# A New World Order? Careful What You Wish For

Shivshankar Menon

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**This paper examines the persistent attractions of the idea of a world order, and whether one may be said to exist today. It argues that we are now in a world adrift or, at best, between orders. It suggests that this may mark a return to the historical norm and represent an opportunity for ideas that can matter and shape political outcomes in this time of flux.**

*The old world is dying, the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.*
*— Antonio Gramsci, at the end of WWI*

What explains the persistent attraction of the idea of world order, even before technology and globalization made a truly global order possible in the late nineteenth century, and even now, when signs of its absence proliferate?

I speak here of a world order in both senses: as an attempt to order the known world, and as an ordering of international affairs on a global scale. The dictionary definition of world order is even more ambitious: "a system controlling events in the world, especially a set of arrangements established internationally for preserving global political stability." A less lofty and more practical definition of the international order would be: the interconnected set of rules, norms, and institutions established by the great powers for managing conflict and cooperation.[1] When that definition applies to the entire known world, such an order becomes a world order.

Our experiences since World War II predispose us to think of the international situation in terms of world orders and ordering. But these outcomes are the exception in human history. In seeking to understand our present international situation, it may be more appropriate to think in terms of disorder rather than order.

## World Orders in History

World orders are an anomaly in history. Political stability has been the exception rather than the rule. World orders existed only when one power or a group of like-minded powers enjoyed overwhelming preponderance and the balance of power was skewed enough to make it possible for them to impose their will and order on the known world. The most obvious examples are the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century, European imperialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and American hegemony after World War II. But for most of history this was an interconnected, uncentered world, with multiple points of viewing in India, the Eurasian continent, Southeast Asia, China and East Asia, West Asia, trans-Sahara and North Africa, and the West. Most of the world functioned in its own regional orders or in multiverses, many of which traded and exchanged ideas, goods, people, and religions, but only occasionally impinged on each other's security and political calculus, if at all. India and China are probably the most salient example of this pattern of exchanges and connections in history.

Visions of global order emerged out of the British Empire, particularly in its final decades, as part of the endgame of empire, and the ideology of the edifice of twentieth-century institutions owes much to British imperial thought. For instance, the United Nations (UN) was designed and initially operated largely as an instrument of great-power politics and a means to preserve empire. That it did not remain so was despite the intent of its founders, men like Winston Churchill, Jan Smuts, and others. What India, the United States, and others achieved in dismantling the old European colonial empires through the UN must count as one of the great ironies and achievements of history.[2]

The attractions of world order grew in early twentieth-century Europe, and not just among "internationalist" progressives or adherents to One World ideologies. Neoliberals like Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and their followers, with their experience of European fascism and disquiet at decolonization, sought the building of a world order through institutions designed to insulate the market from democratic pressures. The influence of these thinkers is evident in the postwar design of the Bretton Woods institutions—the International

This article has been adapted from a speech given by the author at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University, May 23, 2025.

1 Adapted from Rohan Mukherjee, *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 4.

2 Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the UN* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 7, 14.

Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The triumph of neoliberal policies in the West in the 1980s and 1990s expanded international legal protections for foreign investors through a parallel global legal system, led to the emergence of "tax havens" and zones of various types as safe harbors for capital, and reached culmination in the founding of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Decolonization was central to the emergence of the neoliberal model of world governance.[3]

**Today, geopolitics are marked by rivalry among the great powers, and the distribution of power in the world does not support a world order.**

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

It was only after World War II that decolonization remade the entire world into similar state structures for the first time in history, into Westphalian[6] nation-states rather than congeries of differently organized and variously ordered and linked kingdoms, empires, tribes, confederations, city-states, communities, and so on, with fluid, overlapping, and porous borders and loyalties. And it was after the 1970s that technology, economic forces, and the end of the Cold War made one truly global economy possible, leading for a while to an order that was global in certain economic and power-political aspects, though not in terms of identity or local politics. Even economic globalization had its limits, for two factors of production—capital and goods—were mobile and favored over labor and land.

