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# International Order Strategies
## Past and Present

**Edited by Aaron McKeil**

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# Abstract

At an important time in foreign policy planning, a new era of “strategic competition” widely noted by policymakers in Washington and allied capitals has produced a new wave of strategic thinking and evolving strategic practices aiming to maintain or modify “international order”. This collected research report aims to clarify the how strategies for international order are being understood and formulated today, and how this strategic thinking and planning differs from past eras of strategic competition, toward an assessment of its policy implications today.

# Introduction

Aaron McKeil

The presidential election of Donald Trump in November 2024 revives that distinctly competitive approach to order-making called 'America First'. Within the 'liberal' order, this revives an intramural crisis among allied liberal powers. The G7 and NATO, the institutional bases of the 'old' order, will again be tested. America is demanding Europe contribute its share to its own defence. Contributions to balancing China is an additional contribution European states can make. It is worth noting, however, that since the First World War Europe has regularly required American economic and military assistance, and the US has as often been reluctant to provide military assistance, if not economic assistance. Today, these older American approaches to order-making, with a new iteration, will affect every region. What kind of international (dis)order emerges from this reformative era remains widely debated and unclear, however.

Today, the post-Cold War order of liberal hegemony has given way to what policymakers in Washington and allied capitals describe as an era of strategic competition. States are crafting strategies to shape what kind of order comes next. Are these strategies for revising or defending 'international order' new or different, from past eras? Or are they more simply a revival of older more abrasive strategic practices? Influential studies and reports on these strategic trends have argued that adjusting the order to manage incentives can maintain stability and accommodate rising powers (Mazarr 2018). Yet, these ordering practices appear increasingly insufficient and less feasible. Times have changed, strategic competition has worsened. Russia's use of force in Ukraine, backed by the deepening Russia-China strategic entente, extension of conflict to multiple theatres, and ongoing arms racing between the US and China, have all strained great power relations. The times in which international order might be managed through new agreements on the rules of the road and shared institutions has given way to an era in which states are using other tools of statecraft to maintain and revise the international order. Calling it 'Cold War 2' is now commonplace (Niblett 2024; Sanger 2024; Buzan 2024). This is not to say that diplomatic interaction is less useful, only that its methods and aims are increasingly shaped by strategic competition.

This report offers an exploration of these changing strategic practices, with a distinct comparative historical logic. It also carefully explores what it means for states to make 'international order' an object of strategy. The language of international order is widespread in national security strategy documents and diplomatic practice today. Statespersons and governments are increasingly explicit in their claims to advance strategies to maintain or revise the 'international order'. For Joe Biden, we are 'in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order' (US National Security Strategy, 2022). A strategy for international order in this sense is a feature of grand strategy. It gathers a wide range of means, including deterrence so to maintain minimal stability, as well as diplomatic and affiliated tools, to shape ordering rules and norms within national and allied interests. Importantly, it gathers these tools in competition with the international order visions of competing powers. But, because this competition exists, an international order that is at least politically tolerable and relatively stable, to the extent that great power war is avoidable and unnecessary, is itself among the principal aims of grand strategy.

The aims of this collected research report are to clarify how strategic thinking about international order is changing in practice, by comparing it with past eras of strategic competition. The formative workshop of this report integrated perspectives from academic and practitioner participants. This format proved to have an intellectual dynamism, reflected in the findings and interests of this research report. Three thematic research questions framed the workshop: How are strategies for international order being formulated and implemented in a new era of war, disorder, and geostrategic competition? How do these changes in practice differ and compare to past eras of disorder and competition? And, how are changing practices of international order strategy best conceived and understood? These questions aimed to speak to major policy challenges in practice today, by seeking to understand their evolution in international history. Reflecting on these thematic questions, participants in the convened workshop and contributors to this report found that there is such a thing as an 'international order', toward which states and coalitions are crafting strategies for its maintenance or revision. Importantly, however, the language game of 'international order' in practice was also found to have – among other functions – a political-diplomatic rhetorical function or utility, whereby it defines some actors and actions as legitimate, and others as illegitimate. It is important to also analyse what it is that statespersons and governments are doing with this language, in their strategic-diplomatic interaction.

Taking on the historical lens, participants found that strategic thinking and action for making and remaking international orders has undergone an evolution of its practices across different eras of geostrategic competition. The 1930s, the Cold War, and current era were identified as distinct but comparable eras of competition to shape and reshape the international order. This is not to say that other eras, earlier into the 19th Century for instance, are not also comparable or relevant. The activity of historical comparison was generally found to be illuminating, to see the past at

work in the present, and ways in which the present may be forgetting the past. The material and political differences between different eras were found to matter for the kinds of strategic choices available to states, and the kinds of challenges that the maintenance of international order has faced. Differences in nuclear settings between eras, the different depths of economic integration and mechanisms for managing economic volatility, and the multiplication of middle powers across the global south were all noted as major material differences. The encroaching pressures of climate change were also noted to be an increasingly distinct challenge for international order strategies today. The evolution of political ideas, the political in power politics, was found to matter for the strategic ambitions of competing powers, within changing material conditions.

The collected contributions in this report suggest that international politics are in a new formative era, reforming the international order, revising it, with uncertain outcomes. In light of intensifying strategic competition to shape what kind of international order comes next, states are rapidly adapting their strategies from past experience. Many states have conducted major strategy exercises and produced new national security strategy documents, some – such as Germany – for the first time. Several states have also established new national security councils. States are sharpening their strategic edge; the times are more tense and power political. When asked 'what is the secret of politics', Bismarck is said to have replied, 'a good treaty with Russia'. Hoping for a new 'good' treaty with Russia is rather optimistic, and possibly dangerous, given the weakness of prior treaties. The bases of an international stability that is at least tolerable to all major powers are instead increasingly found in the adaptive revival of ordering practices from past eras, such as managing threat perceptions, economic statecraft, and balancing deterrent forces. This report explores the evolution of these strategic practices, in comparison with past eras of strategic competition. This report also explores how historical thinking in practice is shaping how states are adapting and reviving practices from past eras of strategic competition, for current challenges and future visions.

In this report, Alexander Evans explores the strategic and diplomatic challenges of a context where many states wish to revise the international order but have conflicting preferences for how to revise it. He explains furthermore that grand strategies are often made by political directors and responses to volatility in crisis, rather than strategic policy planners. He outlines the important changes in economic policy and technology competition for international order and suggests that there is an opportunity today to find a new language of order, but that time is needed to make it.

Kristina Spohr canvases the changing status quo and revisionist international order strategies of states across defining historical eras: 1945, 1989/91, and post-2022. In approaching this topic, she cautions that the assumption that states have strategies for international order should be carefully assessed against the incremental and pivotal changes to policy arising in strategy implementation. She argues that the challenge

to the prevailing international order today is that the revisionist strategies of China and Russia pose both a power political challenge in force capabilities, as well as a normative challenge in their vision of a 'post-Western' order.

Anahita Motazed-Rad argues that the entanglement of the Middle East in the global economy and security order has made the region important in the maintenance and making of international order. She explores how the strategies for international order adopted by states have both affected the regional political landscape of the Middle East, and the role of the Middle East in the 'rules-based order' more widely. She concludes that the place of the Middle East in the emerging international order is currently uncertain, as to whether it will restabilize as a region in a 'multipolar order' or continue to descend into a region of contestation.

From primary archival research, Oliver Yule-Smith investigations the ideas held by British policy planners about shaping international order, 1945-1989. He finds that British Foreign Office planning for international order included considerable innovative thinking and that planners were encouraged to engage blue-sky thinking. This kind of innovative strategic thinking, he suggests, is again underway in practice today, for an evolving international order.

Yu-Shan Wu suggests that the BRICS form a novel configuration not present in past eras of strategic competition. Exploring the BRICS strategy for international order, she finds areas of common cause and action toward a 'multipolar order', as well as longstanding development demands. These ambitions are less revisionist than is often suggested, where BRICS diplomacy regularly refers to upholding the foundations of the 'rules-based order', even while modifying its architecture. Within the BRICS, however, there are also found degrees of diverging preferences and interpretations of what a multipolar order means, and how it is to be realised, as it is taking shape.

In the concluding paper, I find that liberal and illiberal powers are drawing on different lessons of history in their changing international order strategies. These strategies are highly adaptive to the rapidly changing character of war, technological transformations, and distributions of power. These strategies, competing to shape the future international order, will also require innovative political legitimation strategies, however. The considerable costs of the tools and practices for maintaining international order, such as integrated deterrence and economic and technological change, require legitimation strategies to sustain domestic and international support in a long-term contest.

Collectively, these papers find that in the new competition to shape what kind of order comes next, states have fielded an array of conflicting international order visions, pursued through an evolving set of strategic practices. It is an evolution, not a revolution, of strategy, and so it seems for the international order too. The more

intensely states compete to shape the international order, however, the less clear it is what order comes next, and the less likely it will reflect the strategic preferences of any one major power or coalition. If competition is uncontrolled, the order may well at some point even cease to exist, in major power war or, more quietly, in the collapse of the UN. But, and not unlike in past eras, because states are still willing to defend the order, and in full awareness that it can only be defended if revised, the order may well continue to evolve and find renewal, albeit in a still to be historically defined shape. ■

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# 1 Are we all revisionists now?

Alexander Evans[1]

The international order is dead, long live the international order? Survey the world in 2024 and what is striking is the lack of global consensus, and the growing fraying of consent. From the return of populism to the repudiation of the liberal rules-based international order, doubt and volatility predominate. As a former senior Chinese official (Bo, 2024) put it at a symposium in Oxford in May 2024: "The world is becoming less Western. The West is becoming less Western."

This is not to say that the world has swung from order to disorder. Our narrow focus is naturally on war: in Ukraine, Israel/Gaza/Lebanon, and the potential for conflict in East Asia. And yet the systems, sinews and solid institutionalisation of the twentieth century persists across a wide array of political and technical international institutions. From Interpol to the International Civil Aviation Organisation cross-border, multilateral cooperation continues to enable international trade, travel and security. But confidence in international order and institutions is fraying (OECD, 2024).

The structured ordering of the world—even amidst intense ideological and geopolitical competition of the Cold War—has given way to fractured revisionism. We are all revisionists now but in different ways. Some want to reify the twentieth century rules-based order, even if for status quo powers this is accompanied by openness to redefine as well. Some wish to reform it, with a bewildering menu of potential changes—as with the perennial debates about UN Security Council reform. Some wish to radically reshape it, even if the urge to repudiate is accompanied by an appetite to keep what works for them. Whether this is the arrival of a new age of conservative realism, as proposed by Russian writers like Sergei Karaganov (2017), or China's more measured commitment to a win-win world of mutually assured sovereignty, the foundations of the new radicalism are surprisingly conservative.

[1] This paper reflects the author's personal views and is not a statement of U.K. official policy. Thanks to Nicholas Filipek for his research assistance on this paper.

## A changing context

Grand strategists—and those who follow and write about international order—sometimes focus excessively on what are considered *ur-texts* of international diplomacy. The national strategy document, leader's speeches, opening statements at major conferences. And yet grand strategy is conducted more by foreign ministry political directors rather than policy planners. It is not the blue sky that matters, rather it is the specific, measured steps in international negotiations. The joint statements and closed-door positioning is perhaps more material than strategic signalling through national strategy documents. Diplomatic practice reveals preferences and strategic approaches. Principles and rhetorical positioning may or may not be substantiated by national diplomatic practice. There are plenty of examples of this dissonance. The reputed idealism of the Carter administration contrasts with the realpolitik of the Camp David Accords (Wright, 2015). Substantive positions—and deliberate neutrality—may tell us more about the grand strategies deployed by individual countries. How much will countries risk in economic or other agenda items to apply their principles?

