

DOI: 10.23932/2542-0240-2019-12-3-94-108

Origins of the New International (Dis)order

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CITATION: Beeson M. (2019) Origins of the New International (Dis)order. *Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law*, vol. 12, no 3, pp. 94–108.
DOI: 10.23932/2542-0240-2019-12-3-94-108

Received: 19.04.2019.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I would like to thank OGT's editor and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions.

ABSTRACT. *The old international order created under the auspices of American hegemony in the aftermath of World War 2 appears to be unravelling. In part, this is a consequence of a redistribution of material power in the international system as other powers - especially China - seek to play a more prominent role. In part, however, it is a consequence of the actions of the Trump administration and its privileging of 'America first'. Consequently, urgent challenges such as dealing with climate change, which seem to necessitate international cooperation, are likely to get worse and even more difficult to address. This paper details and analyses the range of 'structural' and agential forces that have collectively shaped the contemporary international order, but which are under increasing stress. Some of these factors—the relative decline of the US, 'the rise of the rest', the persistence of authoritarianism—are familiar features of long-run historical change. What makes them significant in our time, I argue, is their potential to impede much needed international cooperation to address unambiguously collective challenges. Consequently, the new international disorder, threatens nothing less than*

the end of order of any sort—or any sort one might want to live under, at least.

KEY WORDS: *Trump administration, rise of China, BRICS, international order, climate change, politics*

Introduction

No doubt every generation thinks its moment in history is special. To be sure, there are some periods in history that really do seem far more consequential than others. Revolutions, especially those that unfold rapidly and leave significant, unexpected change in their wake illustrate such possibilities. The French, American and Russian revolutions are important examples of this possibility. We might also add the industrial revolution to this list, of course. Likewise, major wars that overturn the existing order and culminate in a large-scale redistribution of power might also lead those involved to think they were living through something uniquely momentous. Possible historical examples of such conflicts are depressingly numerous,

but this does not make them any the less significant, especially for their architects and—even more importantly, perhaps—their victims. In such a comparative context are we in danger of taking ourselves, and our collective problems rather too seriously?

Perhaps not. There are a number of factors that distinguish our time and might justifiably lead us to suppose that we really are living through an unprecedentedly momentous time in human history. I shall detail some of the possible specifics of this claim in what follows, but there is one contemporary issue above all others that gives credibility and directly contributes to the growing sense of disorder and un-governability that pervades international politics at the present juncture: climate change [Steffen *et al.* 2019]. True, environmental crises have been a feature of human development for thousands of years from the Romans to the Aztecs [Ponting 1991], but what sets our own time apart is the global nature of the crisis. No doubt some readers will roll their eyes, but the evidence about the impact of global warming in particular is overwhelming, increasingly incontrovertible, and will continue to get worse in the absence of effective action. The emergence of the politics of the ‘Anthropocene’ make our age one like no other [Dryzeck, Pickering 2019].

I am personally very skeptical about our collective capacity to actually address the challenge of climate change, which means I think that this unprecedented problem is likely to exacerbate all of the others that distinguish our times. Before trying to say what this might mean, it is important to spell out the range of ‘structural’ and agential forces that collectively brought us to this point. Some of these factors—the relative decline of the US, ‘the rise of the rest’, the persistence of authoritarianism—are familiar features of long-run historical change. What makes them significant in our time, I shall ar-

gue, is their potential to impede much needed international cooperation to address unambiguously collective challenges. At the risk of unforgivable but unavoidable hyperbole, the new international disorder, threatens nothing less than the end of order of any sort—or any sort one might want to live under, at least. As Randall Schweller [Schweller 2014, p. 10] observes, ‘There are many ways in which a system can become disordered, messed up, chaotic, and unpredictable. There are very few ways that a system can exhibit order, especially complex arrangements, structures, and patterns designed to perform tasks.’

The end of the old order

In the context of conventional geopolitical analysis one factor stands out above all others in explaining why so many think we live in especially troubling times. For half a century or so, the United States exercised a hegemonic influence over much of the world, either directly or through strategies of containment, subterfuge and influence at a distance [Agnew 2005]. For many observers, especially in the US itself, American power and influence was a good thing, both from a geopolitical and a geoeconomic perspective, and its decline is unambiguously bad [Kagan 2018]. On the one hand, enlightened US foreign and economic policy led to the resurrection of the capitalist economies of Western Europe and (parts of) East Asia at a time when their futures were far from assured. On the other hand, American military power sought to ‘contain’ the very real challenge of the Soviet Union, which emerged as the other, seemingly permanent, element of a bipolar international order [Gaddis 1982]. Understandably enough, perhaps, the merits and impact of American primacy were seen very differently in Russia itself [Sakwa 2008].