Today, geopolitics are marked by rivalry among the great powers, and the distribution of power in the world does not support a world order. During the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact and NATO accounted for over 80 percent of world GDP and a similar proportion of military power. Today, China and the US account for less than half of world GDP and a slightly higher proportion of military spending.[7] Hard power is thus more evenly distributed, while South Korea has more soft power than China. Nor does domestic politics in the great powers support the emergence of a world order, due to an increasing reliance on identity, emotion, chauvinism, and isolationist sentiment. The maritime order is fragile, as the South China Sea shows. And, more often than not, politics seems to trump the demands of a globalized economy, returning us to a world that is between orders or adrift, much more like what we have known for most of history.

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

We are now back to a more normal time of a contested order. The main competition is between the United States and China (with Russia as a lesser partner of China), and is centered on Asia. The competition involves diplomatic, military, and economic maneuvering and a struggle for the minds of everyone else, though the ideological divide is nowhere near

3 Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 2–24.

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

5 Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4–9. See also works by Janet Abu-Lughod, Wallerstein, Andre Gunther Frank, and other world-system theorists.

6 A convenient shorthand term for the type of nation-states that we see today, even though these are far from the imaginings of the authors of the Westphalian treaties.

7 SIPRI Report, "World Military Expenditure Trends 2024," https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024.

as sharp as it was in the Cold War. The rise of China and other countries in Asia has naturally evoked pushback by established powers and balancing by others in the region. And, as in previous rounds of great-power rivalry, we see a concomitant rise in nationalism in the medium and great powers.[8]

Today nationalism is alive and well, and not just in postcolonial states. These nationalisms construct myths and origin stories for themselves, which is why modern history-writing is contemporary with the rise of the nation-state. The idea of a world order—of nation and state being conjoined, of a community of like-minded liberal and democratic states, and of the remaking of the world in its own image—was part of the evolving origin story of European nationalism and imperialism. After World War II, this story morphed into and took on aspects of both liberal and proletarian internationalism. To the extent that it reflected the post-WWII reality of a steadily globalizing world, integrating economically, composed for the first time of similar units, the idea worked, was useful, and brought benefits to many across the globe. For instance, this thinking made the UN not only possible but far more long-lasting and effective than the League of Nations.

We tend to forget how the rise of the nation-state has militarized our civilization and cultures, starting with nineteenth-century Europe and now in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. This is not to say that empires and city states were not violent before the rise of the nation-state. But their violence did not involve the violence of entire societies on the scale that the nation-state has unleashed. War was once the profession of certain strata of society. Now it involves all citizens in industrial-scale violence. Violence and certain forms of coercion are inherent in the state, and war is now regarded as natural, even essential. War was pervasive in traditional societies, but that characteristic did not translate into the respect for soldiers and soldiering that we see today in the United States, China, India, and Russia.[9] "Do not use good iron to make nails or good men to make soldiers" was the Chinese saying before the long, bloody conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made China the militarized (and militant) society it is today.

Since World War II, the world has known two successive US-led orders. The first postwar order was a Keynesian one, formed in response to the challenge of the Cold War and to the alternative proposed by the Soviet Union, which at its height ran the lives of 38 percent of the world's population.[10] That first US-led order consisted of a new set of rules and institutions that provided for an open and multilateral trading and monetary system while safeguarding national economic autonomy. The Anglo-American agreement on a postwar economic order created a new type of open system, embodying a unique blend of laissez-faire and interventionism, and allowing for the operation of a relatively open system of trade and payments while also providing arrangements to support domestic full employment and social welfare. This new system's multilateralism was predicated on domestic interventionism.[11] India, which chose a mixed economy with socialist elements, was also the greatest recipient of World Bank assistance. The purpose of the postwar US-led order was to strengthen and consolidate alliances and contain Communism, regardless of the internal political and economic arrangements that states followed, while setting rules for external economic engagement, particularly trade, and backing them with military alliances.

