power, legitimacy, and intentionality.

¹⁵ Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*, 32.

¹⁶ Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*, 32.

¹⁷ Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, 12.

¹⁸ Other terms used to refer to the rules-based international order include liberal international order, postwar international order, U.S.-(or American)-led international order, sometimes with the words world or global substituted for international, and sometimes with these words elided, such as, for example, global rules-based order and simply rules-based order. See, e.g. Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Role in the World*, footnote 1, p.2.

¹⁹ Kocs, *International Order*.

the future (the 'pull' of the future), the last of these since our decision-making in the present is in part conditioned by them.²⁰ As Willis Harman pointed out nearly five decades ago: "Every action involves some view of the future—as we expect it to be, or as we desire it to be, or as we fear it may be. If our image of the future were different, the decision of today would be different."²¹ Therefore, any analysis of any potential future 'international order', whether rules-based or perhaps otherwise, will need to consider all of these factors: past history, present dynamics, and (possibly competing) visions or images of the future that guide decision-making in the present, the consequences of which will play out in, and shape, the future. This is captured schematically in Figure 1.

Dimensions or 'aspects' of the international order

Many analysts of the international order tend to divide it into several aspects (sometimes referred to as 'sub-orders'), typically utilizing some 3–5 such analytical dimensions,²² usually involving military, economic and political aspects, but several more can be imagined depending on the purpose of the analysis.²³ These conceptions are generally concerned with the 'machinery' of order, such as institutions or rules. However, it is also important to pay attention to the ideological aspect that underpins and ultimately leads to ordering in the first place,²⁴ because at the heart of Kissinger's notion of world order is an

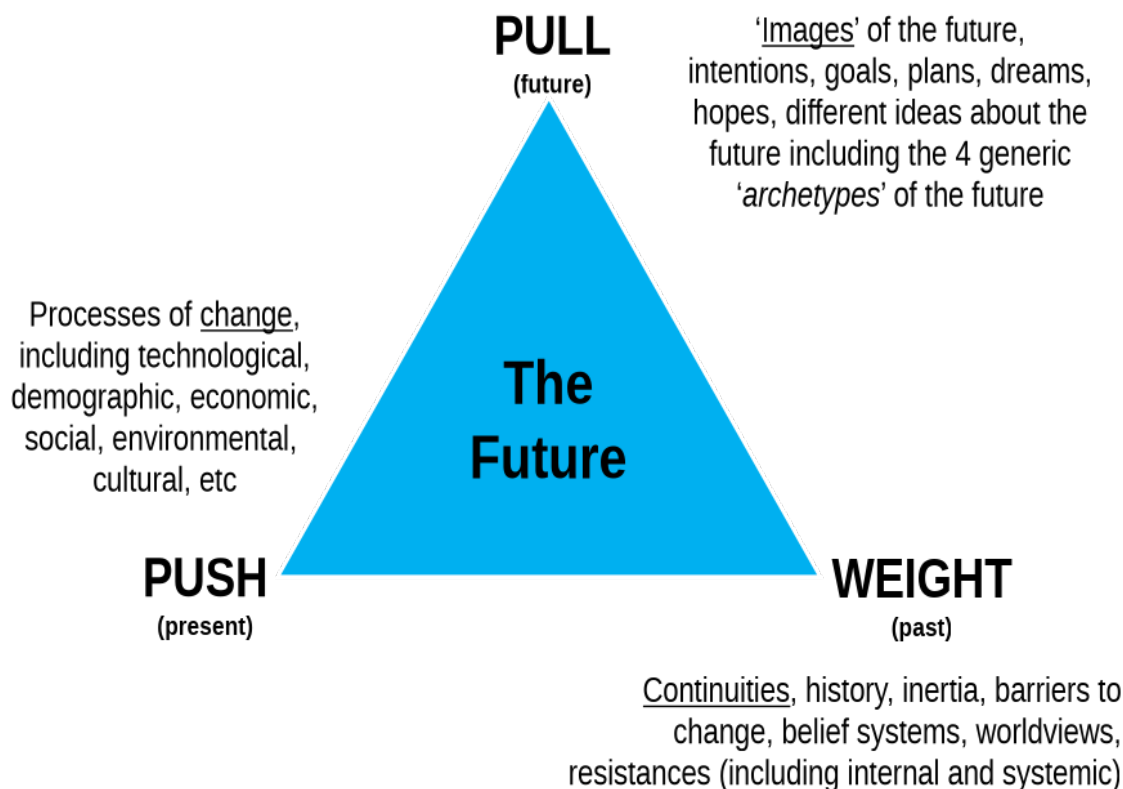


Figure 1. The Futures Triangle.

The future that emerges as eventual lived reality arises from three main dynamical factors

Source: The Author, after Inayatullah 2003.

²⁰ Inayatullah, "The Futures Triangle"; Bell and Mau, "Images of the Future."

²¹ Harman, *An Incomplete Guide to the Future*, 1.

²² E.g. Chalmers, *Which Rules?*; Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, 29–31; Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*, 34.

²³ E.g. Johnson, "China in a World of Orders", considers eight sub-orders: constitutive (i.e. "the norms and institutions that constitute the main actors and their primary interests"); military or coercive; political development; social development; international trade; international finance/monetary; international environment; and the international information order. Here, for example, the political and social sub-orders as well as the trade and monetary sub-orders have been combined into one dimension each, for simplicity of the analysis.

²⁴ Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*, 32.

ideological or conceptual-ideational commitment to how the world should be ordered, which guides that ordering.

Therefore, with these considerations in mind, in the 'first-cut' framework of analysis being introduced here, the dynamics of four key aspects or dimensions of the international order are considered:

- the **security** (sub-)order, including both military and non-military aspects;
- the **political** order, covering domestic, international and geopolitical aspects;
- the **economic** order, including trade and finance; and
- what will here be called the **ideational** order, which includes values, culture, ideology and 'identity'.²⁵

In addition, two further auxiliary dimensions are also important and can be considered in parallel with these:

- **information**, the flow of information within and among actors; and
- **technology**, the effect and influence of technology and technological change on international ordering.²⁶

These six analytical dimensions have evolved and changed through various phases of the international order over the last century. The most recent of these phases can be understood in terms of the framework of the '3 Horizons'.

The '3 Horizons'

The '3 Horizons' framework is particularly well-suited as an analytical framework in this instance, since it explicitly includes a 'transition' zone



²⁵E.g. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*; Flockhart, "The Coming Multi-Order World."

²⁶It would be possible to use a more detailed framework, such as PMESII, in subsequent more elaborated analyses, as described in, e.g. NATO Standardization Office, *Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*.

between two different systems,²⁷ and since the international order in transition is the key underpinning assumption of this analysis.²⁸ In this view, the 1st horizon (H1) was the previously existing system—that is, the post-Cold War international order up to around the mid-to-late 2000s, when the transition is considered by some observers to have begun.²⁹ The 2nd horizon (H2) is the (usually turbulent) ‘transition zone’—between the old passing (H1) system and the new emerging (H3) system—where multiple change processes play out on the way to that future. Finally, the 3rd horizon (H3) represents some future new configuration of the system under consideration, in this case the future international order, often defined by or conceived of via an image or vision (or sometimes by a more elaborated scenario or even ideology) of that future. Figure 2 depicts a version of this framework.

There may be more than one possible H3 system seeking to emerge, which thereby compounds the turbulence in H2, as not only is the old H1 system declining, but multiple new H3 systems may be in mutual competition. In the H2 transition zone, there may also be some dynamics that seek to extend the previous declining H1 system (called

H2 ‘minus’, H2–), in addition to those that seek to bring forth the new H3 system(s) (called H2 ‘plus’, H2+). In this view, the H2– forces could be considered ‘reactionary’, while the H2+ forces could be considered anything from ‘reformist’ to ‘progressive’ to ‘revolutionary’ to ‘visionary’ or even ‘utopian’ depending on how radical the future H3 vision is.³⁰

Archetypal images of the future

Since there may be more than one H3 system vision competing for primacy, an important aspect of analysis therefore is to also examine competing images or visions of the H3 futures that are or may be emerging. The Futures Archetype method is well suited to do this, as it focuses not on specific futures, necessarily—which may not be feasible or practical to develop in highly turbulent times—but rather on types or classes of futures, which allows for somewhat easier analytical comparison.

In general, all future images, visions or scenarios fall into one of four ‘generic’ classes or ‘archetypes’, which is why they appear as part of the ‘Pull’ dynamic in Figure 1:³¹

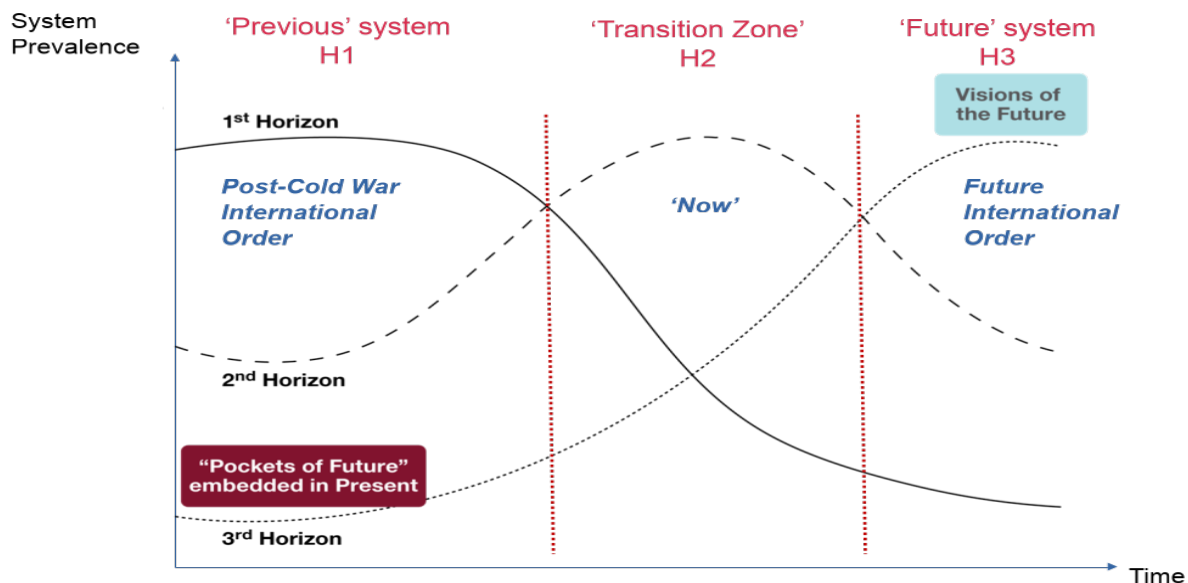


Figure 2. The Three Horizons model.

The shift from one dominant system to another passes through a ‘transition zone’.

There may be several competing visions of the future before one becomes the dominant H3 system.

Source: adapted from Curry and Hodgson 2008, via Hines 2017.

²⁷ Curry and Hodgson, “Seeing in Multiple Horizons”; Sharpe and Hodgson, “Anticipation in Three Horizons”; Hines, “Geeking Out on Three Horizons.”

²⁸ NATO ACT, *Strategic Foresight Analysis 2023*.

²⁹ See, e.g. Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition*, 38–39 and numerous cited references therein.