As we now know, of course, this apparently immovable bipolar structure was anything but, and disappeared virtually overnight without a shot being fired. Those involved might have been forgiven for thinking that they, too, were in the midst of an unprecedented historical turning point—and perhaps they were. At the very least, the abrupt ending of the Cold War provided a telling indictment of the dominant international relations paradigms that struggled to account for, much less foresee, this remarkable turn of events [Lebow 1994]. It is no coincidence that new concepts have emerged to try and capture the very distinctive, unpredictable, contingent and fluid nature of change in the contemporary era [Seybert, Katzenstein 2018]. The Cold War's demise also provides a salutary reminder of the dangers of reading too much into apparently unparalleled events. Indeed, one of the most significant consequences of the 1980s and early 1990s was that it did not mark the 'end of history', as had been famously predicted [Fukuyama 1992]. On the contrary, we have subsequently had more history that we know what to do with.

Yet even critics of the 'world that America made' [Kagan 2012] would have to concede that, if nothing else, the foreign policies of the United States imparted a degree of predictability to world affairs. The American proclivity for interfering in the domestic affairs of friend and (especially) foe alike seemed to have a certain inevitability to it, and one that was judged necessary and valuable by some observers, especially in the aftermath of the disappearance of the Soviet Union [Krauthammer 1990–1991]. But even apologists for American foreign policy would have to concede that such policies could be taken too far and produce all too predictable 'blowback' [Johnson 2000]. The quintessential example of this possibility, of course, was George W. Bush's disastrously ill-judged decision to impose regime

change in Iraq. Although many of the current criticisms of American policy are understandably directed at Donald Trump, it is important to remember that Bush arguably did more to undermine US primacy than anyone else in history [Packer 2005].

Both America's material and ideational power were diminished as a consequence of the invasion of Iraq. It is also important to remember that the much-criticized presidency of Barak Obama was hamstrung from the outset by the need avert a global economic crisis (a consequence of Bush's equally misjudged deregulation of the financial sector), and the perceived need to 'do something' about the Middle East. Little wonder that a cerebral figure such as Obama would think twice about getting the US bogged down in yet another Middle Eastern quagmire after the Bush years [Dueck 2015]. Whatever one thinks about the presidencies of Bush or Obama, however, there is little doubt that they undercut any enthusiasm on the part of the American people for the sorts of 'foreign entanglements' that have always been viewed with caution in the US [Lake 1999]. This confluence of events set the stage for the even more disruptive and unpredicted presidency of Donald Trump.

The Trump era

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Trump era is that, all the rhetoric about 'America first' notwithstanding, Trump's administration has a remarkably narrow conception of the 'national interest'. At one level this provides a useful reminder that the so-called national interest is always a contested, socially constructed idea that reflects the spirit and the leadership of the times in any country [Finnemore 1996; Layne 2017]. At another level, however, Trump's repudiation of America's traditional international leadership role and position as the notional foundation of the

‘rules based international order’ (R BIO) is a striking departure from US foreign policy practice in the period since the Second World War. Even George Bush can be seen as subscribing to a view of the US as playing a distinctive historical role that was simply unavailable to less powerful states; for all the hubris and overreach that accompanied the US’s short-lived ‘unipolar moment’, in many ways it was entirely in keeping with the behavior of other American administrations of the last half century or so [Bacevich 2002]. It is not necessary to think that American leadership has been an unambiguously good thing or driven by anything other than a perception of the US’s national interest to recognize that the Trump administration represents a radical departure from postwar geopolitical policy [Beeson forthcoming].

Indeed, Trump’s foreign policy is in some ways reminiscent of the isolationism of the period between the two World Wars. What is different about the Trumpian approach, is that he is using international economic leverage to pursue national goals. The question is whether such policies will contribute to similar strategic and economic disorder, as the international system has to cope with the fact that ‘under Donald Trump, the US has become a rogue superpower, hostile, among many other things, to the fundamental norms of a trading system based on multilateral agreement and binding rules’ [Wolf 2019]. There are two consequences of the Trump period that consequently merit particular emphasis. First, the doubts that emerged about the US’s ability and willingness to play what was widely seen by many American commentators as an essential role as systemic stabilizer and provider of vital collective goods are more evident than ever [Rachman 2018]. Whether the system actually needs one state to single-handedly provide such goods is another question, but many American policymakers have acted as if it did, and many analysts in

the US have assumed that it delivered key benefits to the dominant power [Daalder, Kagan 2016]. Plainly there is something in such claims: the dollar’s role as the world’s de facto reserve currency confers privileges of seignorage that no other state enjoys [Kirshner 2013]. Even more importantly, perhaps, the absence of rival ideological competitors ought to reduce the transaction costs associated with hegemony. As we shall see, such benefits are less clear in an era of so-called rising powers.