With the end of the Cold War, a neoliberal set of policies that prescribed how states ran their internal affairs took hold in the Washington Consensus. By the late 1990s, the adoption of these policies, and the transnational implications that came with them, began to sink in, and doctrines like the Right to Protect began, in advocates' minds, to override national sovereignty, thus provoking a reaction from those outside the West.

Both orders were strong on economic prescription, had strong political and military regimes to support them, and were weak on humanitarian issues, as we saw during the birth of Bangladesh, in the Congo, in Rwanda, and today in Gaza and the Sudan, where about two million refugees are ignored by the world. Both orders were described as "liberal" and "rule-based," even though they were less than orderly or peaceful and were not particularly liberal in the Cold War's killing fields through maritime Asia,[12] and

8 See, for instance, Paul Staniland, "Major Power Rivalry and Domestic Politics in South Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 14, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/07/major-power-rivalry-and-domestic-politics-in-south-asia?lang=en.

9 John Keegan, *BBC Reith Lecture 1* (1998), https://archive.org/details/johnkeeganwarinourworld.

10 Author's calculation, from Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War; A World History* (Allen Lane, 2017), 183–84.

11 G. John Ikenberry, "Creating Yesterday's New World Order: Keynesian 'New Thinking' and the Anglo-American Postwar Settlement," in *Ideas & Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change*, ed. Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (Cornell University Press, 1993), 57–86.

12 Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (Harper, 2018), 19. During the Cold War, on average 1,200 people were killed every day in wars of one kind or another, with 7 out of 10 of them in Asia stretching from the Manchurian plain through Indochina to the Middle East.

despite the fact that the rules seemed not to constrain the behavior of the great powers who set their terms. The most egregious example of superpower exceptionalism was the nuclear nonproliferation regime embodied in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1967.

## The Purported Advantages of World Orders

In other words, world orders are unusual in history. And they are not necessarily positive or neutral phenomena. India and China and most of the Global South did not particularly or consistently benefit from the last two world orders. And order-building has been primarily conservative, an attempt to stave off change and the forces of history.

What then makes the idea of a world order, of a hierarchy run and led by one or a small group of powers, so attractive to so many? For great powers and potential superpowers, the idea's attraction is obvious: The concept legitimates and helps perpetuate hegemonic power. For smaller and weaker powers, there are attractions in an order that might protect them from international anarchy and the multiple demands of others more powerful than themselves. That protection could come from a single hegemon or, better still, a true rule-based order and multilateral institutions. As for middle powers, or the ones in between, being able to tell their people that they are a present or future pole is flattering. So today it is fashionable to say that the world is multipolar or tending toward that state. But is it really? I have my doubts.

Today, the supporters of the idea of world order are increasingly found in the more prosperous West. While lip service is paid to a "liberal rule-based order," spotting states' commitment in the practice of these rules is difficult. And the steady empowerment of the far right, with their isolationist and nativist (verging on racist) ideologies in the West and emerging economies during this century, has made a "liberal rule-based order" an even less likely prospect.

Among the purported advantages of a world order is political stability, which is naturally attractive to established powers. For the United States, Europe, and Russia, the Cold War defeated the Marxist revolutionary challenge and left market capitalism as the reigning political-economic system. In the Third World, the Cold War helped destroy European colonialism, created dozens of independent states, and fueled mass violence that killed more than twenty million people and gutted the forces of moderate secular nationalism.[13] In today's world, all the major powers are revisionist, and the Global South is searching for alternatives. Over forty countries want to join BRICS, an organization that has yet to prove its ability to produce outcomes. The US wants to "build back better" or "make America great again," while China seeks to restore her lost glory by realizing the "China Dream" of "national rejuvenation." We seem to be in the midst of an intellectual recentering in terms of ideas about international order.