³⁰ Milojević, “Contextualising Conflict”; Inayatullah, “The Futures Triangle.”

- Continuation, which has most usually been conceived of as ‘continued economic growth’, but may also more broadly connote a simple continuation of the system’s current trajectory, which may not necessarily be ‘upward’;
 - sometimes therefore called Growth to explicitly distinguish an ‘upward’ direction, for the above reason;
- Collapse, a more- or less-rapid decline of the system, which may be due to an event, or other sudden shock, or to a slower dynamical process;
 - sometimes tempered with softer language as Decline or Descent, which connotes a somewhat ‘slower’ decrease than the term ‘collapse’;
- Constrained/Disciplined, where society is oriented around some overarching or fundamental set of values, of various kinds;
 - a variant called New Equilibrium also exists, due to Hines³² that sees a ‘re-adjustment’ of the growth/continuation trajectory following an event, shock or dynamical blockage; and
- Transformation, which sees a shift to entirely new forms of society or even human being, usually through either technological change, or some radical change in worldview, typically through some sort of spiritual or consciousness shift.³³

These four archetypes, found from empirical investigations over several decades in the mid-to-late 20th Century, have proved remarkably resilient and exhaustive, and have wide applicability, not just to societal change but also to issues, problems, or even organizations and nations.³⁴ (Note that these four archetypes are ‘emergent’ and do not fall neatly into the common 2x2 deductive ‘crossed drivers’ matrix form that

many scenario sets are presented in.) Thus, any scoping of potential H3 futures needs to be aware of these four archetypal classes of future, although each class may of course be represented by more than one specific scenario. Competing images of (future) world ordering may even view each other through these archetypes. For example, China has for some years characterized the West as in ‘decline’ (i.e. a slow motion form of the Collapse archetype), even as China considers itself ‘rising’ (i.e. Growth archetype),³⁵ a view also shared in parts of the West.³⁶

Quite apart from any specific initial analysis to be carried out subsequently below, the above analytical framework is already useful more generally as a way to make understanding the unfolding transition of the international order somewhat more tractable. Further and more extensive analysis than is possible here would undoubtedly benefit from making use of the above framework as an initial orientation.

Considering the above, the structure of this first-cut assessment is presented in several parts:

- a brief history of international ordering up to the end of the Cold War (i.e. the dynamics that led up to and preceded H1). This pre-H1 historical context has been placed into Appendix A;
- the structure of the rules-based international order during the early post-Cold War ‘unipolar moment’ (i.e. what we are considering H1 itself);
- the transition of the post-Cold War order from then to today (H2); and
- potential futures of the international order (possible H3s).

A further part examines some near-, medium- and longer-term implications for NATO that flow from this initial analysis.

³¹ Dator, “Alternative Futures at the Manoa School”; Dator, *A Noticer in Time*, 43ff; but see also Schultz, “Scenario Archetypes”; and Hines et al., “Mapping Archetype Scenarios.”

³² Hines et al. “Mapping Archetype Scenarios.”

³³ An interesting combination of these two forms of transformation, consciousness and technological, has emerged since the 1990s and can be found in the trans- and post-humanist movements, wherein human biology is transcended entirely and/or consciousness is transferred out of the body onto a technological substrate (‘uploaded’). See for example Eden et al., *Singularity Hypotheses* for a scholarly discussion.

³⁴ E.g. US Air Force, *Global Futures Report: Joint Functions in 2040*; Cork et al., *Australia 2050: Structuring Conversations about Our Future*.

³⁵ E.g. Tang, “China and the Future International Order(s).”

³⁶ E.g. Mazarr et al., *China and the International Order*.

HORIZON 1 — POST-COLD WAR: ‘ENLARGEMENT’ AND ‘OVERREACH’

As discussed in Appendix A, the general theme or ‘flavour’ of most of the Cold War era was one of ‘stand-off’ and ‘containment’—by the late Cold War, a very definite ‘containment’ order was in place between the two competing Western and Eastern blocs. In contrast, the general theme of the post-Cold War liberal international order was one of ‘enlargement’, in all the analytical dimensions being considered here: security, political, economic, informational, technological, as well as ideational, insofar as ‘identity’ emerged as a distinct force in geopolitics.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union fundamentally changed the global security order from bipolarity to unipolarity, leaving the United States the preeminent military, political and economic power. Similarly, with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in early 1991,³⁷ NATO’s mission shifted and adapted to a wider range of military and emerging non-traditional non-military security threats, such as those brought about by nationalism and international terrorism, as well as by other emerging challenges, such as climate change. The concept of security itself thus also enlarged



³⁷ Miles, “We All Fall Down.”

and expanded beyond the conventional military nation-state view to include, e.g. the broader conception of human security as well. Further NATO enlargement beginning late in the 1990s brought in former members of the Warsaw Pact, although not without some pointed criticism.³⁸ Unfortunately, Reagan and Gorbachev's dream of eliminating nuclear weapons entirely by the end of the century did not eventuate, as relations between the US and Russia began to cool into what Boris Yeltsin angrily called a "cold peace".³⁹

The liberal political order also underwent significant change and enlargement, as a number of countries made transitions to liberal democracy, leading Francis Fukuyama to make his (in)famous "end of history" pronouncement.⁴⁰ This was later rebuffed by Samuel Huntington, who foregrounded the role of cultural identity (i.e. the ideational dimension) in geopolitics.⁴¹ The European Union was formally established in 1993 and would later enlarge to include former Soviet states. National identities, which had begun to resurface during the Cold War with the decline of Western colonialism, had also begun to arise in importance as a unifying force in the Soviet part of the Eastern order as the authority of communist ideology waned. Many ethnic groups and minorities in the former Soviet bloc also sought national independence from these imposed federated structures, such as in the breakup of Yugoslavia, which led to several years of bloody ethnically based wars in the Balkans. By comparison, the separation (the so-called "Velvet Divorce") of Czechoslovakia into Czechia and Slovakia was remarkably peaceful,⁴² as indeed was the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself.

The immediate post-Cold War economic order was characterized by expanding and accelerating globalization, trade liberalization and financial deregulation. The removal of social protections leading to increased economic inequalities that this set in motion would come back to haunt Western leaders later, as the social disaffection this triggered began to fuel rising populism

and thereby began to erode the foundations of liberal democracy. China had instituted economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and the 1980s, as part of his "socialism with Chinese characteristics", which elevated China to the second-largest economy within a generation.⁴³ But the attendant political reform that this was assumed to also bring about was quashed decisively in the same year as the Soviet bloc was disintegrating in eastern Europe. Many in the West had assumed that economic liberalization would also inevitably lead to political liberalization, but "that assumption proved false. China's leaders never seriously contemplated political reform".⁴⁴

Changes in the ideational order underpin much of the above. With the discrediting of Marxism-Leninism in its original Soviet form as a viable type of social organization, neo-liberalism stood almost unrivalled. Ethnic-nationalist identity and sentiment, which had been subsumed under federated systems of communist governance, re-emerged to fill the void left by its absence.

The informational dimension also expanded, with the creation of the Internet and then the World-Wide Web sitting atop that information-technological infrastructure. The two related dimensions of information and technology began to intertwine ever more tightly, with much of the so-named "tech sector" being driven by advances in information technology, although a number of other technologies, such as biotech and nanotech, also expanded in their power and reach. But it was the development of powerful software networking systems that gave rise to an expansion of the reach of infotech into more and more of the physical world and human experience, beginning several waves of disruption of many existing industries. This prompted the Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen to eventually make his famous statement that "software is eating the world".⁴⁵ These disruptions continue to this day.

³⁸ Friedman, "Foreign Affairs; Now a Word from X"; Kissinger and Matlock, "Whither NATO?"; Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, *passim*.

³⁹ Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 204.

⁴⁰ Fukuyama, "The End of History?"; Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.

⁴¹ Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?"; Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*; Gilman, "Samuel Huntington Is Getting His Revenge."

⁴² Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 255.

⁴³ Kissinger, *World Order*, 225.

⁴⁴ Froman, "China Has Already Remade the International System."

⁴⁵ Andreessen, "Why Software Is Eating the World."

HORIZON 2 — TRANSITION: RESISTANCE AND ‘PUSHBACK’

The ‘transition’ away from the post-Cold War world—the “new world order” spoken of by President George H.W. Bush⁴⁶ (which is what we have called H1)—did not occur across all the analytical dimensions at the same time. Rather, a series of staggered sub-order transitions seem to have taken place over the course of around a decade or so.

The global political order—characterized at the time as a “unipolar moment”,⁴⁷ although not without criticism⁴⁸—was already beginning to fray in the early-to-mid 1990s, as noted above. Part of this was founded in problems being faced by post-Soviet Russia as it sought to make a three-fold transition, any one of which would have been challenging enough:⁴⁹

- a political transition from an authoritarian system to a democratic one;
- an economic transition from a command-based system to a market-based one; and what Sarotte called
- an imperial transition, which really amounted to an identity transition: “a reduction from a multi-ethnic empire to something much smaller”,⁵⁰ something which had previously

occurred in some Western empires decades earlier due to post-colonialist movements and subsequent independence.

This ‘loss’ of imperial identity, coupled with the failed economic transition and the perceived lack of help from the West during this difficult time,⁵¹ has fuelled a continuing grievance in Russia ever since.⁵² An early indication of this resistance to and ‘pushback’ on unipolarity can be found in a 1997 joint Russian-Chinese communiqué to the UN Secretary General regarding their intention of striving “to promote the multipolarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order”.⁵³ (This same theme recently emerged again at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, demonstrating that it continues to remain topical even after nearly three decades.⁵⁴) The formation of the originally four-member BRICS grouping followed a decade later, which has now grown to 10 member states, with several more expressing an interest in joining a body that has recently been consciously seeking to rival the G20.⁵⁵

The global security order functioned relatively well in the few very early years of the post-Cold War world. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq was repelled by a UN sanctioned operation, led by the United States under President George H. W. Bush,

⁴⁶ Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit.”

⁴⁷ Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment.”

⁴⁸ Huntington, “The Lonely Superpower.”

⁴⁹ Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 151.

⁵⁰ Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, 151.

⁵¹ Dobb, *Why Russia Is a Threat to International Order*, 13.

⁵² Sakwa, *The Lost Peace*.

⁵³ Permanent Representatives of China and the Russian Federation to The Secretary-General of the United Nations, “Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order.”

⁵⁴ Munich Security Conference, “Agenda and Livestreams.” See, for example, the speech by Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi.

⁵⁵ BRICS, “BRICS Portal”; Butt, “BRICS to Rival G20.”

which ceased military operations once the stated objective of expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait was achieved. They were neither chased back to Baghdad, nor was there an attempt at 'rollback' (i.e. 'regime change'). Further military operations were also undertaken, with NATO in an expanded role, in the ethnic wars between the former Yugoslav republics, although various actions taken there were criticized both for not doing enough as well as for doing anything at all.⁵⁶ Some of these actions were undertaken without formal UN approval, including in defiance of UNSC vetoes, which strained international security cooperation. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States—eerily exactly 11 years to the day from Bush's "new world order" speech before the US Congress—signalled a distinctly new phase in the global security order, and was a devastating confirmation of the (then recently) proposed and somewhat controversial "blowback" hypothesis.⁵⁷ It also led to what many commentators, both American and others, considered an "overreach" by the United States in its pursuit of the perpetrators.⁵⁸ While the expedition into Afghanistan to seek out Al Qaeda and Osama bin-Laden was approved by the UNSC, and even had Russian support, the subsequent invasion of Iraq was not, and it was strongly opposed, including by many US allies. By early 2006, Thomas Friedman had begun arguing that the world had entered a post post-Cold War era,⁵⁹ and a worsening security order has been apparent ever since the latter 2000s.