This points to a second major consequence of the Trump period: American retrenchment and ambivalence about its accustomed global role has encouraged other states to challenge American authority. This is an especially significant development in an era distinguished by a number of other ambitious and assertive powers, which invariably have radically different views about the way the world should be governed, and very different ideas about their own place and status in such an order [Beeson, Zeng 2018]. At the very least, these competing, potentially incompatible perspectives are adding to the sense of uncertainty about the basic norms and principles that many believe are necessary for the conduct of effective commercial and even strategic relations. Indeed, the underlying redistribution of material power reflects, and is actually reinforcing a process of ideational contestation [Kupchan 2014].

This might be a problem at any time, but during the Trump presidency it is a major source of uncertainty and instability. Trump’s ‘transactional’ approach to foreign and strategic policy is causing consternation around the world, and not just among putative foes such as China and Russia [Beeson forthcoming]. On the contrary, former stalwart allies such as Canada, Japan Australia and the states that comprise the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have all been unsettled by Trump’s approach to international relations. As a result, the structures that

provide the bedrock of the postwar international order are being eroded by American policy.

The rise of the rest

If the relative decline of the US as the systemic stabilizer and hegemonic power is the principal cause of international transformation, it has been amplified and accelerated by the rise of competing powers that would like to play a larger part in determining the shape and operation of the future world order. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is the most consequential of these and the following discussion focuses primarily on the re-emergence of China as a great power as a consequence. At the outset, however, it is important to recognize that China is not alone, even if it is by far the most influential of the new great powers. On the contrary, other major regional powers are jostling for influence and even attempting to coordinate their actions. The most important and widely noted example of the possibility has been the emergence of the BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Before considering their impact in any detail, however, it is important to say something about China as that has had by far the biggest impact on the extant order thus far.

The challenge of China

The re-emergence of China at the center of regional relations is a remarkable development, although not entirely surprising given its historical importance to East and Southeast Asia [Kang 2010]. What is more surprising is the speed with which China has become a *global* influence of a sort that was simply impossible in earlier periods. After all, China's dynastic decline and descent into civil war was a symptom of European colonial ex-

pansion, itself an important expression of nascent 'globalization'. It is not necessary to get bogged down in an exhaustive and possibly inconclusive debates about the nature of globalization to recognize that the nineteenth century was also a time of epochal change, but one which was nothing like as 'global' or integrated as today's is, or perhaps was. It is, after all, the taken-for-granted nature of global integration of a sort that was encouraged by US hegemony in the period after the Second World War that is under stress and threatening to unravel today [Haas 2018].

Paradoxically enough, China is an expression of both the durability and pervasive influence of the old-US-centric order, and the divisive, destabilizing potential of the new one that seems to be taking its place. On the one hand, the fact that China's incorporation into the global economic order that was essentially 'made in America' is conformation of just how all-encompassing US influence actually was; China's accession to the World Trade Organization and its incorporation into a global capitalist order dominated by the US and its allies was, perhaps, the quintessential expression of this possibility [Fewsmith 2001]. In yet another paradox, however, the US effectively helped accelerate China's material transformation and rise, undercutting American preeminence and setting the scene for today's trade wars [Navarro 2018].

Equally importantly, the current hegemonic challenge and/or transition—if, indeed, that is what it is [Beeson 2009]—is unlikely to replace like with like, as it did when the US replaced Britain as the dominant power. On the contrary, not only does China represent a very different vision of economic and political order, but it is far from clear whether it has the ability *or* the desire to replace the US as the anchor of the system and provider of supposedly essential collective goods. To be sure, China's leaders occasionally complain about the

dominance of the American dollar, for example, and suggest that the renminbi ought to play a more prominent role in the international system [Johnson 2018], but there are important domestic constraints that make any rapid transition in the international monetary order unlikely [Vermeiren 2013]. The current trade dispute with the US has also highlights the continuing constraining impact of China's structural dependence on the US and the difficulty the PRC faces in exercising its growing geoeconomic leverage against what is still the world's largest economy [Bradsher, Myers 2018]. In other words, while China is undoubtedly a much more consequential economic actor than it once was, its leaders are still struggling to know quite what to do with it or how to exercise it most effectively.