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What world orders have indeed delivered in history is increasing prosperity. The US-led orders delivered unprecedented prosperity more rapidly to a larger number of people than ever before in history. Today more people live longer, healthier, and more prosperous lives than ever before. Inequality has been reduced at the global level, though not within societies.[14] Since the end of the Cold War, the size of the global economy has roughly tripled, and nearly 1.5 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. We have the means, if not the politics, to tackle the discontents of globalization and our times. Frank Gavin can now speak, with reason, of the taming of scarcity and the problems of plenty in the United States and the West.[15]

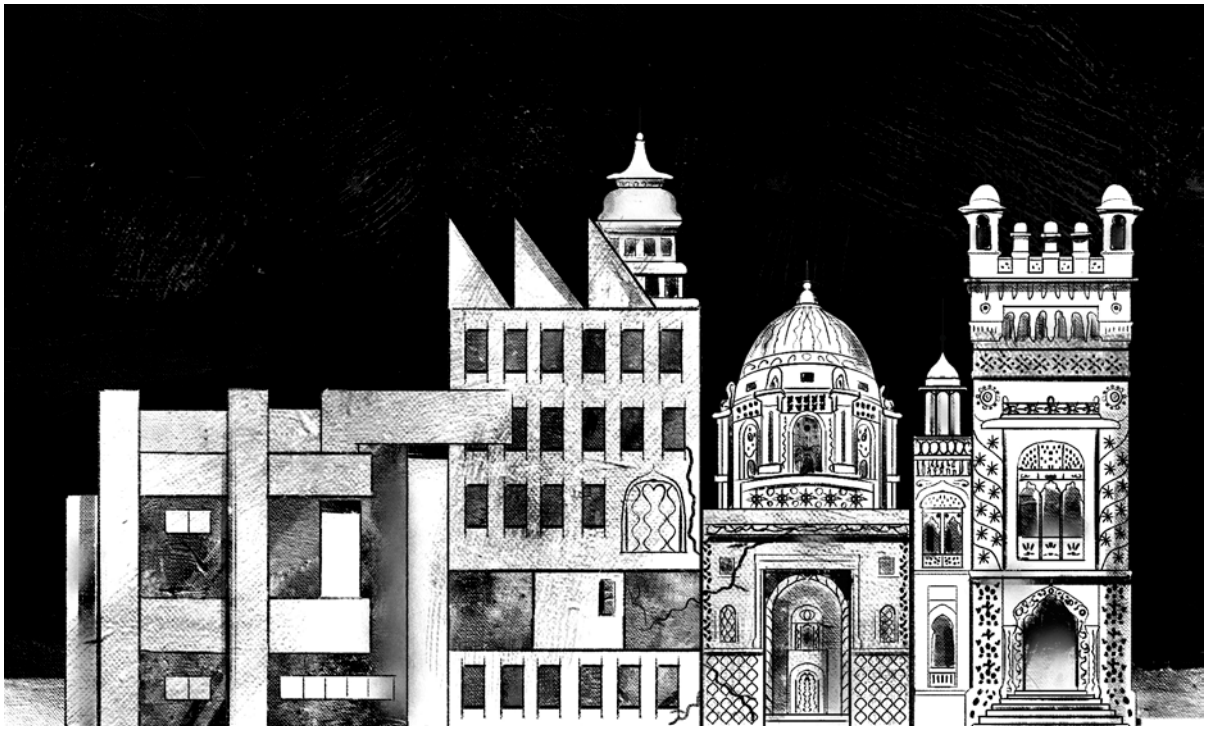
The peace and stability that the order promised are less in evidence, with great-power rivalry and uncertainty rising. Deaths by conflict are at an all-time high since World War II, as are the numbers of internally and internationally displaced persons in the world.[16] The global economy has slowed since 2008, and has yet

13 Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields*, 562.

14 Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 2–3.

15 Francis J. Gavin, *The Taming of Scarcity and the Problems of Plenty: Rethinking International Relations and American Grand Strategy in a New Era* (Routledge, 2024).