If this rang true in the 'comfort' years of the last three decades, it is even more true in the current renewed era of volatility. We are navigating a world of renewed crisis diplomacy: in Ukraine, over Israel/Gaza/Lebanon, and in anticipation of potential crises to come—in particular the risk of Chinese action against Taiwan. There is a hollowing out of international institutions, particularly the UN Security Council; witness the growing collapse of the DPRK sanctions regime in early 2024 and frictions even around counter-terrorism, a space in which tensions between Moscow and the P3 (the United States, France and United Kingdom) rarely bubbled into an inability to work collaboratively.

We are seeing this translate into a plural set of initiatives. Within the traditional 'West' we see specific innovations like the creation of AUKUS in September 2021[2] and active discussion to expand it (Defence Committee, 2023, p. 25). We see forms of linguistic innovation to explain the contemporary international framework from Niall Ferguson's *Cold War 2* (2022) to Samir Puri's *Westlessness* (2024). Even among status quo revisionists, for whom the language of multipolarity may still be revision too far, there is a search for new forms of language that is neo-Western if not post-Western. And change, initiated or imagined, is still in the air. Witness NATO's decision to offer Ukraine a pathway to membership layered on NATO expansion to include Sweden and Finland in 2023 and 2024 (NATO, 2024). The EU has already offered Ukraine a pathway to membership (European Commission, 2024). Look at the floated discussions of a Democratic 10 (or 'D10') in 2020 (see, Brattberg and Judah, 2020; Fishman and Mohandas, 2020; Atlantic Council, 2021). Or debates around materially institutionalising the quad security arrangements in the Indo-Pacific (see Kumar and Khan, 2024).

[2] Security partnership established September 15, 2021 between the U.K., U.S. and Australia focused on the U.K. and U.S. providing nuclear powered submarines to Australia

However, no single vision or version yet prevails. The reality of a new pluralism, even if it sits within a framework of preponderant American power and pronounced Chinese ambition and economic growth, hinders singular versions of a new world order.

## All revisionists now?

We are seeing multiple forms of both intellectual and political revisionism. In the United States, there is a new American post-Trump term one conservatism which has at its heart a stronger America-first vision of international relations. The second Trump presidency will likely embed this further, both in Washington DC and internationally. Across the developed world we see a greater institutionalised scepticism about peak globalisation tied to a more realistic understanding of international pluralism, even if not always appetite for multipolarity. We are seeing innovation at the edges: ideational (from debate about a possible D10 to language of the 'global middle ground'), applied (as with AUKUS), and linguistic (pace Samir Puri's latest book). But all of this is largely fragmented rather than fulsome.

The tone is tempered by modesty and realism. Even progressives harness the language of realism, as with Britain's new Foreign Secretary David Lammy and his *Foreign Affairs* piece on 'Progressive Realism' (Lammy, 2024). Ironically, the doom-watching may foster too pessimistic a view of the future. International trade, connectivity and interaction continues. Norms persist, even as crises multiply.[3] Norms in some areas have persisted or strengthened (as for example against piracy) even if in other areas norms can weaken (as for example constraining whaling) (Zimmermann et. al., 2023). In every moment we run the risk of being trapped in a generational prism.[4] The generation that watched *Forrest Gump* (1994) is different to the generation watching *Civil War* (2024). Those in the Anglo-American cultural space risk seeing the world today through a negative prism. One lesson of grand strategy is the need to challenge status quo thinking—whether positive or negative. Extrapolation is usually wrong, which is why predictions that Japan would dominate the 1980s as wrong as most similar forecasting today is likely to be off-target (Lindsey and Lukas, 1998; Callen and Ostry, 2003) proved.

If offset positivity is one way to counter the path-dependency of contemporary gloom, another way to red-team future international order(s) is to double-down on the potential for shock. Shocks are a recurring reality in international history, and often the nature, timing and configuration of a crisis differs from anticipated scenario-planning. Governments remain relatively poor at preparing for and

[3] As one insurance executive told me in July 2024, the growing challenge for insurance companies is 'micro-cat' or smaller catastrophic incidents. Climate change and weather volatility means there are more of these, set against a past record where insurance companies mainly priced in a smaller number of major catastrophic risk events each year. Discussion with author, Traverse City Michigan.

[4] I am indebted to Thomas Otte for this insight into 'generations' of decision-makers. (See Otte 2011).

designing sufficient resilience to handle shocks, whether domestic or international. So a question that follows is: are we actually being pessimistic enough? We are assuming a changing and degrading of the current international order, but are we sufficiently factoring in the possibility of a major international shock?

What if major conflict, particularly between or proxied between P5 members, collapses the international architecture? What if it leads to the fundamental non-working of the Security Council—or the withdrawal of one or more P5 members from the Council? What if Chapter 7 is already dead without us fully realising—in part because the collective sense of its authority has waned among UN General Assembly members? The active policy debate about seizing or using Russian financial reserves held in the West could prove a pivot point. It could have unintended consequences, speeding the decline of a Western-framed international financial system. What if parallel clearing and settlement systems rise, challenging the material power of a New York banking licence (see Verdier, 2020)—an ingredient of American power little understood outside the banking system? What is the takeaway lesson of Ukraine and Trump for third countries: prepare to de-Swift, proliferate, and hedge? It illustrates the vital conflict between bolstering Ukraine now but generating uncertainty next.

Or are we being too pessimistic? Orders have survived, albeit usually changed somewhat, despite major conflicts in the borderlands in the past. Orders do survive, however, and catastrophising is not a synonym for strategising. Often, change is less vivid and immediate than we imagine. It's mostly Apocalypse next rather than Apocalypse now.

## Novelty and familiarity

There is renewed novelty - but also familiarity - in the reuniting of economic and security policy. But is this conscious coupling accompanied by a sufficient focus on developing and deepening UK state capacity? Developed vetting clearance for selected regulators is one step. So too is boosting the capacity for long-term thinking, scenario-planning and exercising. Training is key; the UK has already strengthened its crisis response capability, in part through trial and error, but also through deliberate development of doctrine, capability and procedural memory (see Cabinet Office, 2023). The 'thin client' model of international policymaking—maintaining just enough capability to pivot to crises—doesn't work in a super-volatile environment.

Looking forward the challenge is the renewed fusion of military and economic statecraft. Technology, AI, computer and supply chains in a nuanced and deglobalising context integrate the two. The connection between economic and military statecraft is not new (Kennedy, 2010; Tooze, 2015), but how much

have countries—especially liberal democracies—maintained a base of national security officials who are as fluent in the international financial system as well as a security architecture?

In an age of greater volatility we may be seeing the fragility of international norms, and therefore their fraying. Across multiple domains norms may not have the normative power they used to. This is new for those with living memory of policy-making, which usually means a 20–30-year window of time (see, for example, Berghoff et. al., 2013; Stone-Johnson, 2016). Domains that were relatively uncontested are becoming new areas of competition: space, cyber, and deep oceans are but three. Greater tech competition, and the democratisation of hacking and offensive cyber capabilities, has implications for the early warning systems that depend on signals intelligence.

We are already seeing a plural wave of increased hedging, higher (and lower) risk appetites, and the fragility of norms: cyber, law of the sea, diplomatic premises, assassination, sabotage, gold reserves etc. This is new for those with living memory of policy. Late Soviets were more risk averse; the 90s were halcyon, and we were distracted for 15-20 years after 9/11. We are also seeing hardening that may inhibit insight: more even tech competition (with implications for SIGINT) and a post-biometrics, big-data and geolocated world (with implications for HUMINT). If you will forgive the Star Wars analogy: the Empire spies back, and increasingly strikes back.

## The Big Short

'Thinktanklandia' may suggest otherwise, but there are few easy fixes or action-lists that can remedy the statecraft challenge for democratic powers. How can we best change practices? The immediate dominates our political and policy attention span—often at the expense of the strategic. The old language of global order does not resonate or reach key audiences: the non-aligned, the doubters and the hedgers. For those states navigating the uneasy path between American power and Chinese trade and investment, autonomy is often preferable to alignment. The next generations are puzzled by the determinacy of late-twentieth century language about the global order. They may ironically be more at ease with a world of volatility, for that is the world they have grown up with. The financial crisis, COVID-19, wars in Ukraine and the Middle-East, and the audio-visual terror of Daesh. They live amidst a splinternet as much as an Internet. Microtargeting and microaggressions go hand-in-hand, and algorithms and social media determine media consumption more than any singular source of information (Reuters, 2024).

We face a classic 50-something problem. We're distracted by 'the now'. We spend a bit too much time hankering after past orders or hunkering down in the current architecture. Despite proper novelty—AUKUS the most interesting example—we

aren't spending enough time looking forward. We've identified the muddle in the middle: the global middle-ground but could still do more to listen to and engage with it. There are good examples of innovative practice in 2024 from the incoming Foreign Secretary's engagement with a range of states to his predecessor's tour of Central Asia.

And yet, the current generation of leaders and advisers are too Gen X and Boomer to find a new language of order, norms and nuance that can forge consensus beyond the like-minded. Most world leaders are in their 50s and 60s (Pew Research Centre, May 2024). This carries what sociologists call a 'period effect' (Kertzer, 1983). Indeed, we struggle even within the like-minded in this. Like an argumentative dinner-party of old college friends, we marinate in past disputes but lack the reference points to repurpose towards a forward-looking agenda.

## So what?

Meanwhile the current languages and approaches all have challenges. Omni-enmeshment may feel reassuring, but it can be a form of self-wrapping in barbed wire if it generates vulnerabilities as well as strength (Goh, 2005). Nodes and networks assume more fixed points than the current world of hedging suggests. Reducing states to pivot points in regional orders obscures angles that speak to the variable world we are in. Take Mongolia, a state that cares deeply about freedom of speech (see, Chu et. al., 2010, p. 146) and whose voice may be more convincing to other states than traditional advocates of free speech like Germany or the United States. Reaching out to the global middle ground is a strong tactic but does not amount to a revised international strategy. And everybody is running hot: distracted by crises.

We can do more. Of course, the cynical pitch will be for more seminars and workshops on the global order. But beyond academic special pleading there is a need for fora and focus on forging ideas, language and debate on future forms of international order. That requires time—including of ministers and senior officials. If we want to be more purposeful in our statecraft and efforts to shape the order to come, we need more deliberation and less 'Deliveroo policymaking'. Just in time means no time at all for strategy. In an impatient and volatile world, we need now—more than ever before—to make sure that there is thinking time for strategy, challenge and reflection. Governments should not simply outsource this to public intellectuals, think-tanks and universities. There needs to be a space, and attention to discussion, within government; one that includes ministers and presidents/prime ministers, even if not all at once and all the time. And it will benefit from international engagement and discussion.