The economic order seems to have come apart most clearly in the Great Recession and Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08 and its aftermath. The early post-Cold War practices of financial and trade liberalization created a global economic structure that turned out to be brittle against shocks rather than resilient—what Nassim Taleb called "interlocking fragility".⁶⁰ Thus there was a growing pushback against the open flows of trade and

capital even in countries that should in principle have benefited from it. Many people in the West, and especially the US, felt left behind and betrayed by globalization, which caused grievances that some observers identify as a key cause of rising populism.⁶¹ Part of the contemporary tariff wars now ramping up at this writing have much to do with what was neither then nor now considered a truly level playing field.⁶²

The open information-technological order of the post-Cold War period has also been pushed back upon and is returning to a renewed form of the segregated 'blocs' of the Cold War, with the implementation of controls on information flows from the West into Russia and especially China, with its "Great Firewall".⁶³ At the same time, there is a growing risk that even US-EU data flows may be curtailed, as Europe begins to re-think its reliance on US tech providers.⁶⁴ More broadly, the systematic dismantling of free access to information is now seen as a hallmark of "illiberalism",⁶⁵ while information itself has increasingly become even more a domain of conflict. The relatively open information flows in democratic states have increasingly been weaponized by illiberal and authoritarian states so that the information environment is now evermore awash with mis- and dis-information.⁶⁶ This has been exacerbated by the recent maturing of Artificial Intelligence technologies ranging from language-based models to image generation and even video production based on a few words in a text-based prompt.⁶⁷ The potential for this 'deepfake' technology to be used for blackmail, information operations or espionage against elected officials or those with access to classified information is increasingly of concern.⁶⁸

The accelerating developments in quantum computing and other forms of Artificial Intelligence in recent years presage a new 'race', primarily

⁵⁶ See, e.g. Apps, *Deterring Armageddon*, part 5.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Blowback*.

⁵⁸ E.g. Brands, *American Grand Strategy and the Liberal Order*, 9ff; Haass, *The World*, 299; Groitl, *Russia, China and the Revisionist Assault on the Western Liberal International Order*, 287ff.

⁵⁹ Friedman, "Driving Toward Middle East Nukes in Our S.U.V.s"; Friedman, "The Post-Post-Cold War."

⁶⁰ Taleb, *The Black Swan*, 225.

⁶¹ E.g. Jervis et al., *Chaos Reconsidered*.

⁶² Fukuyama, "To Make Government Efficient, Empower the Bureaucracy."

⁶³ E.g. Spalding, *War Without Rules*, passim.

⁶⁴ Farrell and Newman, "The Brewing Transatlantic Tech War."

⁶⁵ Cooley and Nexon, "The Real Crisis of Global Order."

⁶⁶ Kuznar, "21st Century Information Environment Trends Out to 2040."

⁶⁷ The Alvideo sub-Reddit has shown remarkable evolution in these video generation tools in only a few short months: Alvideo sub-Reddit.

⁶⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Deep Fakes and National Security*.

between the US and China, aimed at keeping or attaining a technological edge.⁶⁹ In addition, the development of drone technology has revolutionized the conduct of conventional warfare, as the Russo-Ukraine war has shown. So, once again, as in the Cold War, technological advances have led to changed military thinking and planning. This seems likely to continue.

Effects on global governance structures, institutions and norms: 'erosion'

The effects on global governance structures, institutions and norms during the transition period can be summarized in a phrase as a 'gradual generalized erosion'. The main backbone of the liberal international order—the UN Charter System, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The Bretton-Woods institutions, resolutions of the Security Council and General Assembly, international agreements and treaties, framework conventions, and so on—have all had their authority eroded during this transition period. Many nations have found it expedient at times to ignore these institutions or norms, whether it be conflicts in the Middle East, the treatment of ethnic minorities, the treatment of persons who identify with a non-binary sexuality, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, or the UN Convention on the Law of Sea.

Indeed, as time has gone on, the undermining and erosion of the power of these norms has cut progressively deeper into the 'layers' (see below) of the international order, affecting some of the deepest and most foundational, including even the most fundamental Westphalian norms, such as territorial integrity and non-interference in the affairs of other nations. The selective nature of nations' invocations of international norms—when it suits their purposes—has fuelled an accelerating cynicism with regard to these conventions that has openly surfaced in the widely read popular media.⁷⁰ This has prompted some observers to claim that there is no such thing as a rules-based order,⁷¹ while in many areas, the old order is being challenged by alternative institutions, such as the 'multilateral' BRICS grouping, China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, or even the International Investment Bank, revived from Soviet Comecon.

Socio-cultural and socio-political dynamics have tended strongly towards right-wing populism, fuelled by a backlash to and pushback against many aspects of liberalism, one key aspect of which is identity politics.⁷² Liberalism takes as foundational the concept of universal human rights and that all members of society are therefore legitimate actors.⁷³ Acting on its underlying 'enlargement' logic, it therefore seeks to extend such rights to an ever-increasing number of



⁶⁹ Goujon, "The Real Stakes of the AI Race."

⁷⁰ See e.g. Ackerman, "Where Is America's 'Rules-Based Order' Now?"; Malik, "In Dismissing Calls for Netanyahu's Arrest, the West Is Undermining Its Own World Order."

⁷¹ E.g. Porter, "Sorry, Folks. There Is No Rules-Based World Order."

⁷² Fukuyama, "To Make Government Efficient, Empower the Bureaucracy."

⁷³ Madlovics and Magyar, "Why America Won't Become Hungary."

social groupings, including to those outside of the society itself seeking refuge from persecution in other countries. This process eventually bumps up against traditional concepts of group identity based on long-standing conservative institutions such as religion, family structures, or nationality, which can be felt as quite threatening by them.⁷⁴ The determined pursuit of such an agenda (characterized as ‘wokeness’, now usually with a pejorative tone) can easily be perceived as ‘going too far’ (‘overreach’) and thereby alienate those social groups for whom these traditional or conservative elements form a core aspect of their own identity. This, in turn, generates a resistance to and pushback upon the progressive agenda.

Concurrently, the concentration of capital into the hands of a wealthy elite, ‘immiseration’ of the middle class, and dislocation of industrial workers through the high-tech boom, prompted an economic crisis which, George Friedman claims, thereby prompted a social crisis, underpinned by a more fundamental divergence of values (i.e. an ideational foundation).⁷⁵ Open borders, migrants, free trade and globalization become easy targets to blame for the economic insecurity and social marginalization such groups may increasingly feel in a liberal progressive world where their very core identities are somehow considered ‘wrong’. “In short, progressives have offered moral constraints without problem solving—in response to which populist leaders offer problem solving without moral constraints. Even if they fail to deliver, their vision of strong leadership unconstrained by liberal universalism offers a compelling alternative to these voters”.⁷⁶ These dynamics also eroded trust or belief in the legitimacy of the very principles underpinning the liberal international order itself.

Towards a new Cold War?

There is a continuing debate about whether or not the world has recently moved, or is about to move, into a new cold war, ‘Cold War 2.0’, with the usual suspects being the primary actors from version 1.0—the United States, Russia and China—not to mention the counter-argument that we never actually even left it at all.⁷⁷ However, in contrast, this time around it is now China that is viewed as the senior partner of the new ‘no limits’ partnership.⁷⁸ As early as 1997 Zbigniew Brzezinski noted that “the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran” united not so much by ideology as by “complementary grievances,”⁷⁹ those grievances being, in the case of China, the historical “century of humiliation”,⁸⁰ and for Russia, the more recent humiliation of the post-Cold War era.⁸¹

This is a complex debate, and observers on all sides of it raise valid points, including that there is indeed such a renewed (or, perhaps, never-extinguished) defiance dynamic; but also that it differs from the first in important ways, so that while there is some merit to the broad concept, it should not be taken too literally, nor mistaken for a re-run of the first.⁸² And it is certainly true that there appears to be a renewed ideological-political aspect emerging, this time more focused between updated versions of an American world order (‘manifest destiny’) and a Chinese world order (‘tianxia’—‘all under Heaven’) as the two main competing visions of world order.⁸³ Indeed, according to Robert Kaplan, “the ideological aspect of this new cold war” is such that the “philosophical divide between the American and Chinese systems is becoming as great as the gap between American democracy and Soviet communism”.⁸⁴ Former Australian Prime

⁷⁴ Cooley and Nexon, “The Real Crisis of Global Order,” 111.

⁷⁵ Friedman, *The Storm Before the Calm*, chap. 8. The book argues for a very interesting ‘twin cycles’ view of American history: an institutional cycle and a socioeconomic cycle, with different periods, but which are now coinciding and colliding, for the first time, in the decade of the 2020s. See also a review of this book: Voros, “Review of *The Storm Before the Calm* by George Friedman.”

⁷⁶ Madlovics and Magyar, “Why America Won’t Become Hungary”; but also see the countervailing view of that paper’s thesis: Applebaum, “America’s Future Is Hungary.”

⁷⁷ E.g. Kotkin, “The Cold War Never Ended.”

⁷⁸ Kotkin, “The Cold War Never Ended”; Korolev, “A ‘No Limits’ Partnership?”; Blackwill and Fontaine, *No Limits?*

⁷⁹ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 55.

⁸⁰ Tang, “China and the Future International Order(s),” 32–33.

⁸¹ Dibb, “The Sources of Russian Conduct.”

⁸² Kaplan, “A New Cold War Has Begun”; Bekkevold, “Cold War II Is All about Geopolitics”; Sakwa, *The Lost Peace*; Legvold, “Ending the New Cold War with Russia”; Legvold, “Managing the New Cold War”; Dobell, “The 12 Elements of Cold War 2.0”; Sakwa, “East Vs. West”; Lind, “America Vs. Russia and China”; Kolesnikov, “The Cold War Putin Wants”; Legvold, *Return to Cold War*.

⁸³ Daalder and Lindsay, “The Price of Trump’s Power Politics”; Rein et al., “White House Studying Cost of Greenland Takeover”; Stumbaum and De Cet, “China’s ‘Natural Return’ to the Center”; Zhao, *All Under Heaven*.

⁸⁴ Kaplan, “A New Cold War Has Begun.”