16 International Displacement Monitoring Centre, Geneva, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025*, https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/idmc-grid-2025-global-report-on-internal-displacement.pdf?_gl=1*5339n6*_ga*MTc1MzEyMDg2LjE3NTQ4ODY2NTE.*_ga_PKVS5L6N8V*czE3NTQ4ODY2NTAkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTQ4ODY2OTAkajIwJGwwJGgw.



to recover from the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is argument among pessimists about whether the present world is like Europe before WWI, or the 1930s, or whether it is a "neo-Medieval world."[17] None of those eras ended well, and we must not only hope but act to make their analysis wrong.

Is the absence of a world order necessarily an undesirable state with dire consequences? Hegemons, real or aspirant, would like us to believe so. But in history, periods of transition, of political churn, and even times of chaos and anarchy, have been periods of intense technological and philosophical creativity and innovation. One has only to remember the Axial Age of sixth-century BCE in India, Greece, and elsewhere; the Warring States and Spring and Autumn periods, and later the Song dynasty in China; the Abbasid Caliphate in tenth- to twelfth-century central Asia; or the Renaissance and late eighteenth to early nineteenth-century industrializing Europe, to see that these were periods of political disorder, conflict, and war. Some of the most far-reaching advances in human welfare and in our understanding of the world were divorced from the so-called stability and peace that the imposition of order is said to bring. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may well be another such seminal period.

Stability may be overrated. India's recent experience also suggests that stability is not a prerequisite for significant action by the state. The economic reforms of 1991 were carried out under the spur of crisis by a minority government; the nuclear weapons tests of 1998 were carried out by a coalition government when the global nuclear order was undergoing fundamental change. Both events created long-term positive outcomes for Indians.

## Today's World Adrift

Today, our world is adrift. It may be between orders, though it is hard to see a new order forming. We are in an era of great-power rivalry and competition, and the balance of power is shifting. This shift is evident in the pathetic international response to the COVID-19 pandemic; in the retreat from globalization, which can only go so far; in the tensions in hotspots ringing China from the East China Sea through Taiwan, the India-China border, and to the Mediterranean; and in the faltering or absent or ineffective global response to transnational issues like developing-country debt, climate change, and terrorism. The last coherent international response to a transnational challenge was over fifteen years ago, in April 2009, when the London G-20 summit prevented another Great Depression and stabilized the world economy. There has not been a binding international agreement of any consequence on a major transnational issue for decades.

The changes that President Trump has brought about in American policies are part of a trend, and are both

17 See, for instance, Anthony Clark Arend, "A Neo-Medieval World?," December 29, 2010, https://anthonyclarkarend.com/a-neo-medieval-world-5465b3d48577.

a structural and an existential adjustment in American politics. Adam Tooze once called Bidenomics "MAGA for thinking people"[18]—in other words, an attempt to create a new socioeconomic basis for a comprehensive reassertion of US global leadership. By November 2024, this effort had three prongs: American engagement in Ukraine, Israel's aggression in West Asia, and the containment of China in East Asia. The second Trump administration has changed the first, doubled down before changing tack on the second, and is likely to modify the third.

**The big difference this time around is that President Trump is not the "lone wolf" that his opponents portray him as.**

Does President Trump have a doctrine or a strategy? No consistent long-term strategy or doctrine seems visible yet. But we now know what he wants, and he is in a much stronger position to get it than last time around. Ideology does seem to be at work in his motley coalition. His neoreactionary, libertarian, "Dark Enlightenment" supporters like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel believe in dismantling the state; support white supremacy in the name of "race realism"; regard democracy as "horseradish" or worse; and want corporate leaders and technocrats to exercise real power—"an acceleration of capitalism to the fascist point."[19] For them, technology is a revolutionary force that can liberate society from government and ultimately render the state obsolete. These supporters propelled JD Vance into the Senate and the vice presidency, and funded Trump's second victory. There is discussion of a Mar-a-Lago currency accord, of bringing down the dollar's value, and of going beyond the Plaza Accords of the 1980s by continuing and escalating neoliberal ideas of taxing capital, redressing the chronic US trade deficit, and maybe even exchanging US treasuries for perpetual bonds. One of the executive orders reviews "whether to suspend or terminate" a 1984 treaty that removed a prior 30 percent tax on Chinese capital inflows.[20]