We are all revisionists now. Now is the moment to make time to revise our views, language and vision for order in the 21st Century. It is unlikely that the emerging order/s will have sole authors, or authorities but we can influence the language, tone and institutions that will populate that order—and democratic, like-minded states should seek to do so. ■

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# 2 Status quo and Revisionism: The Past in the Present, 1945–2022

Aino Rosa Kristina Spohr

The existing global order is on its way out. What comes next will depend on how the 'contest for the future [character] of our world' will play out (US National Security Strategy, 2022). What is the role of political actors in this transformation? Do they initiate change with a pre-meditated blueprint or grand strategy? Do they 'grand strategise' to develop a 'vision' that they seek to implement? Or are we, when we take the long view back from 2024 to 1945, not mostly looking at incremental policymaking, which, depending on the outcome of such policies, are later sold as a pre-meditated grand strategy? After all, as the historical record shows, leaders and governments, in dealing with specific crises and long-term systemic developments, are more often reactive, than overtly proactive.

In democracies, policymakers are beholden to their electorates and their room for manoeuvre, due to the electoral cycles, is temporally limited. This may explain their apprehension about, to quote George H.W. Bush, the 'vision thing.' Moreover, as we evaluate the shapers of world order in our time, the weight of our various state-actors—small or large, established or emerging, with less or more heft on the global stage—comes into play.

Therefore, in our exploration of those who in the present age pursue 'international order strategies' to preserve, modify, or change the nature of the current system, we quickly find ourselves zooming in on so-called global ordering powers: the United States, Russia and China. We study their interests and policy priorities, and we analyse the mechanisms and tactics they apply to achieve their goals. This immediately raises the question how these 'Big Three' (and their partners, allies, friends, or clients) relate to the key pillars that uphold the order that emerged from the ruins of 1945 and the collapse of 1989-91. Who wants to keep or re-form the status quo, and who wants to undo and replace it with something new?

Global *order*, as we have known it since 1945 or certainly since 1992, depends not only on a stable balance of power; it also rests on some baseline agreement among states on fundamental principles, norms, and rules of conduct.

Today, we find ourselves once more at an historical inflection point. The West is grappling with the power political and normative challenge that a revisionist Russia and a rapidly risen China, both authoritarian and highly centralised states, have

been mounting for some time as part of their strategic pushback against 'unipolar' America and the post-Wall 'liberal' world order. Putin and Xi have pledged a 'new era,' in which, while casting the US as a Cold War hegemon in decline, they present themselves as the drivers of 'changes not seen in a century'.

## i.

World War II destroyed the old international order—one that had been marked by multipolarity, by imperial strife, and from the 1920s/30s also by ideological rivalry. The statesmen (and they were all men), who tried to forge a new 'rules-based [international] order' were, as Dean Acheson proclaimed, truly 'present at the creation' (cf. Acheson, 1970). But even they often dealt with issues in a reactive and incremental way from the late 1940s onward. The leaders who came after did not have the luxury (or, more accurately, burden) of starting completely afresh. Instead, they tended to tack on to the existing structures of their own preferences.

During the Cold War (or Long Peace), they manoeuvred between institutionalised internationalism—and the normative regime, underscored by the UN and CSCE—and the changing temperature of East-West relations (cf. Ikenberry, 2018). Post-wall reconstruction of the international order was not as far-reaching because the ending of the Cold War and bipolarity—that had been characterised by a nuclear face-off and an ideologically-driven systemic confrontation between the superpowers, their allies, and clients—did not create problems as big as World War II.

## ii.

1989-1991 was a shock to the international order, but it did not cause its destruction. Indeed, while the Soviet pillar crumbled and the bipolar system eroded, the post-war institutional network outlived the Cold War and has survived to this day.

The Soviet-led bloc and the USSR collapsed. Eastern organisations such as the Warsaw Pact and Comecon dissolved. By contrast, Western institutions—notably the European Community and NATO—were adapted and reinvented for the post-Berlin Wall world. Thanks to leaders' decisiveness, the EC deepened and became the European Union (EU); by the turn of the millennium the Euro was introduced. The former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU, and NATO, too. Together these institutions became central pillars of Europe's post-Cold War security architecture. Through NATO and the CSCE (later OSCE with the Helsinki Accords of 1975 reinforced in the Paris Charter of 1990) the United States remained a European power.

We should note that Gorbachev's grand strategy to reform and reinvent Soviet communism was reactive to intra-Soviet bloc problems. He sought to scale back imperial overstretch, abolished the Brezhnev doctrine and hoped to reform the USSR to pursue peaceful co-development. The USSR was to become a strong second pole. He failed. He lost his empire for systemic reasons and because, through his liberalisation, the Soviet 'empire by imposition' was rejected by its subjects who applied self-determination (Spohr, 2020; Plokhy, 2014).

After 1991, liberalism and multilateralism were seen—from Bush to Yeltsin—as the new way forward. China went its own way, certainly politically. Triumphalists looked back and put Reagan on a pedestal—the man who had pursued a grand strategy of neo-liberalism, who had confronted the Soviets and militarily outraced or scared them with the idea of the Strategic Defense Initiative. But it takes two to tango, as the talks on nuclear arms control revealed.

Nobody had foreseen the rise of Gorbachev, the collapse of the bipolar order, and the disintegration of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union. Many factors coincided: systemic change, leaders' choices, people's revolutionary zeal, and timing (i.e. chance). That combination brought about a change in the international order—not grand strategy; and then the leaders set out to build a better world, in an incremental manner, not following a blueprint (cf. Zelikow and Rice, 2019; Fischer, 2019; Bartel, 2022).

In terms of the correlation of forces, the world entered what some called a 'unipolar moment' (Krauthammer, 1990). But the way bipolarity had peacefully dissolved allowed for the belief that the spread of capitalism would go hand-in-hand with the spread of democracy (cf. 'the end of history')—all tied to ongoing cooperation through structured relationships within old and new frameworks, e.g. the UN, CSCE/OSCE, GATT/WTO, G7/8, NAFTA, Arctic Council, and Rio/Kyoto/Paris Climate Accord (Fukuyama, 1992; Zelikow and Rice, 2019).

In the post-Cold War world, given the experience of 1989-1991, conflicts were to be dealt with in a 'civilian' manner, through normative regimes (that protected human rights and self-determination), international law, and institutional frameworks. Internationalism and multilateralism thus had survived the rupture in the international order. The brief Gulf War of 1990-91 served as an example. It was hailed as a picture-perfect UN mission; the international community came together in a 'coalition of the willing' to push out Saddam Hussein from the small emirate of Kuwait, to safeguard the country's independence and territorial integrity. All permanent members of the UN Security Council had agreed that 'force' could be used to end the military invasion. Nobody vetoed.

Shortly afterwards, the Yugoslavian conflict proved more problematic to deal with. It started as wars of secession, before descending into genocidal civil war. The UN failed to intervene here; but it also seemed unable to prevent escalation in other conflicts such as Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Liberia, Haiti, Sierra Leone—to name but a few. Suddenly, the post-Wall world was much less peaceful, less civilised, and less orderly than leaders had hoped for. We saw the emergence of more strife, conflict, and disorder in the post-Cold War era. We saw stagnant institutions, nuclear proliferation (e.g. North Korea), the rise of rogue and terrorist non-state actors (Al Qaida, Isis, etc), local and civil wars, frozen conflicts, hybrid and non-linear warfare, etc.

The idea that everybody wanted to follow a rules-based order—an order as the founding fathers of the UN had hoped that would allow for the prevention of future wars, and one that after 1991 many believed would to be tied to capitalism and democracy—was a pipedream. Capitalism and international economic integration could be pursued, as China's unique path out of the Cold War revealed, by an authoritarian one-party regime—without a turn to democracy (Spohr, 2020).

## iii.

The (long) unipolar moment, an era that began with the United States as sole superpower facing no near-term rival(s) for global power and influence, and one in which the defining feature of international politics was American dominance, lasted just over three decades (cf. Brands, 2016; Ikenberry, 2018; Layne, 2006).

Today, 35 years since the Cold War endgame, that moment is over. The correlation of forces has shifted once more; and the international order is openly being challenged. There is little agreement on the norms fought for by all sides in the making of the UN or of the CSCE. Why did this happen? Who did what? And how does this relate to international order strategies?

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US—with President Bush's 'War on Terror' and fixation on the 'Axis of Evil'—quickly lost credibility and its moral high ground through its unilateralist regime change policies and War in Iraq. Bush's 'Middle East-forward' grand strategy backfired, as did the policy built on the aim of spreading 'the hope of democracy, development, free markets and free trade' to 'every corner of the world', as expressed in the 2002 US National Security Strategy (Thompson, 2010). Others began to overtly challenge America, both great and regional powers. Unipolarity was shaken by state and non-state actors. Crucially, around the same time, Putin's Russia started its revisionist-revanchist push and reassertion (cf. Putin, 1999).

Post-Wall engagement with post-Soviet Russia through institutions, arms control agreements, energy deals, and economic integration (G7/8, WTO) in the long-term

apparently did not help to build a more secure continent, or world order. Russia's early-1990s apparent 'westward' (or integrationist) orientation did not last.

Russia (domestic warfare in Chechnya aside) first marched into Georgian terrain in 2008, then Crimea 2014, and in 2022 embarked on 'war of conquest' in Ukraine (Fazal, 2022). The idea of influence in the near-abroad, in rebuilding russkiy mir, insistence on external 'non-interference in internal affairs,' and obsession of security—or the absolute notion of living 'without danger' (bezopasnost, translated non-literally as 'security')—and being a recognised as an equal great power are key drivers (Hosking, 1998; Hill, 2022). Putin's dissatisfaction with the collapse of the Soviet Union and his pseudohistorical plot have manifested brutally in the current full-scale war in Ukraine.

This old-fashioned strategy, to get by force what you want, undermines the post-1945 achievements the liberal international order built around diplomatic and legal norms. It also undermines what the Soviets wanted from the CSCE process 1975/1990: the very principles of the inviolability of border and of equal sovereignty, all the while accepting human rights and the right of states to freely choose alliances and to pursue the peaceful change of borders. Today, by wooing or pulling into its violent cause other aggressive actors like Iran or North Korea, Russia is shaking the system. Ironically, what used to be conventional behaviour in Europe prior to the descent of the Iron Curtain—warfare triggered by an invasion to force a change of borders—had become unconventional, indeed, in the mind of many (despite 'Yugoslavia'), inconceivable after 1945; and therefore, Putin's overtly aggressive move against Ukraine in 2022, unlike his actions in 2014, completely took Western leaders by surprise: from Scholz, to Macron, and to Biden. In reality, it was sadly a refrain of simple, old-style power politics. Since China's own, distinct exit from the Cold War post-Tiananmen Square, we have also witnessed the rise of an increasingly aggressive PRC. Certainly, since the 2010s, under the leadership of the Communist Party and notably of Xi Jinping, the country has evolved into a global economic powerhouse with major military capabilities, elbowing out challengers in the South China Sea and embarking on a grandiose project to make China a global superpower by 2050. Dubbed, with innocuous opacity, 'One Belt, One Road', this policy was coyly presented as Chinese 'multilaterism' (Spohr, 2020).

For the United States, China in 2024 represents a 'pacing challenge' or 'threat' within the larger framework of 'competitive coexistence' or 'strategic competition' between the two countries. The most significant potential for a flare-up is certainly Taiwan, which Beijing has long sought to bring into the CCP's fold and whom the US considers a critical ally. Still, although China and Russia are increasingly economically and militarily aligned and clearly involved in triangular rivalry with America, it is difficult to gauge their broader designs for sustained cooperation, given both countries' domestic plights and historical tensions (US National Security Strategy, 2022; Fraser, 2024).