Minister and current Ambassador to the US, Kevin Rudd, examined and researched the ideology of Xi Jinping at some length, and discerns a set of shifts that he believes will be useful for charting the future course of international relations with China, including avoiding war.⁸⁵

The question is to what extent this ‘war’ will be conducted according to the iceberg model: a small percentage being ‘above the line’ (or ‘threshold’)⁸⁶ of open armed conflict (e.g. the Russo-Ukraine war, the current hostilities taking place in Gaza, or a potential ‘hot’, ‘shooting’ or ‘kinetic’ war in the Taiwan Strait) while the large majority of actions are or will be conducted in the ‘gray zone’ beneath such conflict, utilizing ‘sub-threshold’ threats. These would likely include demonstrations of force, economic coercion, espionage, and many other means, including information operations—and potentially even information warfare extended beyond the hardware and software, into the very “wetware” of human cognition itself.⁸⁷

It has been argued that China has already been waging such “unrestricted warfare” on the West in general and the US in particular since the late 1990s, when military doctrine of such an approach first surfaced.⁸⁸ Perhaps it may be better to think of this new era not so much as a (new) Cold War, or even as a ‘hybrid war’ but rather as a “Gray War”.⁸⁹ Other observers use similar terms such as “Simmer War”, “Shadow War”, “Stealth War” or even “Total War”.⁹⁰ What is common to all these conceptions is that now every aspect of human experience and social organizing is to be considered a potential theatre of global conflict, reaching from outer space as far out as the Moon,⁹¹ down to our very deepest and innermost feelings,

desires and thoughts themselves.⁹² Even the last few cubic centimetres of freedom that George Orwell imagined existed inside our heads is now under threat.⁹³

Taking Stock — Towards Horizon 3

The general flow of the dynamics of the postwar rules-based international order since 1945 can now be succinctly expressed in three broad themes or ‘flavours’ that try to capture the overall high-level dynamics (what in Appendix A are called ‘orienting generalizations’):

- stand-off and containment during the postwar era and Cold War (pre-H1);
- enlargement during the post-Cold War era (H1), and
- resistance and ‘pushback’ during the transition from then up to now (H2), leading to a
- generalized gradual erosion of the institutions, norms and even acceptance of the post-Cold War international rules-based order.

At this writing in early 2025, the world would seem to have rapidly emerged into what appears to be the very early part of a new world order,⁹⁴ which some observers had earlier already foreshadowed.⁹⁵ The new US administration has been remaking many aspects of the international order with remarkable speed, leading one observer to call it an “epochal break with the idea of a rules-based international order backed by U.S. power and a collective West”,⁹⁶ a claim whose general import has been supported by many others.⁹⁷

⁸⁵ Rudd, *The Avoidable War*; Rudd, *On Xi Jinping*; Rudd, *The Ideology Behind Xi Jinping's China*.

⁸⁶ NATO Standardization Office, *Allied Joint Doctrine*.

⁸⁷ Tibbs, *The Global Cyber Game*; Davis, “Cognitive Warfare”; DiResta et al., *Telling China's Story*; Ryan, “China Seeks to Harvest User Data from Global Apps to Boost Propaganda Efforts.”

⁸⁸ Liang and Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*; Spalding, *War Without Rules*; Hagestad, *China's Unrestricted Warfare, Part 1*; Hagestad, *China's Unrestricted Warfare, Part 2*; Hamilton and Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand*.

⁸⁹ Pitts, “Welcome to the Gray Zone and the Future of Great Power Competition”; Pitts, “What Are Our Adversaries Trying to Achieve in the Gray Zone?”; Pitts, “How Can the U.S. Better Manage the Gray Zone?”; Kelly, “Sabotage Without Warning.”

⁹⁰ Lee, “Simmer War”; McGrath, *Spotlight on the Shadow War*; Spalding and Kaufman, *Stealth War*; Karlin, “The Return of Total War.”

⁹¹ Hancock, “US Space Force Warns of ‘Mind-Boggling’ Build-up of Chinese Capabilities”; Nagorski, “When U.S-China Competition Reaches Outer Space”; Miller, “Cislunar Space.”

⁹² Hung and Hung, “How China's Cognitive Warfare Works”; Cao et al., “Countering Cognitive Warfare.”

⁹³ See Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, chap. 2

⁹⁴ Ignatieff, “Canada, Trump and the New World Order.”

⁹⁵ E.g. Sullivan, “The World After Trump,” 19.

⁹⁶ Mohan, “India Sees Opportunities as Trump Jettisons the Western Order.”

⁹⁷ E.g. Younger, “Former MI6 Boss on Trump, Putin and a ‘New Era’ for International Relations”; Brands, “The Renegade Order”; Vinjamuri et al., “The World Upended”; Bekkevold, “Trump Remakes the Security Order”; Daalder and Lindsay, “The Price of Trump's Power Politics.”

ANALYSIS OF HORIZON 3 — MULTIPLE FUTURES

If it turns out to be correct, this observation thereby answers the initial research question regarding the future of the rules-based international order as it was conventionally understood: it has seemingly passed, albeit perhaps only temporarily. That is, if this is true, we now find ourselves at a very rare juncture in history, comparable to 1648, 1815, 1871, 1919, 1945, and 1989: a point where the international order is being actively re-made before our very eyes in real time—in this case, where the rules-based order of recent history seems to have gone at least into temporary hibernation, if not actually into the grave. Of course, the ‘3 horizons’ dynamical perspective would suggest that that system is indeed passing, and that the more important question is what system will emerge to replace it: whether it will be another comparable system with somewhat similar characteristics, or whether it will be an entirely new and radically different system altogether.

Near future

Treating the observation at the end of the last section as a hypothesis about the future, a possible ‘flavour’ for the at-least immediate near future of the rules-based international order might be characterizable as:

- abeyance, as the main architect of the order seems to be exhibiting a decreasing

commitment to some of the very principles of the rules-based order it set about creating 80 years ago;⁹⁹

- fragmentation, as the main architect of the order seems to be separating from and even demonstrating active hostility towards historical allies, such as Europe and Canada;¹⁰⁰
- retrenchment, as its commitments to extend its instruments of power into the world are apparently beginning to be scaled back, including with respect to NATO itself;¹⁰¹ and perhaps even
- return to a spheres-of-influence mindset, as some of the most fundamental norms of world order—not merely the overlying liberal but even the fundamental Westphalian, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity—appear to be being jettisoned, not only by historically revanchist powers, but now also seemingly by the very architect of the rules-based order itself (e.g. “acquiring” Gaza, and “annexing” Greenland and/or Canada and/or Panama).¹⁰²

These descriptors also seem to apply fairly well to our analytical dimensions, to varying degrees, depending on context. For example, the security order is apparently beginning to undergo retrenchment. The free trade that characterized much of the previous order is being progressively

⁹⁸ Nye, “The Future of World Order.”

⁹⁹ Lucas, “Comrade Trump”; Hurburt, “Can the International Order Survive Trump 2.0?”

¹⁰⁰ Bildt, “The Transatlantic World Will Never Be the Same”; Wolf, “The US Is Now the Enemy of the West.”

¹⁰¹ Dueck, “The Strategy of Retrenchment and Its Consequences”; Nemeth, “Defending NATO Without the Americans”; Rosen, “A Better Way to Defend America.”

¹⁰² Chandler, “From Open Door to Spheres of Influence”; Fazal, “Conquest Is Back”; Toft, “The Return of Spheres of Influence”; Rein et al., “White House Studying Cost of Greenland Takeover.”

blocked with new tariffs, an abeyance of the prior norms of free trade, which may lead to fragmentation of trade flows as new trading blocs potentially form in response. Information flow, and especially technology exports, are also being progressively restricted once again, while the cultural fragmentation due to grievances with identity politics continues to polarize many countries. However, many of these dynamics may in fact turn out to be relatively temporary.

Be that as it may, we still need to address the question of what medium- and longer-term futures there may be for the international order in general, even if the rules-based order which existed when this research began last year is now in the process of reorienting itself in unexpected ways. This brings us to the question of what the further-future ‘flavour’ of the international order in general may be.

Many observers have suggested the return of great-power rivalry and strategic competition, most usually considered to be between the US and China,¹⁰³ although with some also adding in Russia.¹⁰⁴ There have even been ‘telegrams’ outlining a US grand strategy with regard to China,¹⁰⁵ modelled on George Kennan’s original

“long telegram” regarding US strategy to ‘contain’ the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁶

Alongside this two- or three-way great power rivalry, Ikenberry¹⁰⁷ sees the world returning to a broader tripartite configuration—what he calls “Three Worlds”: the global West, the global East and the global South—reminiscent of and in part based upon Alfred Sauvy’s First-, Second- and Third-Worlds of the mid-20th Century.¹⁰⁸ In particular, he sees Russia’s 2014/2022 war of aggression against Ukraine as marking “the tipping point—when history reversed course, pushing the world back in the direction of geopolitical and ideological groupings. Specifically, in the direction of Three Worlds”.¹⁰⁹ The use of the “South” designation is not without controversy and some pushback of its own.¹¹⁰

Forms of order

In prior work, Ikenberry outlined three main (idealized) types of political order:¹¹¹

- hegemonic, based on an organizing principle of hierarchy, where the source of stability is the hegemon’s ‘preponderance’ of power, for which there are no restraints;



¹⁰³ E.g. Rose, “Who Will Run the World? America, China, and Global Order”; Mahbubani, *Has China won?*; Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry.”

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Colby and Mitchell, “America, China, Russia, and the Return of Great-Power Politics”; Dobb, “A New US, Russia, China Nuclear Arms Race Spells Danger”; Lind, “America Vs. Russia and China.”

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*; Shea, “The Longest Telegram.”

¹⁰⁶ Kennan, “The Long Telegram.”

¹⁰⁷ Ikenberry, “Three Worlds.”

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, George Orwell had also imagined a tripartite world in 1984—essentially the West, the Soviet Union and China—although he wrote in 1948 before both the Communist takeover of China and the formation of NATO, which latter stopped what he saw to be a march to the Atlantic by Soviet forces, each of which occurred later in 1949: Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

¹⁰⁹ Ikenberry, “Three Worlds,” 121.

¹¹⁰ E.g. Mampilly, “What ‘the Global South’ Really Means”; Sakwa uses the terms “political West”, “political East” and “Global South”: Sakwa, “East Vs. West”; Sakwa, “The International System and the Clash of World Orders.”

¹¹¹ Ikenberry, *After Victory*, chap. 2, and Table 2-1.

- balance of power, based on an organizing principle of anarchy, where the source of stability arises from an equilibrium of power, and counterbalancing coalitions act as restraints on concentrations of power; and
- constitutional, based on an organizing principle of the rule of law, where the sources of stability are limits on the return to power, and binding institutions act as the restraints on concentrated power.

These three types can be schematized by way of Figure 3, which depicts Ikenberry's three idealized forms as the corners of a triangular continuum: the vertical axis being the 'rules vs power' axis, while the 'power' end of that axis expands as it distinguishes the degree of 'concentration vs dispersion' of that power. In this way, in principle any form of political ordering can be characterized by a specific position somewhere within this triangular continuum.