The big difference this time around is that President Trump is not the "lone wolf" that his opponents portray him as. Trump is not just a shock; he is indicative of longer-term historical trends. America has changed. The coalition that supported American globalism in its liberal variant has collapsed. Do not underestimate Mr. Trump. In foreign policy terms, the coalition behind him comprises three separate streams: American primacists like Marco Rubio; prioritizers like Elbridge Colby; and restrainers shading into isolationists like Steve Bannon. When any two of these three unite, as did prioritizers and restrainers on Ukraine, you get clear policy directions—very different ones from what we have been used to from the United States in the past.

This is a historic shift. Like all historic shifts, it is the culmination of several trends and factors in the United States and abroad. The American drift to protectionism, isolationism, xenophobia, and, arguably, racism among some of Trump's followers, is real and significant. It will probably last for a while. President Trump's Middle East policy was initially not very different from President Biden's, letting Prime Minister Netanyahu do what he wanted without the pretense of evenhandedness, even embracing ethnic cleansing. But subsequently the Trump administration's reluctance to let the United States be dragged into conflict has meant a clear divergence with the Netanyahu government and a drive for talks with Iran, leading to a Middle East policy hinging on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, rather than Israel. Nor is there any attempt to disguise disdain for the Global South.

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

According to the United Nations, since October 7, 2023, over 1.9 million Gazans—almost all of the strip's population—have been forced to flee their homes, but remain trapped in the Gaza Strip. Their plight contributes to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the globe. Amid war and conflict, climate-related disasters, and other humanitarian crises, tens of millions of people each year flee their homes to escape danger—but the majority of them never cross international

18 Adam Tooze, "Great Power Politics," *London Review of Books* 46, no. 21 (November 7, 2024), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n21/adam-tooze/great-power-politics.

19 Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010). See also Andy Beckett, "Accelerationism: How a Fringe Philosophy Predicted the Future We Live In," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2017.

20 The White House, Presidential Actions, *America First Investment Policy*, February 21, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/america-first-investment-policy/. See also Peterson Institute for International Economics, "Trump Investment Order Seeks to Limit US-China Flows," February 28, 2025, https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/2025/trump-investment-order-seeks-limit-us-china-flows-while-attracting.

borders. According to the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024 saw a record 83.4 million people living in internal displacement, more than double the number a decade ago.[21]

In this situation, to speak of an international order, and to use adjectives such as "liberal" or "rule-based" to describe it, seems inaccurate, to say the least. What we see around us is a world *between* orders, where major powers disagree on the rules of the system and their own inter se hierarchy. What keeps us going is limited agreement among major powers on what Kurt Campbell calls an operating system[22]—namely, a few general rules of the road that the great powers respect so long as there is no cost to themselves, such as peaceful settlement of disputes, freedom of the high seas, and so on. This is the operating system that enabled the rise of China and other Asian powers during the globalization decades. The system is fraying, and the absence of an agreed global order since 2008 has resulted in growing great-power rivalry. And yet one can probably say that with President Trump's return to office, the risks of direct great-power conflict have become lower than before. This development is suggested by his stated reluctance to involve the US in military and other engagements abroad, his pride in describing his first term as the only presidency this century not to involve America in a war abroad, and his desire for better relations with China and Russia and declared admiration for their leaders.

Which brings me back to where I began, trying to get a grip on the concept of "order." Perhaps we should break down the term "order," separating out the idea of a tightly bound security and political regime, which is clearly fraying and problematic, and distinguishing it from the thick sets of rules, norms, institutions, and networks that clearly have formed, that did not really exist before World War II, and that are more resilient. This new system, too, is fraying—but less so, and in patches. Just traveling to the US in an aircraft involved a host of rules and systems, from engineering standards for aircraft, to overflights over nations, to visas and passports, to financial transactions, to being able to use my cell phone. All of that is possible because of something like an order: It is not grand, like the UN, but it exists, is historically unique, is resilient, and is worth keeping. As other, non-military forms of power acquire salience and are distributed differently from traditional hard power, an overarching global security and political order seems more unlikely. But it is the unraveling of both kinds of order that should worry us.