That said, all the above marks a major shift of the tectonic plates of global power. President Obama spoke in 2011 of the US's to 'Pivot to Asia' (Shambaugh, 2013); Putin under Russia and Xi's China proclaimed in 2022 a 'friendship' with 'no limits.' The realities, the pursuit of immediate national interests and the reactivity of most policies to the actions of rivals or competitors shows that priorities tend to change rapidly. America, while looking to China, Taiwan, and the Pacific, is focused imminently on Russia-Ukraine-Europe and the escalating Israel-Gaza-Lebanon-Iran conflict. Russia—now with a war economy in full-swing—is fixated long-term on conquering Ukraine, as well as keeping an eye out for Moldova, Georgia, and Belarus. With China, Putin's Russia still aims for a 'multipolar' or 'polycentric' international system; there is lesser talk of internationalism now. And having declared liberalism obsolete, they openly strive for a 'post-Western world order' in what they see at present as an unfolding 'new era' (Spohr, 2020; Putin and Xi, 2024; Gabuev, 2024).

Words and communication matter, and both Putin's and Xi's regimes are clear and forceful in their messaging and political practice. It is easier to proclaim grand strategies, pivots, or shifts than really pursuing them in practice (cf. Zeitenwende speech by chancellor Olaf Scholz)—certainly for authoritarian regimes which are free from electoral cycles, parliamentary whims, coalition politics, and popular accountability (Scholz, 2022; Spohr, 2023). With his war, Putin put in practice his grand strategy of looking to change the territorial status quo in Europe and challenging the balance of power and rules of the existing global order.

## iv.

Generally, leaders do matter. Their political choices have consequences at home and for international diplomacy. The institutions they create and how they use them can help with order, their nuclear brinksmanship or arms control initiatives, their decisions to work for peace or go to war, to contain and sanction, or approach and engage in good faith have serious impact. But for all their occasional grand proclamations—especially when leaders of great powers make speeches—most end up in the daily jetsam and flotsam, having to react to sudden disasters (political, economic, social climate), even outright conflict, or looking to somehow steer slowly developing change.

Let us remember that Western leaders in 1989-1991 were shocked by the rapid implosion of the Soviet bloc. They then worked hard to manage change—driven both from below and from above—by adapting and reinventing their policies and the international frameworks to forge a new architecture out of the old that would align with new geopolitical realities. They realised the bipolar order they knew had gone, while the international institutions they knew and used prevailed. Trust and intense diplomacy (statecraft) played a huge part as they sought to shape the international and institutional landscape—turning EC to EU, pressing for the

Euro, modifying NATO and its relations with Russia, managing the fall-out from the USSR's collapse, opening the G7 to the G8, moving from GATT to WTO, facilitating Arctic (environmental) cooperation, and so forth.

Beyond kinetic and conventional war, the present-day hybrid and non-linear warfare creates immense uncertainty and political polarisation on the domestic and international planes. We have the problem of a very unstable, relatively volatile international system, with very little predictability and calculability.

Meanwhile the old post-war (commonly agreed) ground rules and norms have been broken even though the institutions, charters and frameworks per se still stand. But they appear as shells without substance, because they seem to have lost legitimacy and credibly on all sides. The UN Security Council is a prime example: if a permanent member of the UNSC breaks the key principles and no longer genuinely buys into the system, the system loses its value; just as when voters do not buy into their (democratic) political systems, the system is effectively dead.

Cooperation has dangerously been replaced in many spheres by overt competition and rivalry, which challenges institutionalised internationalism and order. In practice this means, that Western leaders, faced with very controlled and aggressive messaging by forceful dictators, need to retake the initiative to formulate clear horizons of expectation and goals for their electorates that can be followed through with. But few countries see themselves as global ordering powers. Europeans, notably, still prefer to look to the gains of the post-war order and to post-Wall institutional status quo; up to a point, so does the United States. Europe and America are effectively status quo powers.

It is Russia and China (and perhaps the BRICS and some ME states in tow) who are revisionist if not revolutionary in terms of the global transformation they hope to achieve—including, at least in Russia's case, by force. And it is this overt bellicosity in the rivalry—the return to coercive territorial re-ordering, making what had become unconventional conventional again—which makes previous internationalist normative regimes void.

The West, in turn, is seriously grappling with this power political and normative shift, as it seeks to respond to the challenges to and already ongoing changes in the global order. ■

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# 3. The Middle East in the Light of International Order Strategies, Past and Present

Anahita Motazed Rad

The post-1945 world order emerged as a reaction to the catastrophic events of the first half of the 20th Century, which included the two most devastating wars in history, the Great Depression, and the rise of autocrats with imperial ambitions. The primary objective of the post-war architects was to prevent a recurrence of such devastation. Consequently, they established a new order grounded in the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, an open global economy, and the protection of fundamental human and democratic rights.

Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update highlights that 'confidence in the rules-based global order is being undermined by disruptions from a widening range of sources' (Australian Government Defence, 2020). Similarly, the Biden Administration's National Security Strategy asserts that, 'we are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order' (National Security Strategy, 2022). These observations reflect the current debate on the international order; some argue it has become outdated; others believe it has fragmented and still others contend that the liberal order was never fully realised in the first place.

Meanwhile, in their joint statement, China and Russia affirmed their commitment to uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and the existing post-war world order. However, their actions often contradict and stand deeply at odds with many of the principles that define the liberal post-war arrangements (Russian Federation and China, 2022). The invasion in Ukraine explicitly exposed contradictions in Russia's actions and views. It has also shaken the foundations of the liberal international order and shows we are living in a world where great powers can take territory, impose their rule, and spread chaos at will.

These shifts in global power dynamics spark a broader debate about the nature of order and the balance of power across regions including the Middle East. Following World War II, the Middle East became integrated into the post-1945 rules-based international order, with several states joining the newly established United Nations and adhering to its Charter (United Nations, 1945). Additionally, the formation of the Arab League in 1945 sought to align regional cooperation with the broader principles of the UN, further embedding the region in the evolving global system (Barnett, 1998; Shlaim, 2000). As the evolution of global strategies raises critical

questions about how current approaches to maintaining international order might reshape the regional balance of power, different from the Cold War-era bipolarity, it becomes essential to examine new dynamics. This includes the effects on rival proxies, the influence of new global players, the role of militant groups, and other non-state actors (Dalay, 2022). Furthermore, understanding these dynamics is crucial for analysing how past and present international order strategies have influenced the Middle East's complex political landscape. This paper will explore how historical and contemporary international order strategies have shaped, and continue to shape, the region's geopolitical trajectory, and whether any emerging strategies can offer stability amidst ongoing chaos and provide a sustainable framework for the future.

## Middle East and the Cold War

Since the end of World War I, the Middle East has undergone significant transformations driven by external actors, first by European powers and later by the United States and the Soviet Union. The dramatic shift in global power dynamics after World War II and the emerging multifaceted bipolar world order profoundly impacted on the region, leading to numerous geopolitical changes over the ensuing decades. The onset of the Cold War intensified this transformation, as the competition between the US and the Soviet Union reshaped the Middle East in ways that are still felt more than four decades later (Primakov, 2009, p.10). One of the foremost outcomes of the waning grip on power of the old colonial powers, Britain and France, was the rise of nationalism among many Arab nations, leading to their independence from European colonialism in the late 1940s and 1950s (Pekow, 2023).

The transition from being colonies to independent states brought specific security, political, and economic implications and needs that continued to make them dependent on external support. The creation of the state of Israel, perceived as both a clear security threat and a new form of neo-colonialism by the European former colonial powers, added another layer of complexity to the region. Economically, the discovery and exploitation of oil transformed the economies of many Arab nations like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. In contrast, countries like Syria, lacking significant oil reserves, faced economic challenges. This disparity contributed deeply to regional tensions and conflicts, as well as the rivalry between the two superpowers, as these countries sought external powers to alleviate their economic difficulties (Helfont, 2015; Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Regarding these dynamics, the US and the Soviet Union developed distinct regional strategies aimed at securing their regional influence. The US focused on forming alliances with key oil-producing states and promoting stability through military support and economic aid, exemplified by the Eisenhower Doctrine (Eisenhower, 1957). Conversely, the USSR sought to expand its influence by supporting nationalist and

socialist movements, often positioning itself as a champion of anti-colonialism (Hahn, 2004). This competition for influence not only exacerbated existing tensions but also entangled the region in the broader ideological conflict of the Cold War, as both superpowers vied for the loyalty of newly independent states (Shlaim, 2000).

Non-Arab countries also played a role in the Cold War dynamics, although they were less contested by the superpowers compared to the Arab states. Turkey, Iran, and Israel aligned with the West, firmly placing themselves in the US camp (Harrison and Salem, 2017, pp. ix, x). This alignment, along with the region's overall strategic importance, transformed the Middle East into a key battleground for Cold War rivalries between the US and the Soviet Union. Both superpowers viewed the region as crucial for advancing their global ambitions, leading them to back various factions and regimes to establish and expand their influence. On the other hand, the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the rise of Arab nationalist, jihadist, and Islamist movements further divided the region into camps backed by the Soviet Union and the US. These factors collectively caused the Middle East to remain a significant theatre for Cold War rivalries between the US and the Soviet Union, cementing its importance on the global stage and shaping its trajectory for more than four decades later (Harrison, 2018, p.2).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a major geopolitical shock for the Middle East. However, the strategic relationship between Soviet-aligned countries had been weakening before this event. As a result, the nature of alliances shifted significantly, with the US continuing to prioritise the region due to its vital oil and gas resources and its strategic alliance with Israel (Bruce, 2018). The end of the Cold War and the rise of American unipolarity profoundly reshaped global geopolitics, leading to a regional power imbalance that still affects Middle Eastern power dynamics and alliances today.

## Middle East and American Unipolarity

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent geopolitical shifts did not end the zero-sum perception of alliances. Events such as the War on Terror, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Arab Spring, and the collapse of old state structures reinforced a more nuanced and pragmatic approach (Fulton, 2020). The shift in global power strategies manifested itself across the region in two distinct ways. First, since the early 1990s, China has emerged as a secondary force, gradually gaining influence (Lee, 2005). This shift has played a significant role in reshaping the geopolitics of the Middle East, altering the regional role of the US, and contributing to the Middle East becoming a multipolar region (Sternfeld, 2023). Additionally, it established a new regional competitive power structure in the Middle East, characterised by a tripartite contest among Iranian, Arab, and Turkish centres of power.

It also profoundly disrupted the regional power balance and significantly affected the foreign policy, economy, and security of former Soviet allies such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and South Yemen (Morganthau, 1993). While each of these countries responded differently to the loss of Soviet support, they all faced major challenges. Transitioning from state-controlled to market-oriented economies proved particularly difficult, and the removal of the Soviet security umbrella deeply impacted their foreign policy and security strategies. While they tried to find new domestic legitimacy and regional security frameworks, a resistance front consisting of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas formed in opposition to the US and its regional allies.