The 1945 postwar rules-based order was clearly explicitly designed and intended to be of the third type, even as it was embedded within a broader balance of power containment order with recognized spheres of influence during the Cold

War, as discussed in Appendix A, and which then gave way to an effectively hegemonic order in the immediate post-Cold War 'unipolar moment'.¹¹²

In addition to Ikenberry's three idealized types of order, Lascurettes and Poznansky consider a 2x2 framework for analyzing international orders, utilizing the following two dimensions: whether (inter-state) power is concentrated or dispersed; and whether ordering is intentional or spontaneous.¹¹³ The spontaneous endpoint arises because, as Mazarr noted above with respect to the patterns that are inherent in an order, "[e]ven if they eventually become quite structured, these patterns can be emergent and unplanned".¹¹⁴

In this four-quadrant view (Figure 4), concentrated-intentional (Quadrant I) depicts a hegemonic order, such as the post-Cold War unipolar moment;¹¹⁵ dispersed-intentional (IV) depicts a negotiated order, such as e.g. the Concert of Europe order following the Vienna Congress in 1815; dispersed-spontaneous (III) depicts an order with no centralized power and actors reacting to other actors' actions, the classic decentralized balance-of-power realist view; and concentrated-spontaneous (II) depicts a centralized order which emerges from the influence of a privileged actor

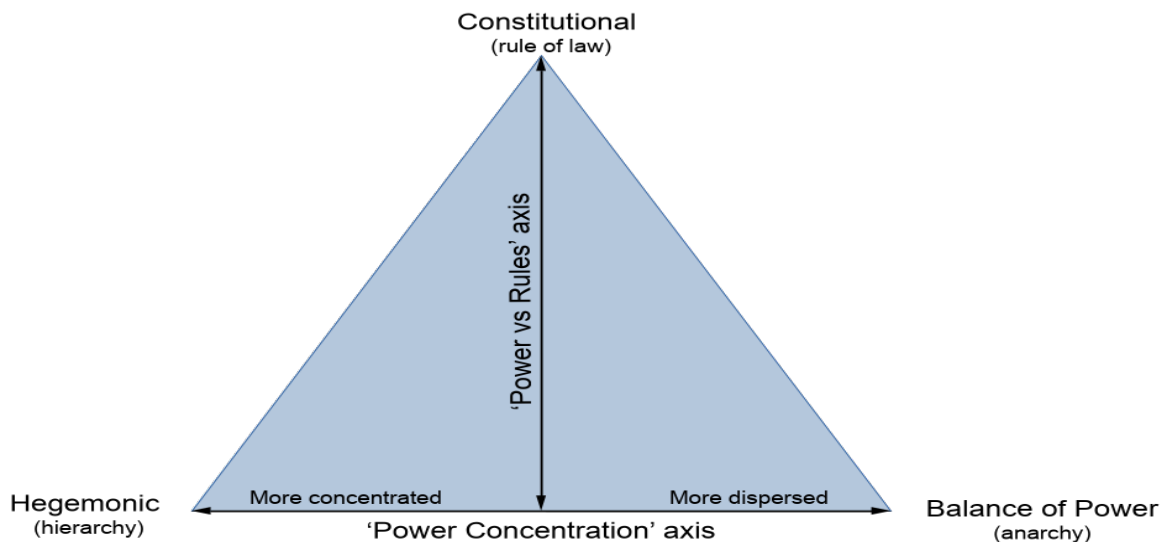


Figure 3. The Triangular Continuum of Ikenberry's possible international orders, ranging between three idealized types.
Source: The author, after Ikenberry 2001, chap. 2.

¹¹² With regard to Figure 3, this transition from Cold War containment to post-Cold War unipolarity might arguably be characterizable as a shift from near the middle-right section of the triangle towards a perhaps slightly lower position on the left side.

¹¹³ Lascurettes and Poznansky, "International Order in Theory and Practice," fig. 1, p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, 8.

or small set of actors acting in their own interests, but “not out of a conscious desire to establish or sustain the resulting order”.¹¹⁶ At this writing, it seems as though international ordering is moving more towards the spontaneous side, away from the intentionality of the hegemonic Quadrant I, toward an emerging Quadrant II form that may eventually track into Quadrant III, as American power declines in relative terms to other rising powers, or else is actively withdrawn from the world.¹¹⁷

When it comes to the future of the international order, it seems clear that at the very least the liberal aspects of it are being pushed back against, as the discussion above has noted, as well as perhaps now actively being dismantled. Ikenberry has also argued that it is possible to think of the international order as a layered system of norms, rules and institutions, like “geological strata”, a useful metaphor for understanding how different aspects may overlay each other to greater or lesser degrees of fundamentality.¹¹⁸ He later suggested that there are four main layers in this system:¹¹⁹

- First, “[a]t the deepest level it’s ... a system of sovereignty” – essentially the Westphalian

norms of territorial integrity, sovereign independence, and so on;

- Second, there are “layers of treaties and institutions culminating ... in the UN system” – essentially the framework of principles and rules designed to govern the world more equitably than had been the case in earlier times (e.g. the age of power politics and the Concert of Europe);
- Third, there are “more work-oriented rules and institutions ... that are based on problem-solving [and] regulating interdependence: the IMF, the World Bank, the WHO” – essentially the sorts of structures that allow for cooperation and global governance as well as ensuring a well-functioning international system; and
- Fourth, “the rules-based order does have a kind of western liberal democracy component on top of those more basic fundamental institutions” – essentially the kinds of values and ideology associated with Western liberalism.

A very similar model with much more detail,

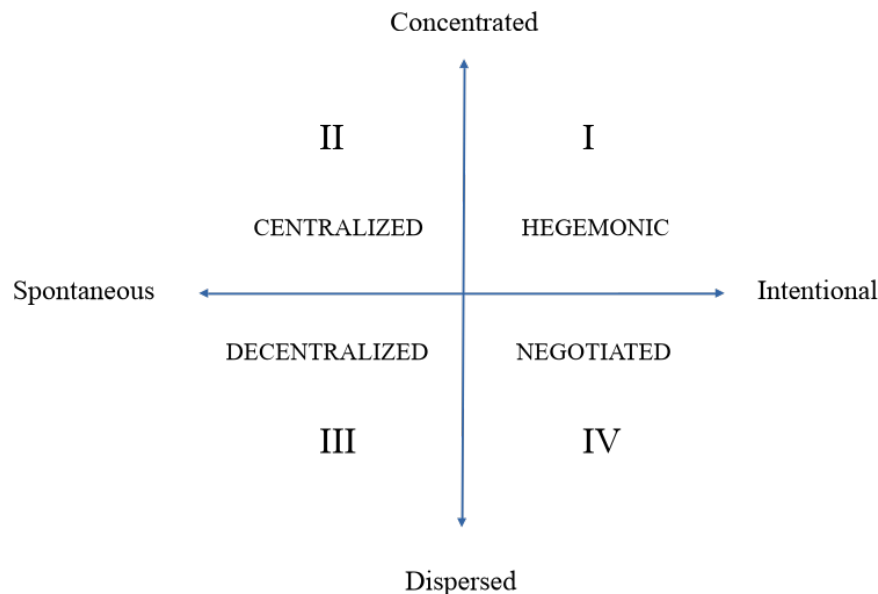


Figure 4. Explanations for origins for international order
Source: Lascurettes and Poznansky

¹¹⁵ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*.

¹¹⁶ Lascurettes and Poznansky, “International Order in Theory and Practice,” 12.

¹¹⁷ Acharya, *The End of American World Order*; Daalder and Lindsay, *The Empty Throne*; Zakaria, *The Post-American World*.

¹¹⁸ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, xii.

¹¹⁹ Ikenberry, *Is There Such a Thing as a Rules-Based International Order?*

although differing in some ways as to the exact placement of some of these elements, is proposed in a RAND report by Mazarr, showing the explicit contents of the layers, including the key institutions involved, specifically:¹²⁰

- Baseline institutions and norms (UN system, semi-formal global associations, such as G8, BRICS, etc, and the norm of territorial sovereignty);
- Security issues and norms (treaties, alliances, regional security institutions, ASEAN, EU, African Union, international law of armed conflict, etc);¹²¹
- Economic institutions and norms (GATT/ WTO trade treaties, IMF, global and regional development banks and programs, OECD, etc); and
- Institutions devoted to liberal values and collective goods (legal conventions and treaties, ICC, WHO, UNDP, ICAO, UNESCO, etc)

In both of the above lists, the items closer to the top represent 'deeper' more 'conservative' levels of the international order, so that the fourth and last entry in each represents the 'topmost' 'liberal' elements of that observer's conception of the 'layering' of the international order.

In such an expanded quasi-geological view, it is now much easier to understand how some states might resist and 'pushback' against some of the overlaid "Western" liberal democratic aspects while still adhering to many if not most of the underlying structures. China, for example, has historically shown strong interest in—and benefited enormously from—the (deeper) liberal economic aspects of the international order, if not the (overlain) liberal political aspects, and has

often invoked the fundamental Westphalian norm of non-interference by outsiders in its own internal affairs.¹²² Russia, by contrast, has repeatedly shown clear disdain for even this most fundamental norm, although it seeks to circumvent this charge by arguing instead that Ukraine is 'really' part of Russia, and is therefore not a 'real' sovereign state. China, too, has long argued that Taiwan is 'really' part of China and might also transgress this norm by military means, although some observers believe that it is more likely to play a longer waiting game and try to re-absorb Taiwan through influence and information operations.¹²³ Both of these states appear to seek to argue around the Westphalian norm when it suits their own agendas. If this tactic is to be taken as a new emerging norm in the coming years, we can expect to see further territorial claims based on 'historical' precedents and/or other precepts, some of which at least will be cynically invented and more-or-less obviously spurious.

In addition to this nation state-based view of global order, focused primarily on the security and economic (sub)orders, another 'pole' has also been identified. This is the infotech digital or "technopolar" order, wherein technology companies begin to exert as much influence in the 'digital' realm as nation-states have traditionally done in the physical.¹²⁴ Given the rising importance of the digital spaces of the online world to world ordering, this represents a possible source of power shift away from nation-states, and the maturation of the information dimension into a full-blown aspect of international ordering in its own right.¹²⁵

The confluence of the three-way strategic competition between America, China and Russia, Ikenberry's three-fold division of the world into global West, global East and global South, and the emergence of a rising technopolar digital order alongside the security and economic orders, leads to the idea of multiple interlinked 'three-body problems' as a metaphor for the dynamics of the coming world order—or indeed, dis-order.¹²⁶ This

¹²⁰ Mazarr, *Summary of the Building a Sustainable International Order Project*, fig. 1, p. 4.

¹²¹ This layer would therefore also include the parallel developments of International Humanitarian Law and the various Geneva Conventions by the ICRC dating from the mid-19th Century. See, e.g., International Committee of the Red Cross, "Historical Treaties and Documents."

¹²² Mazarr et al., *China and the International Order*; Johnston, "China in a World of Orders."

¹²³ E.g. Engelke et al., "Three Worlds in 2035," Scenario 2.

¹²⁴ Bremmer, "The Technopolar Moment"; Bremmer, "The Next Global Superpower."

¹²⁵ Johnston, "China in a World of Orders," 53ff.

¹²⁶ E.g. McFate, *The New Rules of War*; Becker, "Order, Counter-Order, Disorder?"; Haass, "The New World Disorder"; Hill, "Ukraine in the New World Disorder."

idea, while intriguing, is not central to this work, and so a preliminary exploratory discussion is deferred to Appendix B.

In complexity theory, a microscopic fluctuation may be amplified to macroscopic scale very rapidly, in a completely unpredictable way. The self-immolation of a solitary Tunisian street vendor leading to the fall of several governments during the 'Arab Spring' of 2010-11, facilitated by the widespread use of (digital) social media, is a perfect case in point. The complexity implied by these interlinked three-body problems indicates that detailed timeline-based scenarios are likely to be less useful or effective than what are sometimes called 'context' or 'framework' scenarios, which instead lay out, or 'frame', the dynamics of the broader contextual environment¹²⁷—in this case within which international relations will be playing out in the coming future. Therefore, it is this type of broader contextual 'framing' scenario which we will now consider.