What I see today is a world that is economically multipolar as a result of globalization, still militarily unipolar but challenged in some regions, and politically confused. Economically, we see three big blocs or areas of activity: the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA) in North America, the European Union (EU) in Europe, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) centered on China in Asia. Militarily, there is only one power that can project military force where it will, when it will, across the globe, and that is the United States. Politics is increasingly local, populist, and authoritarian, and local political considerations are driving foreign policy decisions to an extent seldom seen before. So while the world economy remains globalized despite some leaders' best efforts, politics has fragmented the world order. The pillars of the post-WWII order are crumbling: the nonproliferation regime in Northeast Asia and the Middle East, the Bretton Woods institutions, the WTO, and the multilateral system based on the UN.

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

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

All in all, we are in the midst of a recalibration of geopolitics and the global economy, marked by great-power competition, with no end in sight. Asia has risen, but has yet to find its own equilibrium—both in the world and within itself. Disquiet and dissatisfaction with existing international arrangements in the Global South persist. There is also no gainsaying the growing importance of the Global South. More than half of global trade now involves

21 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, Geneva, *Global Report on Internal Displacement*, 2025.

22 Kurt Campbell, speaking at the opening of the Lowy Institute, Australia, conference on the "Indo-Pacific Operating System," December 1, 2021, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kurt-campbell-what-america-rather-what-we-re-against.

a nonaligned country—the Global South matters more. The Global South is also the beneficiary of reduced foreign direct investment (FDI) by the West into China.[23] With great-power rivalry, the leverage of middle powers and the Global South on the major powers increases.

## India's Attitude: Missing Imagination on the Subcontinent's Role

What is India's interest in and attitude toward world order?

India's views on international order have evolved with time and experience. From Jawaharlal Nehru to Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Manmohan Singh to Narendra Modi, India's view has, broadly speaking, been influenced by two factors: the world order's utility in enabling India's transformation and development, and its ability to enhance India's say in that order, since world order affects India's prospects so profoundly. The latter factor has often—wrongly in my view—been interpreted as status-seeking. India's preference has historically been for a plural, democratic, open order as best suited to India's interests, unlikely as that outcome may seem on present trends.

In the 1950s, India worked with and against Cold War bipolarity. Decolonization was achieved by working with the superpowers against European imperial powers, despite suspicions of the West engendered by the colonial experience. India worked to uphold the post-1945 order and played a role in its formation, helping to draft the UN human rights conventions and declarations and seeing a rule-based order centered on the UN and based on sovereignty, equality, non-interference, and multilateralism as being in her interest. At the same time, India emphasized her postcolonial identity and preference for nonalignment and change.

From the 1970s onwards, security concerns became increasingly significant. Fighting three wars in a decade along with regional preoccupation with the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Kampuchean issue in the 1980s led to a renewed stress on self-reliance. The prevailing international security and political order was seen as unhelpful to India's interests. The unequal terms of the NPT, the configuration of the UN Security Council, and other issues contributed to Indian disillusionment with what was claimed to be a liberal international order.

Over time and with experience, as distrust of the international system grew in the Indian establishment, India became an ever stronger advocate of national sovereignty. The post–Cold War relaxation of the norm of nonintervention, and its use for strategic, economic, and other purposes, led to increasing differences between India and the US and the West on matters relating to trade, climate change, and the governance of the global commons.

India adjusted to the unipolar moment and was a significant beneficiary of globalization. But even then, India's foreign policy objectives displayed considerable divergence from those of the primary proponents of the status quo: the United States and United Kingdom. In voting on UN resolutions deemed important to the United States, for instance, India has only concurred with Washington 20 percent of the time over the past two decades, compared to 80 percent for long-term US allies like Japan and Australia. Among US strategic allies, only Pakistan and Egypt have a worse record of support for the US in the UN.[24]

**All in all, we are in the midst of a recalibration of geopolitics and the global economy, marked by great-power competition, with no end in sight.**

Today, much of that view is behind us. In a trend going back to the beginning of the century but accelerated after the 2008 financial crisis, both the order and official India's views of the order have shifted again. Official India purports to believe that we are now in a multipolar world.[25] I have my doubts. But this view also reflects the fact that India does not want to see an Asia dominated or controlled by any one power.