American unipolarity in the Middle East unfolded in two phases. The first phase, during the Clinton administration in the 1990s, was marked by 'quiet unipolarity' (Harrison, 2018, pp:8-9). During this period, the US adopted a policy of dual containment towards Iraq and Iran, effectively imposing a Pax Americana on the Middle East in the absence of a global rival (Parsi, 2018; Cohrs, 2018). The US had recently defeated Saddam Hussein's attempt to annex Kuwait and, facing few constraints in the region, imposed tougher sanctions on Iran, labelling it a 'rogue' state (Wright,1995). The second phase, beginning immediately after 9/11, was characterised by 'aggressive unipolarity'. The US, tolerating no active resistance from Middle Eastern regimes, launched military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Feith, 2009). Initially, Iran saw its interests threatened by these incursions near its borders. However, as the US was caught in a military predicament, Iran began to view this as an opportunity to build deterrence against potential invasions by the US and Israel, in particular (Barzegar, 2008). This strategic shift motivated Iran to bolster the 'axis of resistance' it led, which included Syria and Hezbollah. By developing asymmetric hybrid warfare tactics and recruiting Shi'i militias from across the region, Iran enhanced its capacity to counter what it perceived as the arbitrary exercise of power by the United State (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Overall, American unipolarity established a new competitive power structure in the Middle East, despite the region mirroring the Cold War global bipolarity structure; after the Soviet collapse, the region began forming its own order. This emerging regional system was characterised by competing Iranian and Arab nationalisms, along with Sunni and Shi'i sectarian identities (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). In response to the perceived arbitrary power wielded by the US, Iran sought to bolster its resistance front, including Syria and Hezbollah. By developing asymmetric hybrid warfare capabilities and recruiting Shi'i militias from across the region, Iran aimed to counterbalance US influence. Meanwhile, Turkey maintained a neutral stance in the disputes between the Iranian-led resistance and US-aligned Arab allies until the Syrian civil war forced Ankara to abandon its 'zero problems with neighbours' policy.

## The Emergence of Multipolar Middle East

The transition from a unipolar to a multipolar Middle East emerged from a combination of factors. The unipolar global structure led to the establishment of a new regional power structure characterised by intense regional struggles, manifesting as civil wars in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya (Forsberg, 2016). The US being stuck in the swamp of Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with President Barack Obama's 'pivot to Asia', contributed to general perceptions of American retreat from the Middle East (Cohen and Ward, 2013). In the meantime, China has emerged as another key global player in reshaping the geopolitics of the Middle East, contributing to its transition from a unipolar to a multipolar region. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China views the Middle East as crucial for its energy needs and regional strategy. Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China views the Middle East as crucial for its energy needs and regional strategy.

China's approach emphasises economic engagement and infrastructure investment, positioning itself as a partner for development rather than a traditional military power, which appeals to many Middle Eastern countries seeking to diversify their economic ties (Wang, 2016). Additionally, China advocates for a non-interventionist foreign policy, promoting dialogue and cooperation among regional players to maintain stability. This strategy contrasts sharply with the more interventionist policies of the US, allowing China to expand its influence while also contributing to regional order and challenging the traditional dominant role of the US in the Middle East (Huang, 2020; Teng, 2019).

In addition to China, is Russia, the other major old actor that has reinforced its regional influence and position by aligning with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, impacting regional power dynamics and contributing to this new multipolar environment. The entry of Russia into Syria in 2015 marked a pivotal moment in this transition, turning the region's geopolitical landscape into a multipolar reality. By aligning with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, Russia not only reinforced its influence but also positioned itself as a key player with sway over Israel and Saudi Arabia (Ross, 2016). This involvement led Russia to mediate tensions between Israel and Iran, Turkey and Iran, and possibly Iran and Saudi Arabia, aiming to stabilise the region's ongoing conflicts and challenging the US influence and effectivity in the region.

Similarly, the European Union, though less engaged in security issues compared to the US and Russia, remains involved due to its strategic interests in energy, refugees, and counterterrorism (Shepherd, 2021). These diverse factors collectively illustrate the evolving power dynamics and the complex interplay of great powers influences in the Middle East. Each element adds a layer of complexity to the distribution of power in the region, demonstrating how the shifting roles and strategies of global actors contribute to an increasingly intricate geopolitical landscape.

The most distinct characteristic of a multipolar Middle East geopolitics is its combination of profound interdependence with fluid alliances. Despite trends of 'power bloc' formations and regional 'cold war', relationships within the region are continually subject to change (Chang, 2020). This fluidity contrasts with the perception of alliances as zero-sum games, which has persisted despite significant regional upheavals. The War on Terror, the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, the Arab Spring, and the collapse of established state structures have all reinforced a more pragmatic approach to alliances (Adikari, 2022; Hoffman, 2018). In an increasingly complex and evolving global landscape, characterised by shifting geopolitical interests and alliances – spanning issues like competition, green and digital transitions, and international security – pragmatism, the pursuit of prosperity, and regime survival have become central to defining relationships within the Middle East. These factors play a crucial role in shaping the region's dynamic and fluid alliances, continuously altering the definitions of friend and foe.

However, the Middle East is perhaps more 'disordered' today than ever before, as some states and non-state actors deliberately stir up disorder as part of a strategic preference (Lynch, 2016). Countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia have been accused of supporting proxy conflicts or non-state actors to destabilise rival states and expand their regional influence (Byman, 2013). This strategy of controlled chaos enables certain actors to exploit regional instability for their own geopolitical ends, further complicating the already fragmented landscape of shifting alliances and undermining efforts to maintain long-term order (Pollack, 2019).

## Concluding Points

The current global landscape is marked by increasing diversity and disorganization, with shifting interests and alliances in areas such as geopolitical competition, green and digital transitions, and international security. This environment is further complicated by a collapse in humanitarian affairs, boosting of securitisation versus rights debates, and the decoupling of interests and values. The backsliding on international commitments and erosion of norms concerning fundamental human and democratic rights is more pronounced than ever, making events increasingly unpredictable.

In this evolving global multiplex landscape, it appears that authoritarian states like China and Russia will face no significant pressure regarding human rights or internal affairs. The concept of democracy itself is being redefined, with no universal standard to guide its implementation. As stated in their expansive joint manifesto, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping envision a fundamentally different world order. They advocate for a multipolar international system where their nations will collaborate 'without limits' to secure their positions of influence.

Their vision includes establishing alternative international organisations that rival Western institutions such as NATO and resisting the global reach of US missile defence systems.

This paper argued that the shifting global power dynamics have ignited a broader debate on the nature of international order and balance of power, particularly within the Middle East. As global strategies evolve, they pose critical questions about how contemporary approaches to maintaining international order might reshape the regional balance of power, moving beyond the Cold War-era bipolarity. The increasing influence of emerging powers such as China and Russia have not only transformed the geopolitical landscape but also renewed the question of how the Middle East fits into this evolving international system. While China's economic and diplomatic engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative positions the region as a crucial corridor for its global ambitions, Russia's military interventions, particularly in Syria, suggest a desire to reassert its presence in the Middle East as a power broker. These developments challenge the traditional Western-dominated order, reviving debates about whether the Middle East will be integrated into a multipolar global order or remain a region of contestation. Persistent ideological and geopolitical rivalries continue to obstruct cooperation on vital issues such as climate change, migration, and security, further complicating the region's role in the evolving global order. Despite the increased negotiating power granted to local leaders under a multipolar system, the ongoing civil conflicts and potential conflicts, like those between Iran and Israel, underscore the urgent need for a unified international effort. Understanding these evolving dynamics is essential for evaluating how past and present international strategies shape the Middle East's geopolitical trajectory and whether emerging strategies can offer a sustainable path to stability amidst the ongoing chaos. ■

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# 4. The Lessons of British Policy Planning and International Order, 1945-1989

Oliver Yule-Smith

## The Problem

In 2021, the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy declared the country's commitment to 'shaping the open international order of the future'. It accepted that there was indeed a crisis of what was called—increasingly pejoratively—liberal international order. In so doing it acknowledged a need to 'update our statecraft for systemic competition' and 'renew and re-skill our core diplomatic capability, ensuring it can meet the challenges of an era of systemic competition' (UK Government 2023, 58). Yet this acknowledgement indicated an existing shortfall in the UK Government's ability to think deeply about a shifting international order. This weakness in UK strategic thinking has been recognised outside of Whitehall too (Ricketts 2020). By even the most conservative understanding of strategy, as it relates to external policy, a mindfulness of changes in wider international order will necessarily shape the ends, ways, and means of your strategy. This way of thinking, however, appears to have atrophied.

Policy planners should be at the sharp end of the wedge in this mode of thinking. These officials should provide the clearest distillation of government thinking about order. Historically, they were encouraged to think about the 'big questions' of international order, regional order, and grand strategy and, importantly, they were given the most time to investigate these questions. As one contented policy planner would later reflect, 'in its central position, its scope, the opportunity to see a large part of the world scene and to impose some order on the flux of events it is one of the best jobs in Whitehall' (FCO, Cradock Minute, 1975). Though the exact shape and function of the policy planning staff changed over the years, since the 1960s there has been a dedicated Planning Staff in the Foreign Office and even before that there were officials who participated in planning even if they lacked the name.[1]

[1] This study uses the phrase 'policy planners' advisedly as throughout this period the British policy planning machinery underwent significant reform. Policy planning was relatively ad-hoc from 1945 until it was given a more formalised position in the Permanent Under-Secretary's Committee, later Department, in 1949. It was not until 1963, under the Plowden reforms, that an independent foreign policy Planning Staff was formed from the Western Organisations and Planning Department. It was then not until 1987 that the Planning Staff became the Policy Planning Staff. For a comprehensive study of the development of British policy planning see (Kettle 2020).

While the size of the policy planning teams meant they would never be the heart of the Foreign Office, they could legitimately claim to be the head of the institution. Getting a grasp of how these planners approached the problem of order in an era of sustained systemic competition therefore holds intrinsic value for how officials should approach these questions today. Whilst there are many texts that one might have selected to demonstrate this kind of strategic thinking, these texts are especially illustrative of the thinking of these policy planners.

## Theme I: The Utilisation of History to Understand Systemic Change

Historical study was closely associated with the institution of a professional Foreign Office in the nineteenth century and the aristocratic upbringing of its personnel. But even after the rigid aristocratic hold of the Foreign Office softened during the course of the 20th Century, Foreign Office officials remained gripped by what could be termed a 'historical tendency. Engagement with history remained intrinsic to any study of first order questions of foreign affairs. The utilisation of history to understand systemic change was used in three key ways.

Firstly, history was used to justify a particular course of action. On his return from the San Francisco Conference that established the United Nations Charter, Gladwyn Jebb—a Foreign Office official responsible for postwar planning—wrote a memorandum in defence of the charter and the work done to establish the new world organisation (FO, Jebb Memorandum, 1945). Jebb's memorandum was an attempt to explain the British position on postwar arrangements to Foreign Office colleagues. It was suffused with language that was more likely to be found in 1845 than in 1945. By doing so, Jebb hoped to convey the main thrust of his argument that Britain had secured an order favourable to its interests. By using the language of the nineteenth century he hoped to highlight similarities between this new order and a period that was seen as one of relative peace. At the same time, Jebb sought to explicitly identify what he saw as the differences between the achievements of 1945 and the last re-ordering moment of 1919. It was certainly not a given that Jebb would have wanted to mention the United Nations in the same breath as the League of Nations. But he believed an honest appraisal of what they had achieved in San Francisco necessitated a potentially painful return to Britain's last effort to help design an organisation capable of maintaining a stable international order.