Xi Jinping's grandiose ambitions for expanding China's economic influence are an important illustration of these contradictions. While there is no doubt that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the biggest and most geopolitically consequential economic development project since the US's post-war Marshall Plan [Beeson (1) 2018], it is proving difficult to reap the potential benefits its architects hoped to achieve; or it is at this stage, at least. If realized, the BRI has the potential to entrench China as the regional, if not a global, center of economic development: infrastructure expansion that revolves around China and production networks in which China is the focus will consolidate the PRC's place as an economic hub and reinforce its growing geoeconomic leverage. And yet the rollout of the BRI is generating a surprising degree of resistance and ill feeling toward China by those concerned about being locked into a form of Chinese debt diplomacy that threatens the freedom of action of client states [Anderlini 2018].

If exercising economic influence is proving difficult for the PRC, efforts to achieve strategic dominance are proving

even more fraught and contradictory. To be sure, China has become more assertive and has an ability to pursue improbable-looking territorial claims that its weaker neighbors find hard to resist, especially when they are reinforced by economic inducements or threats. The most striking example of this possibility has been the manner in which China has employed a divide and rule strategy in Southeast Asia, buying the support of the likes of Cambodia and Laos, making the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) essentially ineffective [Beeson 2015]. Skeptics might argue ASEAN isn't terribly effective at the best of times, but it is noteworthy that another important and supposedly stabilizing piece of regional institutional architecture has been undermined, contributing to the general shift to disorder and flux. There are few signs that other rising powers are likely to halt this trend.

Alternative institutional orders

China is part of BRICS grouping which many see as an exemplar of the evolving international order and an important expression of the potential of new, non-Western groupings to bring about useful systemic change. While this may be true in principle, in practice it is proving more difficult to realize useful change. Indeed, in many ways the BRICS highlight the problems challenger states face in trying to develop alternative institutions and durable patterns of international cooperation, especially when one of their number exercises an outsize influence over their internal and external relations. The reality is that China is rather more than first among equals: it single-handedly accounts for significantly more economic output than all the other members put together. Likewise, it is by far the largest contributor to the BRICS bank, and a major diplomatic influence over BRIC activities. The

fact that China has troubled historical relations with Russia and India in particular also makes agreement on common goals and agendas inherently difficult [Bremmer 2017], although there are signs that Russia and China are becoming closer as a consequence of American belligerence [Grove, Kantchev 2019].

Despite the fact that Russia appears to have made a decisive turn eastwards [Lukin 2018], it is not clear that China is interested in sharing influence and power with other states in an equal manner. It is revealing that the PRC has sought to establish its own institutional order alongside the BRICS [Beeson (1) 2019]. In other words, it is not necessarily just the Americans that China seeks to institutionally outflank. Despite all of the positive rhetoric, therefore, China's policies are having ambivalent impacts. Much the same might be said about China's impact in Europe.

In Europe's case, of course, it was already suffering from its own troubles before China added a further divisive force [Peel *et al.* 2019]. Much has been written about the rise of populism in Europe, especially as a manifestation of growing unhappiness about the effectiveness of European cooperation [Judis 2016]. Brexit is the most dramatic manifestation of this possibility, but there is no doubt the European project has a number of unresolved problems that do not bode well for either the European Union in particular or for the prospects of long-term institutionalized cooperation more generally. Important as these problems are for Europeans themselves, the long-term position and prospects of the EU has a significance that goes far beyond Europe and tells us something about both the origins and the possible persistence of the new disorder [Rittberger, Blauberger 2018].

Whatever one may think about the EU, its institutions, and the elites that determine its actions it represents the most

enduring, powerful and effective example of institutionalized cooperation that transcends national borders that we have ever seen. This is not to overlook its manifold shortcomings of accountability, legitimacy and effectiveness at times; yet the most remarkable fact about the EU is that it exists at all. Moreover, there is little doubt that it has contributed to the pacification of most of Europe, not to mention dramatic improvements in the living standards of some of its lesser lights. These are no small achievements. At a time when the world has precious few examples of effective, much less 'good' governance at the international level, the sub-optimal performance—possibly even the demise—of the EU is unfortunate to say the least. Analysts of a realist persuasion may claim that it was ever thus [Mearsheimer 2018], but even if they are proved to be correct, we can take little pleasure in the empirical confirmation of such a pessimistic prediction. On the contrary, the demise or decline of the EU will only contribute to the perception that cooperation is increasingly difficult, that our collective prospects are bleak, and that increasing disorder is the new normal [Luce 2017].