To the extent that raw geopolitics prevail rather than questions of order, India's relations with the United States and the West have benefited, transformed by the common demands of China's rise and an American turn to working with partners rather than just traditional allies and alliances. But the

23 Gita Gopinath, chief economist and first deputy managing director, IMF, "How Policy Makers Should Handle a Fragmenting World," *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2024, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/06/how-policymakers-should-handle-a-fragmenting-world/.

24 Chirayu Thakkar, *India and the United States: Friends Elsewhere, Foes at the UN* (Stimson Centre, 2021), quoted in Sumitha Narayan Kutty and Walter C. Ladwig III, "Nonresident Prime Ministers? Measuring India's Foreign Policy Orientation via Leadership Travel," *International Studies Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2024), 144ff., https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae144.

25 India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, *"Operating in a Multipolar World Is More Like a Chess Game,"* NDTV, June 12, 2025, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/operating-multipolar-world-is-more-like-chess-game-s-jaishankar-8646795.

broader long-term issue for India is her ability to acquire and exercise not just hard military power, but also other forms of power—economic, technological, diplomatic, and soft power. That ability will determine India's approach to international order. For the present, there are those who think that India can gather power without her neighbors' acquiescence and without an international order.

One could argue empirically that India's increasing alignment with the West and the United States has been in inverse proportion to those actors' commitment to an international rule-based or liberal order. Indeed, it is harder today to identify what exactly India would expect from the international order. (In this she is not alone, and may even have a majority of the larger powers with her.)

In practice, India has been tactically cautious about committing itself on questions of international order. It has joined multilateral groupings like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) while building strategic partnerships with the United States and Japan, engaged regimes in Myanmar and Iran, and been chary of criticizing Russian interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere. India has worked with the Quad (along with Japan, Australia, and the US), while carefully avoiding direct confrontation and criticism of China, unlike the other Quad partners. What has been missing throughout is an imagining of the subcontinent's role in world order.

## Conclusion

To conclude, today's geopolitical flux opens up space and opportunity for regional powers. West Asia is a good example, with new initiatives by a host of local powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, and others. There are balancing, hedging, and other options for independent action today that did not exist in Cold War bipolarity or the unipolar moment when China and the US worked closely together. This is an era of coalitions rather than alliances, of un-alignment rather than nonalignment.

The world is between orders, and has returned to a state that has been normal for most of history—namely, the absence of a world order. In such a fragmented and uncertain world, the means and methods to cope will also be ad hoc, tentative, and impermanent. We will see more issue-based coalitions of the willing and able, as in the Quad, I2U2 in the Middle East, AUKUS, and other formations.

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

The absence of order today also suggests that we are at a hinge moment, when ideas could make a difference. Ultimately, the structures of power and interests matter, as they always do. But this is a moment when uncertainty about power structures and unhappiness with past or current definitions of interests create opportunities for fundamental rethinking of our assumptions about order and the nature of international society. This is a time when ideas form preferences and shape identities. This is thus a time when ideas matter, when what scholars and thinkers say, if politically resonant, can influence political definitions of interests and the choice of outcomes. We seem to once again be at a moment when, in the absence of order, creativity can play a meaningful role in the world.

***Shivshankar Menon*** *is chair of the Ashoka Center for China Studies in New Delhi and a former national security advisor to the Indian prime minister.*

***Image:*** *Kremlin.ru via Wikimedia Commons.*[26]

26 For image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Prime_Minister_of_India_Narendra_Modi_and_President_of_China_Xi_Jinping_before_the_beginning_of_the_2017_BRICS_Leaders%27_meeting.jpg.