Secondly, history was used as a source of illumination. While for Jebb and his planning successors history was used as justification, for officials of the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department it was a source of illumination. In 1951, these officials grappled with the implications of a newly consolidated Chinese communist state

on international order. The paper asserted at the outset that 'immediate questions about China can often be decided by reference to recent events alone. A longer view depends on looking further backwards as well as forwards'. Of the memorandum's twenty-two pages, twelve were dedicated to the history of the country and its place in the world. This led the paper's authors to conclude that while the Chinese revolution under the Chinese Communist Party was not expansionist for its own sake, 'the traditional concept of a Middle Kingdom surrounded by tributary satellites has never died and will continue to exert an influence in the CPG [Central People's Government]' (FO 1951). That this history would be asserted, rather than dulled, under Chinese Communist doctrine led officials to the inescapable conclusion that it would seek to eliminate Western influence from Asian regional order. In this case, history was used as a handrail for a future policy towards a country that was unknown to many.

Thirdly, history was also used as a tool for these officials, helping to address new problems with older solutions. In June 1971, Head of the Planning Staff Percy Cradock and his deputy Charles Powell produced a paper analysing the future of the 'Big Power' balance in Asia, which they termed the 'Asian Quadrilateral' (the US, Soviet Union, China, Japan). The paper posited that this quadrilateral was increasingly likely to become the 'centre of gravity in world affairs' (FCO 1971). If this worldview seems old-fashioned, it is because it was. The Asian Quadrilateral model drew direct inspiration, once again, from the 19th Century and the European balance-of-power system. Not everyone agreed with this framing of international order, however. Cradock's replacement James Cable was tasked with writing an 'Asian Quadrilateral 2.0' in 1972 and confessed that:

> *The concept is too mechanistic. The four powers are not counters to be shuffled about, or magnets which automatically attract or repel each other. Their ability to adjust their mutual relationships and change their existing policies will be limited in the short and even in the medium term. Each is subject to various forms of political and economic constraint. All are likely initially to move with caution and to keep certain options open (FCO 1972).*

Yet for its faults even Cable acknowledged that the concept offered a 'convenient conceptual frame-work in which to consider the new developments'. Not only did Cable avoid dropping the concept, but his critique also engaged the concept on the historical foundations upon which it was founded.

## Theme II: Declining Power of Europe in General and the UK in Particular within International Order as a Lens

Declinist angst pervaded Britain over the course of the second half of the 20th Century. Policy planners were certainly not immune to indulging in this affliction. But it is important to distinguish here between the declinism that induces a nihilistic quasi-theological affliction and the declinism that served as a more constructive framing device. Because the effects of decline for these officials were not altogether negative. Pessimism that flowed from a sense of decline could led to a clear-eyed assessment of the country's place in international order, as well as a greater awareness of the place of Europe within that wider order. By the same token, it could also spur bouts of optimism as planners investigated whether things really were as bad as people made out. There are at least three ways in which this constructive framing of decline manifested.

Firstly, decline served as the basis for a realistic assessment for what Britain could do to shape international order to its advantage. Deputy Under-Secretary Orme Sargent's 1945 'Stocktaking after VE Day' paper is regarded as a seminal piece of analysis and highly indicative of Britain's attempt to adjust to the postwar world. The paper focused on the situation in Europe but recognised that this situation would have a preponderant influence on the balance of power more widely. But Sargent also recognised that Britain's ability to shape European order to its benefit had clearly diminished: "our own position, too, in dealing with these problems is very different from what it was at the end of the last war, when we and France shared and disputed, and eventually lost control of Europe" (FO, Sargent Minute, 1945). This document was candid but not fatalistic. Good statecraft is about stretching your influence on world politics beyond your material circumstance, but critically this relies on an accurate appraisal of your strengths, weaknesses and position in world affairs.

Secondly, decline was used to draw attention to future areas of geopolitical activity and, by extension, areas of threat and opportunity for British foreign policy. In 1949 the new Foreign Office Permanent Under-Secretary William Strang took a tour across the Middle East and Asia. The report of that tour that he presented to the Permanent Under-Secretary's Committee reflected his belief that the centre of gravity in world politics was moving eastwards. He signalled the increasing importance of Asian regional order and sketched how this order connected to Europe. Strang identified an area which covered the 'central and eastern parts of the sea-girt periphery, or what the geopoliticians call the Rimland, which skirts the Heartland of Europe and Asia which is at present in large measure under Soviet control, and the fate of the Western part of which is now at issue in the current battle for Berlin [the Berlin Crisis]' (FO 1949). Upon seeing the region first hand, Strang articulated a vision of the world that drew heavily, especially in terminology, on Nicholas Spykman's

vision of geopolitics. Strang's theory of international order was, therefore, hardly novel, but it was influential. After recognising Asia's growing importance in world affairs, he sought to connect East and West to more immediate policy concerns. A paper prepared by the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department, and overseen by Strang, the following year examined the implications of the war in Korea, not only for Britain's policy in Asia, but for the country's foreign policy writ large (FO 1950).

Finally, decline brought into focus the inextricable connection between the domestic situation and international order. By the mid 1970s Britain was in a very different place, particularly domestically. Living standards were in decline, export growth looked improbable, and it was blighted by crippling inflation. As *The Economist* forebodingly warned in January 1974: "No country which has sustained a rate of inflation of over 20 per cent for long has been, or has remained, a democracy" (The Economist, 1974). But for some planners this critique was a work of gloomy sophistry. The paper that the Head of the Planning Staff J. T. Masefield and his team prepared in 1975 felt it was important to issue an internal corrective in the face of mounting fatalism. The paper argued that the country's balance of payments, employment, exports, growth, production, and standards of living were actually better than Britain's historical performance or even the recent achievements of major competitors. In fact, British agriculture and the country's invisible earnings were 'outstandingly efficient.' In light of the prevailing opinion, Masefield was thoroughly optimistic and believed it was important for Britain to act as such.

The paper highlighted the entanglement of domestic order with that of international order. While Britain's own economic situation was hardly ideal, the Planning Staff were clear that this situation had as much to do with what was going on abroad as with what was going on at home. They pointed to the 'breakdown of the old international economic order' and the consequent stimulation of a 'new, emerging post-industrial society' in Britain' (FCO, Planning Paper, 1975). Britain's economic decline, therefore, was not only the symptom of poor economic planning, but the result of an international economic order that was in a state of convulsion. Faced with the breakdown of the Bretton Woods System, at the hands of President Richard Nixon's New Economic Policy, and the Oil Crisis, Britain would naturally be vulnerable. The humbling experience of Britain's IMF bailout just a few years later indicates that some of the Planning Staff's confidence was misplaced. But it also indicates just how serious these changes to international order were for planners. If policymakers were not attentive to the implications of a changing international order, then the consequences could be disastrous and immediate for the country.

## Theme III: Distinction between a Material 'international order' and a Normative 'world order'

The final key theme is in how policy planners distinguished between a material 'international order' and a normative 'world order'. Definitions of these terms were sometimes made explicitly and other times implicitly. While no single comparison of these two terms exists in the writings of policy planners, given the widespread usage of these terms, the distinction would have been axiomatic. But this is no less important as it would necessarily shape the lens of analysis applied to a given international problem.

The Future Policy Study that took place from 1959 to 1960 provides a stark crystallisation of this materially-defined international order. In 1959, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan issued departments responsible for external policy with a set of questions on how they saw the international setting developing from 1960-1970. There was a very real sense at this time that the geographic distribution of power was changing, and Macmillan wanted a serious study of the situation. This study featured planners from the Foreign Office, but also from across Whitehall.

The section of the final document focusing on the 'international setting' made clear that the correlation of forces in the international system was tied to traditional metrics of state power. As the paper explained, the 'economic, military and political pull which a state can exert in the world in peacetime should be measured not so much by its total resources as by part of them which its government and people are prepared to use for defence and other international purposes'. Population projections, defence expenditures, and predicted gross national product over the next ten years were all aggregated to provide a picture of a country's relative place in world affairs. By the formula outlined above, only the United States and the Soviet Union had the 'strength to provide and sustain a complete power apparatus' (Cabinet, 1960). The effective deployment of these resources mattered far less than the fact that a power possessed these resources—a detail that explained the absence of the European Economic Community, India, and China from this list. Effective diplomacy and strategy could not fundamentally alter a country's relative importance within international order. Basing a foresight study on amorphous concepts like 'prestige' and 'diplomatic experience' risked benchmarking predictions on highly subjective indicators. Using more tangible indicators meant that trends could be identified and a sense of a country's projected position in world affairs could be established. But the conclusions were almost less important that than the work. Officials from across Whitehall clashed on some truly fundamental questions of what is power or can a strong economy provide a discernible strategic advantage. It meant that officials had a much firmer grasp on the ingredients of international order and national power. Officials could then feedback these important ideas about international order to their home departments.

But planners also innately recognised a less tangible facet of order and it is here that officials spoke more to the existence of a more amorphous, future-oriented world order. Often the term 'world order' reflected a more desirable pattern of intercourse in the relations of states—a hope about where global politics was going as opposed to where it was. Indeed, it was often highly aspirational in nature. But these visions were important. One of the most striking instances of the search for a desirable normative world order was the memorandum, 'the first aim of British foreign policy'. It was prepared by Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and officials of the Russia Committee and presented to Cabinet on 4th January 1948. Faced with a solid political and economic bloc running from the Baltic to the Oder and from Trieste to the Black Sea, the paper argued that the Soviet Union was the principal threat to Britain. In response, the paper called for the creation of a 'spiritual union of the West'—which was to a say a Western democratic system comprising Western European countries and backed by the United States and Dominion powers. These countries were 'nurtured on civil liberties and on fundamental human rights' and many had a common experience of Nazi occupation (Cabinet, 1948). The paper argued this collection of countries were ripe for consolidation. While the idea might have sounded utopian at the time, by the end of the month, Bevin had announced his intention to expand the 1947 Treaty of Dunkirk that had established an Anglo-French alliance. The Treaty of Brussels followed in March 1948 and the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. The paper did not explicitly call for the creation of something that resembled NATO, but by signalling a commitment to a grander, more utopian, cause, Bevin and his officials hoped to inspire others to take part in a project that might unite Western Europe.

In the same vein, an unmistakably unique paper that captures the normative, if less the hopefulness, of the idea of world order was in an ambitious paper produced by the Planning Staff in 1970 that investigated the connections between technology and international relations (Foreign Office, 1970). The paper argued there would be a profound impact on international relations and conjured visions of a world in which international organisation ruled. Technological advances were brought under the competency of discrete technocratic multilateral sub-bodies that would regulate these activities and ensure that the benefits of these advances were spread equally across mankind. These new competencies would make international organisations more operational as they sought to manage resources, technology, and funds. While reading like a work of science fiction, if this techno-centric world order came into being it would have far-reaching consequences. For policy planners, imagining this world was the first step in preparing for it.

## Conclusion

Rarely did British Cold War policy planners see it as their mission to deliver discrete policy outcomes, but ideas matter in foreign policy, and they mattered particularly for these officials. The role of the policy planner was to think about the big questions affecting their world. These could lead to messy policy papers and fraught discussions about basic concepts in international relations. But that was the point. The role of a planner was to 'impose some order on the flux of events'. Rather like international order itself, the work of the policy planner is contested and changeable. But in a crisis, policymakers reach for the ideas lying around. Bevin's Cabinet paper never really fleshed out what a 'spiritual union of the West' was, but it quickly became the intellectual framework for a British approach to the organisation of Western Europe. Therefore, discerning the shape of international order and re-examining axiomatic assumptions or basic concepts holds intrinsic value. History, decline, and distinguishing between levels of order proved useful intellectual precepts for planners trying to understand international order in the Cold War; these themes may yet form the basis of a fruitful discussion for those studying order today. ■

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# 5. What the BRICS reflects about International Order

Yu-Shan Wu

## Introduction

The Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) group, which has since January 2024 expanded its membership, adds an interesting and complex dimension to the international orders discussion. Formally established in 2009, the BRICS did not exist during previous eras of competition that led to changes in international order—that includes post-World War II and the post-Cold War era. This contribution explores the current era of geostrategic competition, under which the BRICS and broader Global South have emerged with greater prominence; and furthermore, is to understand the BRICS strategy towards international order.