Framing Scenarios

A number of observers have considered a variety of scenarios for the future international order (what we are here calling H3). As noted above, in general, all future scenarios fall into one of the four 'generic' classes or archetypes: Continuation/Growth; Decline/Collapse; Disciplined/Constrained/New Equilibrium; and Transformation.¹²⁸

Mazarr's 2018 RAND study mentioned above also suggested four models of the possible future international order differing from that which existed at that time:¹²⁹

1. Global Constitutional Order: a tightly rule-bound institutional order constraining all states, including the great powers (clearly a strong form of Ikenberry's constitutional order);
2. Coalition Against Revisionism: an order that

privileges US interests and defends it against challengers (a much more hegemonic form, perhaps with some constitutional elements);

3. Great Power Concert: weakly binding international institutions for great power cooperation (clearly a balance-of-power form albeit with pragmatic elements); and
4. Coalition of Democracies: another order that privileges US interests, but restrains US power within institutions with democratic allies (which seems to be another hegemonic/constitutional form like Type 2 above, albeit here with the constitutional aspect more dominant).

Of these, the emerging dynamic in international relations as of this writing seems to be heading towards that of Type 3, Great Power Concert, namely Ikenberry's balance of power, although the degree to which elements of cooperation may spontaneously emerge where these are in the interests of the major powers remains to be seen.

A set of three contextual scenarios was proposed in *Diplomacy and the Future of World Order*.¹³⁰ Their scenarios are:

1. A Realist's View—a more dangerous world of nationalistic and assertive sovereign states, with increased competition and discord leading to a growing potential for interstate conflict, with changing power balances (loosely resonant with Great Power Concert above);
2. Liberal Internationalism—strengthened global institutions, characterized by continuing collaboration among states, even as US hegemonic power declines, taking one of two generic forms: a collection of states sharing similar liberal values seeking to strengthen "instruments of collective security and cooperation at regional and/or global levels"

¹²⁷ van der Heijden, *Scenarios*; Eriksson and Weber, "Adaptive Foresight."

¹²⁸ These archetypes can even be used to sequence the future, such as the historian-futurist W. Warren Wagar did whereby in one 'future history' all four of these futures occur in the order listed here (Wagar, *A Short History of the Future*). The world continues on a path of destructive capitalist growth until a nuclear war in 2043, which precipitates a world-wide collapse. The survivors rebuild a socialist world order which continues for around a century until the governing body votes itself out of existence as a new consciousness dawns leading to a transformative utopia of plenty based on the equitable distribution of wealth of the previous century. Wagar based this sequence on the three main currents of futurist thought he had identified in the late 20th century; see Wagar, *The Next Three Futures*.

¹²⁹ Mazarr, *Summary of the Building a Sustainable International Order Project*, 15.

¹³⁰ Crocker et al., *Diplomacy and the Future of World Order*, chap. 2 especially, but also *passim*.

(resonant with Global Constitutional Order); or a smaller ‘minilateral’ group of “leading democratic states that promotes (or ‘imposes’) liberal internationalism” (more resonant with Coalition Against Revisionism); and

3. Pragmatic Cooperation—a “concert of nations” (somewhat resonant with the Great Power Concert above), which is a combination of “weakened hegemony” (i.e. of the US) coupled with “aspiring multipolarity” among China, India and also Europe, and a return to spheres of influence with a Westphalian ‘hands-off’ agreement, albeit with occasional cooperation on common issues, such as climate change or humanitarian crises.

One can recognize some of the archetypes in the above. For example, Scenario 1 is a Decline of the rules-based (i.e. constitutional) order, but not to full Collapse, necessarily, although it remains a definite risk in such a balance-of-power world. Scenario 3 has a Constrained/New Equilibrium aspect, with regards to the rules-based order, being a further erosion of the liberal elements, but allowing at least some of the deeper norms of the order to remain (i.e. the Westphalian norms of the deepest stratum). And Scenario 2 is a Growth archetype, where the rules-based order manages to recover from recent decline and present shock, and regain its authority. One notes that no more radical Transformation archetype is considered by any of these authors.

A further group of three scenarios for 2035 has very recently been produced by the Atlantic Council. Reduced from their quite detailed narrative form to a more contextual overview form, these are: ¹³¹

1. The Reluctant International Order. Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the rules-based order, it continues to evolve, with the norms underpinning it continuing to be preserved by many international actors apart from nation states. Trade continues to be seen as a net good for most countries, and a close call with a bioweapons scare in the late 2020s involving a highly lethal synthetic variant of smallpox leads to the realization by most governments of the need to collaborate

to mitigate such existential threats. This has some resonances with aspects of both the Liberal Internationalism and Pragmatic Cooperation scenarios above.

2. China Ascendant. This world comes about because the United States turns inward and is no longer committed to the rules-based order and all of its norms, principles, or multilateral institutions, nor indeed to its allies and partners. The US essentially stands aside and allows China to step in and remake the global order, across all metrics of power, dismantling the (uppermost) democratic norms established in the postwar order through its newfound influence in multilateral institutions. Taiwan is subordinated by a variety of gray zone activities and information operations, and this dynamic plays out writ large on a global scale, never arousing an adequate response. With no security guarantee from the United States, some countries are considering acquiring nuclear weapons. This scenario is a combination of Decline and Transformation archetypes; the former because the US-led rules-based order is allowed to decline, while the international order is simultaneously transformed to a new China-led one.

3. Climate of Fear. Climate change has worsened, the resulting instability has caused people to turn on one another, and the turbulence has exacerbated many other problems, including geopolitical, making them harder to solve. The bleakness of outlook is leading to radical solutions being contemplated to extricate humanity from this predicament, including geoengineering. Many climate tipping points have been getting closer and chronic heatwaves are everywhere. Climate-driven displacement or migration leads to government responses similar to the Syrian migration crisis of the 2010s, such as border fences and drone surveillance. While decarbonization of energy systems is occurring, it may be too little too late. This is clearly a Decline/Descent archetype with regard to the global environment, and has strong resonances with the Fortress World variant of the Barbarization channel from the Great Transition Initiative’s set of six global scenarios developed over two decades ago. ¹³²

¹³¹ Engelke et al., “Three Worlds in 2035.”

¹³² Great Transition Initiative, “Global Scenarios.”

What is interesting is that in this set an “ascendant China” is explicitly mentioned, which was not the case in the four RAND orders reported above. However, in a separate report in the same year, RAND considers a spectrum of possible stances or approaches of China towards the international order, given its rising importance and increasing confidence.¹³³ In fact, one can infer that the RAND spectrum has five main locations, ranging from China simply joining the US-led international order at one extreme, all the way to outright revisionist aggression and extreme hostility at the other, with the three more ‘middling’ positions between these being the only ones considered in detail in that report. These middling positions are:¹³⁴

- adversarial displacement — “a China determined to push the United States from the predominant position at the head of the international order and achieve first regional and then, in the very long term, global predominance for itself”;
- multilateral power-flexing — “a similar Chinese effort to lead a multilateral order, with less direct confrontation to the U.S. order. China in this future is not a devoted adversary of U.S. influence, as in the first scenario: It is simply trying to use the multilateral order to promote its own unique interests and expand its own influence, using multilateral forums and processes as one tool”; and
- uncoordinated shirking — “a China that has turned significantly inward and backtracked from recent signals that it would become a more active and responsible leader of the multilateral order ... [which] could be the result of internal crises that pull ... attention away from its international ambitions, domestic political problems, or simply a reorientation of leadership attention.” A variant of this is one where there is posturing of global leadership, but no actual follow-through, so that the end result is the same.

Toward the future international order

Synthesizing these ideas, let us scope out a rough schema for the possible evolution of the

international order, towards its eventual H3 form.

Ikenberry’s three idealized forms of order discussed above also provide a useful way to characterize these differing H3 visions of the international order by using a continuum derived from the triangular form depicted in Figure 3. Based on the concept of ‘dispersion of power’ between states,¹³⁵ these will range from Constitutional (fully dispersed and constrained, at the top) through Balance of Power (somewhat dispersed and constrained, moving towards the bottom right) to Hegemonic (not at all dispersed or constrained, moving across towards the bottom left). In other words, a kind of ↘ then ← movement through the triangular continuum. The scenarios considered above can then be placed upon this ‘dispersion of power’ continuum more or less as follows:

- Global Constitutional Order
- Liberal Internationalism, variant 1
- Reluctant International Order
- Liberal Internationalism, variant 2
- Coalition of Democracies
- Pragmatic Cooperation
- A Realist’s View
- Great Power Concert
- Coalition Against Revisionism (i.e. US privileged)
- China Ascendant

with

- Climate of Fear as a Decline/Collapse archetype for the global environment, and with the further addition of
- Collapse to Disorder, as the ultimate failure of international order, included here for completeness of archetypal representation.

¹³³ Mazarr et al., *China and the International Order*, chap. 6.

¹³⁴ *China and the International Order*, chap. 6.

¹³⁵ E.g. Lascurettes and Poznansky, “International Order in Theory and Practice,” and the discussion around Figure 4 here.

One notes that the two quasi-hegemonic scenarios near the bottom of the main sequence have either the US or China as the privileged state, the latter because of the ‘shirking’ dynamic described above, except that in this scenario the ‘shirking’ is done by the US instead of China (see below). At the outset of this research last year, one may have been tempted to view the competition for the H3 vision of world order as being between the current US-led order and a China-led order challenging it.¹³⁶ Such a dynamic would be occurring as a result



of either adversarial displacement or multilateral power-flexing on the part of the ascending China, perhaps arising from one of its stated “centenary goals”, namely that of “national rejuvenation” for the year 2049.¹³⁷ Since then, as noted above, the change in US administration has introduced a remarkable alteration to its traditional foreign policy direction that appears, *prima facie* at this writing, to be more resonant with the general tenor of the ‘uncoordinated shirking’ descriptor above, wherein the word ‘America’ could simply be substituted for ‘China’. Of course, this may simply be but the initial phase of the shift in foreign policy trajectory by the new administration, which will most likely continue to change as the administration fine-tunes and crystallizes the details of its new foreign policy direction. The approach to international ordering now appears much less intentional (per Figure 4) than merely spontaneous and emergent, and more likely to be based on increasingly ad hoc bilateral ‘deals’ than on any formal multilateral intentionality. How dispersed power eventually becomes depends also on the degree of multipolarity that the system ends up evolving into, which may depend a great deal on how much China actually

wants to lead the international system.¹³⁸

Given this, and the discussion above in the Near Future subsection, one can now discern an initial emerging trajectory away from the more constitutional forms (such as Reluctant IO) towards more balance-of-power ordering (such as A Realist’s View or Great Power Concert), even leading perhaps to the China Ascendant scenario, as the United States seemingly decreases its commitment from its traditional level of engagement with the world, in what appears (per the caveats above) to be a stance and approach resembling the uncoordinated shirking dynamic discussed above. In this case, if this trajectory continues, then the more moderate forms of possible H3 future international order resonant with constitutional forms (and the rules-based international order itself) towards the top of the list are correspondingly less likely.