## The current era of competition

The current era of strategic competition continues to reflect an emphasis on polarity, only there is general agreement that the unipolar moment—that is a US-led order that existed since the end of the Cold War—is diminishing. Instead, two different kinds of polarity have emerged, to create what is described as a 'bi-multipolar' moment (Baru 2023). On one hand, there is the view of a bipolar system dominated by the US and China—as the largest and second largest economies in the world respectively—and it is their competition and differences, which has led commentators such as the Economist (2019) to describe this moment as a 'new kind of Cold War'. On the other hand, the emphasis on such a competition misses the nuances emerging beyond, what some view as the emergence of multipolarity —that suggests no single power dominates. Take for instance the fact that the centre of power politics has shifted (and for some re-shifted back) from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region where three of four of the largest economies—that is China, India and Japan—outside of the European Union, happen to be located (Watanabe 2024; Canada 2022).

In this context, the Western dominated order is being challenged and this is demonstrated by ongoing tensions—as seen by Russia-Ukraine and the Gaza crisis—where states who seek to uphold the current order, namely the US and its partners, have been taken by surprise by the very divided Global South support for unilateral sanctions. Furthermore, the emergence of independent diplomatic postures, as seen by India who is a BRICS member as well as part of the Quad

(a group compiled of Australia, India Japan and the US), for Sidiropolous and De Carvahlo (2023: 27) suggests positions of pragmatic non-alignment, not to be mistaken with the historical non-aligned movement (NAM). Indeed, the BRICS—who up to its 2024 expansion was represented by three democracies: Brazil, India and South Africa—and the larger Global South, complicate the very idea that the current 'disorder' is characterised by binaries of democracy versus autocracy or liberal versus illiberal powers.

The current focus on polarity also tends to overlook other shifts, such as the underlying ideational and ideological changes taking place, where there appears to be diverging positions over what values and principles should guide the international order. It was predicted that as developing countries became richer, the more liberal and secular in character they would become, and yet the opposite has taken place (Economist August 2023). This is further evidenced by the World Values Survey that explores contemporary changes in values. From data taken between 1981-2022, it was found that values are converging more within regions but there is even greater divergence across the world (Jackson and Medvedev 2024). There also appears to be broader divergence between 'North' and 'South', a poll by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Ash et. al. 2023) found that citizens in China, India, Turkey and Russia agree on the emergence of a multipolar world, more so than their American and European counterparts.

## BRICS strategy or strategies?

It is clear that despite the current emphasis on a new era of competition and strategies to maintain the current order, there is nothing new or different in terms of the concerns of the Global South, several of which have been inherited from past eras. Ambassador Sooklal (2024), who served as South Africa's BRICS sherpa, sees a continued marginalisation of the developing world where there is a feeling of being left out of 'mainstream' discussions that lead to real reform. This was evident during the outbreak of the COVID-19 variant, Omicron, where Seydi (2021) summarised: "Southern Africa: Last in line for vaccines, first in line for travel bans." Interestingly, it was at the 2021 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation—FOCAC—the triennial platform between African and Chinese policymakers that African leaders, such as South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa, had the public stage to express that the travel bans were both unscientific and discriminatory.

It is then no surprise that the BRICS continue to call for a multipolar order, which for Van Noort (2017) can be traced back to 2010. This is corroborated by a report titled 'BRICS and Global Order' (Wu and Marggraff) where it was found that this configuration of polarity has been called upon in every BRICS declaration but one between 2008 and 2023. It is the view that the international order serves those who created it (and not those at the fringes), which explains the group's call for

an order that is 'fair', 'just', 'equitable' and 'representative'. This position is finding wider resonance as seen by the fact that in 2023 over a dozen states applied to join an expanded BRICS and again, in mid-2024 , Malaysia applied to join, which would broaden the group's scope to Southeast Asia.

Yet, on closer examination, the call for multipolarity does not necessarily equate to anything radically new from what already exists. The BRICS may seek to re-order the international system to allow for better access and engagement, but they do not actually seek to replace the very foundations built in 1945—and that includes the centrality of the United Nations and its Charter, as well as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Wu and Marrgraff 2023). While the BRICS may differ in 'how' the architecture over this foundation should look, they surprisingly—like the defenders of the liberal international order, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO, 2022)—talk about protecting or upholding 'a rules-based order' (not to be mistaken with the US-led order). Contrary to reports of the BRICS seeking to replace the current order then—that is a 'BRICS-centric' order—is the idea put forth by Naidu (2024) of a 'BRICS-infused order'. At the same time, an expanded BRICS is also raising caution over its potential to work as a coalition to disrupt consensus-based platforms, such as the case of the Antarctic Treaty (see Boulègue and Dodds 2024) where politics has delayed agreement over the protection of endangered species and the inclusion of new consultative parties.

Of course, the BRICS is not a homogenous group and despite a common ordering vision as expressed in declarations, there are also discreet individual strategies (as well as smaller groups) within it. For example, India has been more vocal about its strategic non-aligned position as has Brazil over is strategic autonomy. Russia is currently the most critical of the current order and its interpretation of a multipolar order seems to directly challenge it. Meanwhile, China reflects both support for the international order through its contribution to the UN budget and peacekeeping, while it also challenges it, through the support of parallel institutions like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and by not conforming to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on select maritime disputes (Rapp-Hooper et. al. 2019). While like China, South Africa is dissatisfied with the current economic order, it displays a stronger development agenda position (Wu and Marrgraff 2023). What these various positions reflect, is that it is not always so clear-cut over who seeks to maintain or challenge order, and specific instances need to be explored further.

## Implications

There is general appeal amongst the BRICS and its supporters for greater equality and self-determination at the global level; however, this becomes more complex as issues trickle down to the regional, bilateral and even individual state levels. Instances of these complexities include:

- While the calls for a multipolar order are equated with fairness and equality in BRICS documents, in practise, history—as emphasised by scholars (Acharya 2019, Varisco 2013)—has shown that multipolarity can create greater instability and likeliness of war. Indeed, multipolarity may equate to a wider distribution of power but it can also prioritise select states, and this does not necessarily equate to multilateralism.

- There are deeper dynamics within this group that needs greater investigation. Examples include Argentina and Indonesia's underlying decisions (and Saudi Arabia's reluctance) to not join the 2024 BRICS expansion, as well as the outstanding concerns of Brazil, India and South Africa to reform the UN Security Council (UNSC). Analysing the BRICS as predominantly led by China or Russia's interests (see for example De Aragao 2023 and Imray 2023) overlooks such important dynamics and concerns. In fact, Heine (2024) poses the question: does China lead the Global South or does it in fact strategically follow Global South decisions?

- There is also the complex dynamic over how each member consolidates the rhetoric of equality called for at the global level and the ability to apply the same principles back home. As McKeil's contribution in this report attests, history plays an important part in international order strategy formulation. This is reflected in China, India and Russia's self-promotion as 'civilisational states'. However, as Edward Said (1998) warned, there is the risk that within civilisational groups, official representation becomes the primary mouthpiece of an entire civilisation, which can risk reduction and under-representation of those outside official spaces. It is important then, to consider whether the opening of spaces at the multilateral level, necessarily means the same for the spaces at the domestic levels.

To conclude, it is precisely because the current international order is at an inflection point that the nuances and developments around the BRICS are important to consider. As South Africa's former foreign minister, Naledi Pandor (2023), observed: "We no longer share an understanding of the greatest global challenge." This was demonstrated earlier by the fact that both the BRICS and NATO perceive themselves as protecting a rules-based order. Indeed, different perspectives exist (over what is order and who is considered a threat) within the international orders discussion. It is only through engaging different perspectives and including them in defining discussions, can an inclusive and more conscious order be formulated. ■

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# 6. Changing Strategies for International Order

Aaron McKeil

A revival of 'realist' strategic thinking is sharpening the tools and more coercive practices for reshaping and maintaining international order (Lammy 2024; Bew 2016). These adaptations in strategy are also grappling with the rapidly changing character of war, technological transformations, and dynamics of competition amid economic interdependence. This strategic environment consequently is more demanding of innovative and long-term defence planning, at considerable costs, to maintain the minimal bases of international order. But understanding and legitimating these strategies for shaping the next international order also requires understanding the historical consciousness underpinning their strategic thinking and sources of public support. The discourse of a new 'Cold War' for instance is now widespread (Niblett, 2024; Sanger, 2024; Buzan, 2024), but liberal, illiberal, and Global South states are drawing different lessons from the last Cold War in their strategic thinking today. This varied historical thinking is shaping the varied grand strategic choices of states, as well as the narratives used to mobilise public support.

## Grand Strategy and International Order

If a state can be said to have a 'strategy for international order', this means that its grand strategy coordinates domestic and foreign policy so to maintain an order in which great power war is avoidable and unnecessary. This is classically a major meaning behind the idea of grand strategy, for thinkers such as Edward Mead Earle (1943) and Basil Henry Liddell Hart (1954), the aim of a sustainable relative peace worth having. A state whose grand strategy is purely power political, aiming to make a new order by aggressive force alone, is practicing strategic disorder (McKeil, 2022a), and tends to only achieve its own destruction, by provoking grand alliances and risking military fiasco. Conceptually, an 'international order strategy' is an attribute of a grand strategy, as a principal aim or end, with a collection of means. These strategies are adopted by states when the maintenance or modification of ordering arrangements are within a state's perceived interests (Mazarr, 2018). In eras of strategic competition, grand strategies as a state's 'theory of victory' may at times aim to win the competition, rather than manage it (Balzacq and Krebs, 2021). But, even so, victory in a long-term geostrategic struggle conditioned by nuclear forces cannot be achieved without maintaining some minimal degree of stability along the way, to compete safely, and avoid direct major power war.

Broadly speaking, strategies for international order have two aspects: a *security* aspect of deterrence strategies for the maintenance of minimum international stability, and second, a *political* aspect of strategies for the maintenance and modification of ordering arrangements, rules, and norms within national and allied interests. New long-term deterrent force deployments supplemented by emerging rules of competition are increasingly in demand as ordering practices (McKeil, 2022b). Strategies for international order in both aspects are domain and 'suborder'-specific in implementation, be it nuclear order, trade order, and so on. Across domains and sectors, how densely 'liberal' the order remains and how permissively illiberal it will become is increasingly being linked to security imperatives for liberal and illiberal powers alike.