The questions that remain to be revealed by time alone are:

- how far down the above list of representative framing scenarios the world now moves from quasi-constitutional to balance-of-power orders and, indeed, perhaps to a fully ascendant China attaining first regional and then global hegemony;
- how far down the layers of the international order the erosion of norms, institutions and authority progresses, even perhaps unto the deepest Westphalian layer itself; and finally, indeed
- whether the world will somehow—perhaps via a Pragmatic Cooperation scenario—avoid the decline and collapse of the global environment described in the Climate of Fear scenario, even if it manages to avoid the ultimate Breakdown and Collapse to Disorder that no-one rationally wants, but which may yet accidentally occur in these times of growing tension and increasing assertiveness—and even belligerence—among and between the world’s great and rising powers.

¹³⁶ Jones and Yeo, *China and the Challenge to Global Order*; King, *A China-Led International Order*?

¹³⁷ Essentially, 2049 represents the milestone of a century since the founding of the PRC by the CCP. The goal of ‘national rejuvenation’ is framed by the CCP as a way to “restore” China to its preeminent place in world affairs, following the “century of humiliation” it experienced in the lead-up to 1949. For a fuller discussion, see US DOD, 2024 China Military Power Report, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁸ Schuman, “How China Wants to Replace the U.S. Order”; Campbell and Rapp-Hooper, “China Is Done Biding Its Time”; Radchenko, “China Doesn’t Want to Lead an Axis.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO

The implications for NATO flowing from this initial 'first-cut' analysis can be considered on three main timeframes: near-term (~0-5 years), medium-term (~5-20 years) and longer-term (20+ years), and with dynamics arising from two main locations: from within the Alliance and from without.

In the near-term, the question of the continued internal cohesion of the Alliance itself has surfaced as a real issue, given the new US administration and its initial statements concerning its degree of commitment to preserving the historical arrangements of the Alliance.¹³⁹ The question of the level of commitment can be examined, for the sake of completeness of analysis, along a continuum ranging from full, to reduced (to varying degrees), to removed altogether. Each of these positions can be examined by thinking through the above-mentioned four future archetypes as applied to that position. In the last case it may even be necessary to perhaps, again for completeness' sake, 'think the unthinkable':¹⁴⁰ namely, the extreme, albeit unlikely, situation of an invocation of Article 13 of the North Atlantic Treaty.¹⁴¹ Archetypal analysis yields a variety of possible futures to consider as a result, and not necessarily a complete Collapse of the Alliance, either. For example, a New Equilibrium logic suggests an alliance made up of the remaining member states, albeit with some adjustment and re-calibration of both conventional readiness and nuclear postures. Or, in the less drastic case of a mere stepping-back from its current level of involvement to a somewhat reduced level, another set of potential futures

emerges, such as an increased (Constrained archetype) self-reliance by Europe, which indeed appears to be the emerging trajectory at this writing. And, even in the preferred case of the Alliance remaining fully supported, archetypal analysis can be used to chart out possible new policy directions. NATO has had to re-imagine its role before in the past, especially after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. This current ambiguity could be used as an opportunity to rethink and perhaps revitalize the Alliance's external mission and purpose even in the absence of an actual existential threat to cohesion from within. With regard to external dynamics, the range of current and near-term threats and options available to NATO have been well-explored and well-charted by the Alliance.

In the medium term, the question is more around the role of NATO in a world that is perhaps moving ever-more away from constitutional forms of ordering towards more balance of power forms, which implies a re-emergence of spheres of influence into international relations and world ordering. In this case, NATO would likely continue to have a definite role in the transatlantic sphere, albeit perhaps more skewed towards Europe than North America (given the considerations above), even as it might retain and perhaps build upon wider 'out of area' partnerships in other spheres or theatres, such as is currently the case in the Indo-Pacific. In the case of a fully preserved NATO, the Alliance creator may wish to formally expand the Alliance (via a suitable change in the

¹³⁹ E.g. Hamilton, *NATO's Past, Present, and Very Uncertain Future*.

¹⁴⁰ Kahn, *Thinking about the Unthinkable*; Mahbubani, "It's Time for Europe to Do the Unthinkable"; Daalder, "NATO Without America"; Nemeth, "Defending NATO Without the Americans."

¹⁴¹ NATO, "The North Atlantic Treaty."



Articles) beyond the Atlantic zone to include new allies in other geographies, such as the Indo-Pacific, especially if there is a return to a form of the 'containment' dynamic that prompted its creation in the first place. The question of further NATO enlargement is one that has had quite a vexed history. In a balance-of-power spheres-of-influence world, enlargement intentions from within the Alliance would need to be viewed more clearly through an external 'security dilemma' lens, given the probable posturing of great and rising powers, and their likely sensitivity to issues of territoriality in such a world.

For both the near-term and medium-term, there will be clear threats to the cohesion of the Alliance originating from outside it, especially if the Cold War 2.0 dynamic matures into a full-blown Gray War. In this instance, the present probing for weaknesses especially along the eastern flank can be expected to increase, as it will with any expansion in the number of partners and/or formal allies, and the consequent expanded territorial extent. In this case, NATO needs to prepare for full-spectrum warfare of the Simmer, Stealth, or 'unrestricted' type across all dimensions of human social and even individual experience (e.g. cognitive warfare targeted at specific individuals, including within NATO itself). At the upper limit of the 'medium term', the year 2049 looms as an interesting milestone, given that it represents the centenary year both for NATO as well as the above-mentioned stated timeframe for "national rejuvenation" by China's current leadership.

In the longer-term view of the international order, we are somewhat freer to envisage futures for NATO that may tilt more towards the Transformation archetype. In a world that may potentially have returned to a more constitutional ordering, or is more multipolar or simply has a more stable and pragmatic balance of power ordering, the real-world example of a successful long-term security alliance that NATO represents could end up leading to the formation of a global security alliance or organization beyond the Atlantic zone.¹⁴² This would seem to be much less likely to arise as a result of the transformation of NATO itself. Rather

it seems more likely for NATO to be an exemplar of how such a global security organization might be implemented, operating under the auspices of the United Nations, as was imagined in the very founding documents of the UN itself, such as in the Articles in Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Changes in the international system mean that new security and military alliances "are very likely to emerge" in prospect, and that they very well may not even look like NATO presently does.¹⁴³

The possible impetus for such a significant reorientation may come from the eventual maturation of a recent development in security thinking, that of "security cosmopolitanism".¹⁴⁴ In this view the concept of security is expanded beyond the narrower nation-state focus and is extended much more widely, owing to the globalization or even "planetization of insecurity".¹⁴⁵ The Reluctant IO scenario imagines one possible trigger for such a shift in mindset or worldview (which is one form of the Transformation archetype). The core conceptual realization is that of "a particular understanding of the globe as a moral unity shared by humans with myriad differences but a common fate".¹⁴⁶ In a sense, this represents, as it were, 'human security taken fully global' owing to the recognition that there are in fact broader existential threats to humanity itself that transcend and subsume all limited national interests and boundaries. The effectiveness and authority of such a globally oriented security alliance would likely grow with each new member. If the stated goal is something like "security of all, by all, above all" in order to ensure this, then some pragmatic arrangement or accommodation to different nations' values might be necessary, which would be more in keeping with the basic precept of sovereignty built into the UN Charter system. If nothing else, the concept of a global security organization properly designed and well-suited to protecting all the inhabitants of planet Earth from existential threats, whether endogenous or exogenous, provides a quite compelling normative guiding image or vision of the longer-term global future. Whether or not such a Transformative global future indeed comes about remains very much to be seen.

¹⁴²United Nations, "UN Charter."

¹⁴³Schmitt, "The Emergence of Military Alliances in the 21st Century," 24.

¹⁴⁴Burke, "Security Cosmopolitanism and Global Governance."

¹⁴⁵Burke, "Security Cosmopolitanism and Global Governance," 85.

¹⁴⁶Burke, "Security Cosmopolitanism and Global Governance," 87.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has introduced an analytical framework for conceptualizing and situating the current transition of the international order, viewing it as an interim way station on the way towards a newly emerging but as-yet still-evolving future configuration. It has examined the history of the international order up to and including the current transition, four different ‘layers’ that that history of ordering has produced in that time, as well as three different forms of ordering that the future order may develop into, yielding a dozen contextual framing scenarios arrayed along a spectrum of possibilities. An initial analysis is based on recent dynamics gives the following assessment.

While some form of ordering is likely to remain, the descent into anarchic disorder is also considered possible by some observers. The main questions are: ‘what sort of order will this be?’—be it constitutional, balance of power, hegemonic, or some admixture—and ‘how far “down” the layers of the current order might the order be eroded?’ Will

only the top layer of liberalism be contested and potentially altered, or will the current erosion go even as far down as the very Westphalian norms that have persisted for nearly four centuries?

The polarity of the future international order is increasingly likely to continue towards renewed bipolarity, although there is a dynamic of rising multipolarity also in evidence. The coming few years presage a strengthening return to great power competition and strategic rivalry—suggesting a possible transition to a balance of power order—probably turning into a more extensive Gray War on multiple fronts, and with shifting alliances and balance of power changes possible over time. Beyond that, changing policies of governments may once again alter the direction of international ordering, leading to potentially more hegemonic forms, or perhaps, in a potential ‘post-populist’ world,¹⁴⁷ a return to largely or quasi-constitutional forms once again.

¹⁴⁷ Wigura, “Post-Populism in Practice”; Kuisz and Wigura, “Poland’s Post-Populist Rehab.”

APPENDIX A — HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of the world order is long and complex.¹⁴⁸ To make our summary of the history of the rules-based international order feasible within the scope of this paper, we shall necessarily be taking a very high-level overview—what one might call “orienting generalizations”.¹⁴⁹ Such a perspective is interested in broad patterns, such as one might see from an overview key map in an atlas, rather than the complete details one finds in the specific maps themselves. Our interest here is in ‘board brush-stroke’ heuristics that we can use to summarize the trajectory of the rules-based order; we cannot and do not claim that this type of overview captures all nuances of the specifics. Instead we seek to find a “broad sweep of history” type of perspective¹⁵⁰ that will enable us to usefully orient ourselves in the present as we prepare to look into the possibilities of the future.

Pre-World War 2

Following a century of upheaval and conflict culminating in the Thirty Years’ War, the signatories of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia attempted to establish an international order based on an initial balance-of-power (pre-1815) and later concert-of-powers system (1815-1914) designed to prevent any one actor from overwhelming the others.¹⁵¹ Apart from inventing the concept of the nation-state itself, the 1648 agreement gave rise to some of the oldest and most fundamental norms found in the study of international relations, including

territorial integrity; sovereign equality; and mutual non-interference in other states’ internal affairs.¹⁵² With the subsequent emergence of European powers undertaking global imperial expansionism, this particular type of international ordering, while merely one of many that are possible (cf. Kissinger’s observations in the Introduction), ultimately became the dominant form worldwide by the end of the 19th Century.