## The Return of Historical Thinking

In the revival of power politics, new strategic thinking and practice is being formulated against the backdrop of history. It also tends to be legitimated by reference to historical analogy and metaphor. General Sir Patrick Sanders for instance has stated that the UK is in a '1938 moment'. This historical analogy was also influential in the origins of the Cold War, shaping Allied strategic thinking. This historical analogy is useful again, insofar as it implies the need for a *sufficiently armed* and *sufficiently cohesive* coalition organised to deter states seeking to revise the international order with the use of force. But its utility should not mischaracterise adversaries or misconstrue the different balance and means available today. The differences between historical analogies—1914, 1938, and 1962—matter, although each has value for strategic thinking. Each represents a case of disastrous or near-disastrous conflict between liberal and illiberal powers, to be avoided and learned from. Finding the most approximate historical analogy is not important and distracts from thinking about the key differences between the present case and cases in general. Surrounding this discourse of historical analogy, it should be noted, are historical metaphors such as 'appeasement' and 'isolationism', generally used as terms of political rhetoric. These pervasive metaphors, if used polemically and without distinctions, are unhelpful for strategic thinking (McKeil, 2023a).

Perhaps the most prominent historical analogy today is that of a new 'Cold War'. The language of a cold war should be used in lower case if applied to the present, and upper case for the Cold War past. If there is a new cold war, it is in the sense of strategic interaction of multiple great powers seeking predominance in multiple theatres, to shape an order within their interests, whist avoiding the direct use of force. Robin Niblett argues that a 'New Cold War' will persistently shape international politics in this century, because 'the conflict between the two sides is also ideological', constraining their ability to trust and limiting the degree of order possible (Niblett, 2024, p. 4). Niblett, however, distinguishes ten meaningful ways

in which the new cold war differs from the last. For Niblett, these differences call for a collection of five broad policies that readapt strategies from the last Cold War: avoiding 'self-fulfilling prophecy' by perceiving intentions correctly, rallying democracies with or without US leadership, building a new framework for 'peaceful economic competition', insisting on new nuclear arms control including China, and partnering with global south states on sustainable development (Niblett, 2024, p. 137-160). An ordered new cold war may be preferable to a disordered multipolarity.

Different powers are drawing different lessons of history from the last Cold War, however, shaping their varied strategic choices and the stories used to mobilise public support. New adaptive grand strategic thinking is self-consciously historical. US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan for instance argues that the US is in the 'third phase of the global role it assumed following World War II' (Sullivan, 2023, p. 29); the first being Truman's containment strategy, the second being the post-Cold War strategy of expanding the 'liberal' order, and the current era as 'Biden-omics' coupled with a modified liberal internationalism 'for the middle class' (Ward, 2024, p. 32). This historical thinking draws on models of Roosevelt and Truman, for a new strategic context. And in renewing the American strategy for international order, it is at once modifying the order, by giving it new guiding principles and bases of legitimacy. The alternative narrative, 'Make America Great Again', is more nostalgic, but is equally shaped by historical thinking. It relies on a similar strategic conviction about America power, rooted past mobilisation of industrial dynamism and technological ingenuity. Defining the global role of the United States in world-historical terms; however, also provides the historical narrative and purposes used legitimate the demanding costs of this strategic undertaking with the American public. It matters which narratives mobilise American power.

Historical consciousness is no less formative for illiberal strategies. Illiberal powers today however are drawing on their own historical analogies and lessons. China's discourse of 'national rejuvenation' for instance defines strategic aims by recalling a relatively distant and nostalgic prosperous past and set of historical national disasters. It is a specific framing of history. Domestically, both Russia and China also regularly draw on selective national histories of the Second World War and Western imperialism to mobilise popular support for their strategic priorities. The 'multipolar order' pursued by Russia and China is also framed as a return to a 'normal' condition of history before Western predominance in world affairs. History as a series of hegemonies is however a Western way of understanding history; grasping Chinese traditional history is critical for understanding its strategic intentions (McKeil, 2023b). The new discourse of 'civilizational states', furthermore, is articulating cultural ideology, as an historical mission (Coker, 2019). The strategies of illiberal powers in prior eras of strategic competition were shaped by their belief that their recipes for modernity gave them the winning edge. The failed Soviet strategy was to *out-produce* the West, via its belief in a new superior industrial civilization, and the strategic delusion of the fascist powers was to

*outfight* competitors, with superior warfare (Coker, 2008). Today, with differences between Russia and China, the long-term strategy of the new illiberal powers is to *outlast* and *outnumber* the West with superior domestic stability, rallying 'the rest', and where possible encouraging and agitating the West's anticipated internal decline.

China's international order strategy includes rapid technological catchup, as well as an alternative *integrative* order, across the Global South, giving it greater potential longevity, breadth, and perceived legitimacy (Ikenberry, 2024; Mendez and Alden, 2021; Cooley and Nexon, 2020). The strategy of the Soviet order by contrast was one of *imposing* an alternative order in Eastern Europe, whilst supporting revolutionary disorder outside Europe. China's integrative strategy today follows from the import and export demands of its industrial economy, but lessons of Soviet history for China's single-party regime, as well as lessons from China's civil war, contribute to China's domestic development priorities, driving its need for growth and search for economic integration. But China is offering more than purely transactional development logics, in its 'multipolar order' vision. This is a challenge to liberal states, because liberal ideology is in some respects counter-productive with Global South States. An alternative concept of 'liberal multipolarisation' could include greater strategic activity of liberal-democratic middle powers such as Germany and Japan, as well as inclusion of multi-aligned democratic global south powers such as India and Brazil. Global South states however are informed by the experience of the last Cold War, aiming to maximise development, and attain status (Paul, 2024; Mukherjee, 2022), both rejecting Western hegemony and avoiding the consequences of a new cold war.

## Long-term Challenges in a Changing World

Faced with long-term strategic challenge, in a complex and changing world, defence spending will likely rise and remain sustained for decades. Adapting new means of integrated deterrence, to avoid major power war, faces not only spending, technical, and bureaucratic challenges, however. Perhaps more challenging in the near- and long-term is integrating new deterrent forces with new grand strategic political vision, to mobilise public support (Wirtz and Larsen, 2024). Great power politics requires sustained means of collective mobilisation (Goddard and Nexon, 2016). The Cold War encountered considerable public discontent, in disarmament campaigns, and anti-war movements. New long-term deterrence and societal resilience strategies require new political legitimation strategies. Legitimation strategies tend to rely on historical narrative. In allied societies with greater spending constraints than the United States, defence spending will have greater legitimation demands.

These legitimation strategies include broad narratives, drawing upon historical experience, but with visions of a future order worth having and defending. The kinds of legitimating narratives selected, mobilising public support, however, build up public demands, creating a relation of public expectations. Waging a war to end all wars, in the name of democracy, Woodrow Wilson and the Allied powers built up public expectations about what a post-war order should deliver (Cohrs, 2022). Supporting a war to defend democracy and liberal order in Ukraine and other theatres in a long-term struggle, governments are creating public expectations.

Allied practices of strategy formulation are rapidly adapting to new technologies and new complex conditions, while the public narratives legitimating them are being worked out.

The proliferation of National Security Councils, National Security Strategy documents, deepening and broadening NATO, allied intelligence sharing and information warfare, rapidly advancing cyber and AI capabilities, new geo-economic statecraft, and G7 revival mark a rapid evolution in allied strategic practice. But strategy for international order in an increasingly complex and competitive world also involves articulating new politically purposeful strategies, beyond 'smart muddling through' (Prantl and Goh, 2022; Gaskarth, 2015).

## Conclusion

International history is in a new formative era, whether it is a 'Cold War 2.0' or not. It is not clear what kind of international order will come next, if any. It may be impossible to know, until it arrives, insofar as Hegel's owl of Minerva arrives at the dusk. In competing for the future, however, what order comes next is likely to be shaped by the kinds of political commitments statespersons claim it is being fought for. Anticipating is partly making. By most estimates, this formative era constitutes a long-term demand for ordering strategies, such as integrated deterrence, to maintain a relative and tolerable stability. This comes with considerable costs, which need innovative and forward-looking political legitimation strategies to sustain domestic and international support. Stability of the order itself is not enough. The old Cold War story of liberal freedom and human rights is no longer the same 'fighting faith' it once was (Moyn, 2023; Clark, 2021). This struggle for minimal bases of order, however it is defined, will define the international experience of the current generation.

A disordered new global cold war is taking shape, even while many try to resist and avoid it. The frontiers of this new cold war are grey, however, and contested, and the rules of great power relations less ordered. 'America First' versus the vision of a 'multipolar order' is a contest with unclear outcomes, creating a global condition of unpredictable international disorder (McKeil 2022a). The relatively

radical changes in US economic policy, under Trump, then under Biden, and now under Trump again, are changing the open 'liberal' economic order from the inside out. Transatlantic security relations are being tested, and the European security order revised. States inside and out of the old 'liberal' order are actively dismantling and revising it, producing a pervasive condition of unstable disorder. Whether the UN Charter and deeper bases of order can withstand this era of global disorder is unclear. What kind of order if any comes next is unclear, and will take considerable time to take shape, beyond this era of pervasive global disorder. ■

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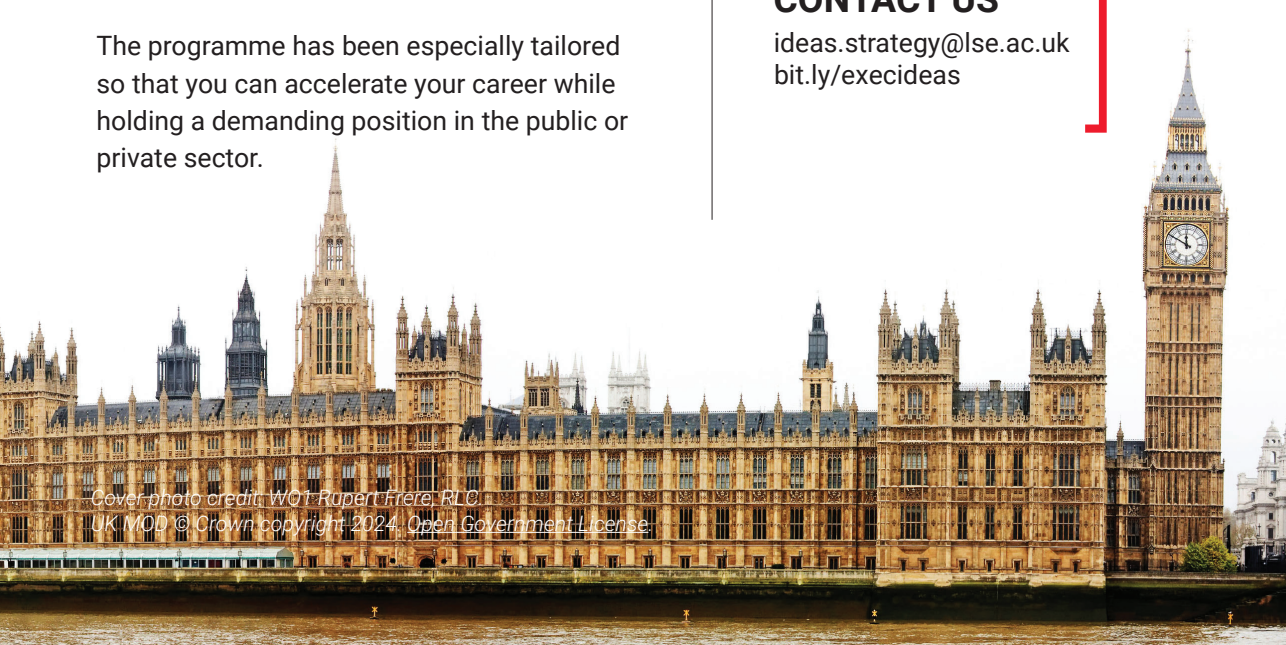

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