This form of power politics-based international ordering persisted, with some fractures, until it finally failed completely in 1914. The United States remained out of World War I until 1917, with President Woodrow Wilson entering it ostensibly because of German attacks on US shipping, but also—according to some historians—to counter the rise of communism, following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia that year. Thus, some historians date the start of the Cold War—as an ideological-political global contest between American capitalism and Soviet communism—to 1917.¹⁵³ The desire to avoid a repeat of what was then called the “Great War” led to the establishment of the first liberal order as we understand the term today, devised at the Versailles conference in 1919, and leading to the creation of the League of Nations.

The US Senate refused to ratify the Versailles treaty, thereby excluding the United States from the enforcement process, or from any further

¹⁴⁸E.g. Kissinger, *World Order*; Kocs, *International Order*; Keylor, *A World of Nations*; Hurrell, *On Global Order*.

¹⁴⁹This is a term frequently used by the philosopher of consciousness Ken Wilber in his attempts to provide an overarching perspective on what is a notoriously broad subject area. See Wilber, *Collected Works*.

¹⁵⁰Voros, “A Generalised ‘Layered Methodology’ Framework,” 36.

¹⁵¹Kissinger, *World Order*; Kocs, *International Order*.

¹⁵²Harris, “Losing the International Order.”

¹⁵³E.g. Fink, *Cold War*.

part in modifying its terms. Thus, ironically, in the early 20th Century, the prime mover leading to the creation of the (then international) order did not join it. (Today, in the early 21st Century, perhaps even more ironically, we again seem to be witnessing the active withdrawal from the international order by its primary architect.) The three main ideologies of the inter-war period were liberal democracy, communism, and fascism. This system also subsequently failed for various reasons, including a lack of credible enforcement processes, and economic and trade policies exacerbating the effects of the Great Depression in several of the 'defeated' countries. This proved conducive to the arising of militant expansionist nationalism there, precipitating conditions that led to the breakdown of international order and the outbreak of World War 2.¹⁵⁴

Post-World War 2 and the Cold War: 'Stand-off' and 'Containment'

US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had served under Wilson as Deputy Secretary of the Navy, sought to re-ignite the ideals underpinning the League of Nations while also seeking to avoid the mistakes of the past.¹⁵⁵ Most commentaries on and histories of the rules-based international order tend to start here. However, as noted above, the ideological contest which in large part defined the post-World War 2 and Cold War period was already nearly three decades old by this stage, and the earlier unsuccessful League of Nations was also intended as an instrument of a liberal rules-based order.

The general theme or 'flavour' of international relations for most of this era across the six analytical dimensions we are considering can be encapsulated as 'stand-off' and 'containment'. The latter term had been proposed by George Kennan as a policy to be applied in the ideological-political sense to counter Soviet "expansive tendencies", but it was soon extended to include the security-military aspect as well.¹⁵⁶

The security order was characterized by the formation of opposing military alliances focused on deterrence; the establishment of NATO in 1949 was based upon and an expansion of earlier alliances in Western Europe.¹⁵⁷ While NATO was a voluntary alliance, its corresponding and counter-balancing Soviet counterpart, the Warsaw Pact (1955), was not. This security order was "precarious", as US President John F. Kennedy himself said.¹⁵⁸ The military deterrence posture of the US and USSR came to be based on the concept of Mutually Assured Destruction, literally MAD, a hair-trigger stand-off that threatened the whole world if it should ever get out of hand, as it almost did in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. This incident led to the setting up of a 'hot-line' between the White House and the Kremlin,¹⁵⁹ and the beginning of a recognition by both sides of the need to curtail the potentially suicidal arms race they were both engaged in. With the arising of détente in the late 1960s and early 1970s, arms treaties intended to, initially, limit Strategic Arms Limitation Talks —SALT) and eventually reduce Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) offensive strategic arms became subject to negotiation.¹⁶⁰ A number of 'proxy' conventional wars occurred around the globe throughout this period, generally in the 'Third World', with both sides supplying arms, financing, and sometimes also advisers, and each side careful to avoid any direct confrontation that might lead to a nuclear escalation.

The overall global political order was primarily structured around the United Nations (UN) system, although this suffered from repeated stand-off and deadlock due to the veto power of the US, Soviet Union and China in the UN Security Council (UNSC). Within this global order were two largely self-contained political-economic-ideological sub-orders: the Western, American-led liberal order, incorporating the US and its allies; and the Eastern, Soviet-led communist order, incorporating eastern European Soviet satellite states, and also, to varying degrees, China, depending on the state of Sino-Soviet relations at the time.¹⁶¹ There was relatively little overlap of economic, trade or capital flow activity between the orders: the Bretton-

¹⁵⁴ Kocs, *International Order*, chap. 7.

¹⁵⁵ Kocs, *International Order*, 164ff.

¹⁵⁶ Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"; Kennan, "Containment Then and Now: Containment 40 Years Later."

¹⁵⁷ Apps, *Deterring Armageddon*.

¹⁵⁸ Kennedy, "Radio and Television Address to the American People on the Soviet Arms Build-up in Cuba."

¹⁵⁹ Fink, *Cold War*, 114.

¹⁶⁰ Fink, *Cold War*, *passim*.

¹⁶¹ Snow, *China and Russia*.

Woods system and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) were the Western economic analogues of NATO, while Comecon was the Soviet economic analogue of the Warsaw Pact. Both sides were relatively 'contained', so that the rules-based (liberal) order was far from being universal in extent during much of the Cold War.

Technological developments were also carefully guarded, with the development and use of technology contained, as was the degree of technological advancement of each side, being a major target of espionage. As the technology of nuclear weapons advanced, as well as the mechanisms to deliver them, the Cold War very soon went from theatre-based thinking to strategic—that is, weapons did not need to be close by 'in theatre'; they could be based on home territory and still reach across the globe to strike the adversary on their home turf. Of course, this technological ability cut both ways, and led to a re-thinking of military strategy. As a result, "the overriding US strategy became one of deterrence—what Kissinger would describe as 'a psychological strategy of negative objectives'."¹⁶² The subsequent development of multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle (MIRV) technology in part led to the realization that limitations needed to be placed on strategic weapons, since anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems could thereby be easily overwhelmed. Hence, technological developments, in part, helped prompt the above-mentioned change in strategic nuclear arms posture, towards limitations (i.e. SALT) and ultimately reductions (i.e. START).

The flow of information (including by way of the movement of people) between West and East was also strongly curtailed, and took place mostly through traditional channels—radio, television, films, news—controlled in large part by governments. Obviously, information operations ("propaganda") was a significant aspect of the ideological contest between the two sides. A single example suffices to make this point: radio broadcasts from outside of the Iron Curtain were routinely jammed.¹⁶³ Yet, as the Soviet side

became more open (due to Gorbachev's glasnost), and more Western media were allowed in, the disparity in the standard of living between Soviet communism and American capitalism became ever more apparent to those on the Soviet side. This fuelled a rising discontent which they were, for the first time, due to Gorbachev's reforms, allowed to express. With the creation of the Internet, global flows of information became much easier and could effectively bypass the traditional state-controlled channels. The informational and technological dimensions became much more closely bound by the end of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War

By the late Cold War, there was a well-defined 'containment order' surrounding the Western and Eastern suborders, put in place via various treaties and informal practices.¹⁶⁴ The Cold War's ideological-political aspect ended with a speech by Mikhail Gorbachev at the UN on December 7, 1988, which signalled "new thinking", including on the right of countries to decide their own form of government.¹⁶⁵ As former US Ambassador to the USSR, Jack Matlock reminds us, the end of the Cold War, the end of communist rule in the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself—three distinct events that re-shaped international relations—"happened so rapidly, and for most observers so unexpectedly, that they have become conflated in people's minds and memories."¹⁶⁶ He has argued at length in many places that the belief that the US 'won' the Cold War—rather than the recognition that it was in fact a negotiated armistice between the superpowers—led to a series of myths and illusions that adversely affected post-Cold War diplomacy, foreign policy, and international relations. This, in turn, led to a decade of lost opportunities which could have remade international order very differently than the way it ultimately transpired.¹⁶⁷ He is far from being the only observer to make this point,¹⁶⁸ but almost no one—apart from Reagan and Gorbachev themselves—could have had a more 'front row' seat to the negotiations that ended the Cold War than he had.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶² Petraeus and Roberts, *Conflict*, 7.

¹⁶³ Lipien, "Jamming Was a Sign of Effectiveness of Western Broadcasts"; Rizzo, "Radio Wars."

¹⁶⁴ Mazarr et al., *Understanding the Current International Order*, fig. 2.3, p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, 280–1ff and passim.

¹⁶⁶ Matlock, *Superpower Illusions*, chap. 1; Matlock, "Looking Back to Look Ahead," part III.

¹⁶⁷ E.g. Matlock, *Superpower Illusions*, chap. 7.

¹⁶⁸ E.g. Groitl, *Russia, China and the Revisionist Assault on the Western Liberal International Order*, chap. 4.

¹⁶⁹ See, e.g., the photo insert in Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev*.

APPENDIX B — AN INTERSECTING TRIPLET OF ‘THREE-BODY PROBLEMS’

The first ‘three-body problem’¹⁷⁰ is that of America, China and Russia as three great powers all manoeuvring for advantage in a world now governed less by the rule of law (i.e. constitutional order), and increasingly by an emerging balance-of-power spheres-of-influence ‘arrangement’ dynamic.¹⁷¹

These nations make up some of the core constituents of the second three-body problem—Ikenberry’s Three Worlds: the global West (including the US, Europe and traditional capitalist allies, such as Japan and Australia); the global East (including China and Russia); and the global South (including India, Brazil, Indonesia and other rising economies). He notes, however, that they are best seen as “informal, constructed and evolving global factions, and not as fixed or formal political entities”.¹⁷²

A third three-body problem is to be found in the tensions existing between the three orders Bremmer notes: the security order, arguably still unipolar, at least for now; the economic order, arguably multipolar between the US, China and Europe primarily, but with others arising; and a new infotech “digital” order, run not by nation-state governments, but by information technology companies with a global reach.¹⁷³ This introduces an additional instability into the mix, since technology companies now wield so much power that they could in principle choose to chart a course other than what their governments might prefer.

Now, add to these three three-body problems the interactions of the constituents within and between them. Within the West, there is now an apparent loosening of the historically strong ties between the US and parts of the rest of the West, even as there is (currently) a security arrangement between the US, UK and Australia (AUKUS), with a further ‘spoke’ extending from Australia to New Zealand via the ANZUS alliance. Within the East there is the (currently) “no limits’ partnership” between Russia and China, which are also both founding members of the BRICS Grouping that includes several nations from the global South, including India, and now also Indonesia. This is further complicated by the Quad, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, making India a link between both the Quad and the BRICS, while onto this, there is the additional linkage between ASEAN and the BRICS grouping by way of the newly joined Indonesia. And these are simply the first-order interactions, let alone any second- and third-order dynamics which may arise between those already-existing and those newly emergent.

Analyzing the many complexities of these multiple-order interactions would be both a fascinating and important addition to continuing efforts to understand the potential future dynamics of the transitioning international order.

¹⁷⁰ The Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “Three-Body Problem.”

¹⁷¹ Kocs, *International Order*, 8–9ff.

¹⁷² Ikenberry, “Three Worlds,” 122.

¹⁷³ Bremmer, “The Next Global Superpower.”

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