The climate imperative

Such an outcome would be especially unfortunate, not to say potentially catastrophic, at a moment when we collectively confront what is perhaps the greatest collective challenge humanity has collectively faced. Even some of the more modest and measured predictions about the impact of climate change are becoming increasingly apocalyptic [National Security and the Accelerating Risks of Climate Change 2014; Kendra 2019]. Unfortunately, they are also becoming increasingly credible. Our capacity to act or even take such warnings seriously in many cases does not match the scale of the problems, however. In such

circumstances, it is not fanciful or alarmist to suggest that climate change is likely to contribute to all of the other problems we collectively confront and further undermine people's confidence political action, whether it is democratic or autocratic [Beeson (2) 2019].

I shall not try the reader's patience by exhaustively detailing all of the possible well known impacts of climate from deteriorating agricultural productivity, 'weather events', (fresh) water shortages, rising sea levels, environmental refugees and much else. Suffice to say it is difficult to think of an area of human (and animal) activity that *won't* be adversely impacted by a rapidly changing climate. While there is understandably some doubt about the precise extent and timing of some of the impacts, there is less doubt about the underlying science and its likely impacts [Cook *et al.* 2016]. The only real question is whether human beings have the capacity to mitigate some of the effects, or whether the destabilizing impacts of climate change will accumulate and combine to undermine international order. The fact that many of the world's strategic thinkers and military establishments are actively work-shopping the sort of worst case scenarios that have long been understood to potentially flow from climate change should tell us all we need to know about the seriousness of the problems [Mazo 2010].

And yet the leader of what is still the most powerful nation on the planet is a well-known climate change skeptic who has appointed former coal industry lobbyists to head the Environmental Protection Agency and who has withdrawn from the latest attempt to encourage cooperative international responses to global warming [Plummer, Friedman 2018]. While the EU has made an important contribution to climate change mitigation, it is currently so preoccupied with its own survival that it looks incapable of acting effectively, much less providing much needed internation-

al leadership. Paradoxically enough, China may provide an alternative model and even source of leadership, but its own developmental imperatives mean its actions are always likely to be constrained by the need to keep economic expansion going at all costs [Beeson (2) 2019]. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for effective cooperation and a durable international order.

Concluding remarks

The new international order presents us with something of a truism: in the absence of successful attempts to encourage international cooperation, disorder is likely to increase and may generate a self-sustaining momentum. While there may be distinctive features of the current international disorder, history provides all too many examples of the consequences of destabilization. In the current period, it is not just the risk of catastrophic conflict between nuclear powers that makes the dangers of disorder especially acute. Even if the world manages to avoid old-fashioned and increasingly rare forms of inter-state war, the material context in which international relations actually occurs is likely to continue getting worse. The inescapable reality is that climate change will continue to undermine the very conditions in which cooperation may actually be possible.

Perhaps the only optimistic reading that is possible of the new international disorder is that because of climate change in particular, cooperation is an essential precondition for human survival, or survival in something approaching a civilized condition, at least. In other words, there is a compelling reason to actually encourage international cooperation of a sort that possibly hasn't existed before. Unfortunately, that may not be enough to galvanize political leaders into necessary action. Politics of any sort invariably re-

volves around national priorities and very circumscribed visions of what is feasible and appropriate in policy terms. Such an approach may have been viable in less interdependent times when forms of isolation may have been feasible. Now such attitudes are not even theoretically possible. Unless or until such attitudes change, nationalism, populism and parochialism are like to make growing disorder an unsustainable reality.

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DOI: 10.23932/2542-0240-2019-12-3-94-108

Происхождение нового международного (бес)порядка

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ЦИТИРОВАНИЕ: Beeson M. (2019) Origins of the New International (Dis)order. Outlines of Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, Law, vol. 12, no 3, pp. 94–108. DOI: 10.23932/2542-0240-2019-12-3-94-108

Статья поступила в редакцию 19.04.2019.

БЛАГОДАРНОСТЬ: Я хотел бы поблагодарить главного редактора журнала «Контурсы глобальных трансформаций» и рецензентов за их ценные замечания и предложения.

АННОТАЦИЯ. Старый международный порядок, созданный под эгидой американской гегемонии после Второй мировой войны, похоже, распадается. Отчасти это является следствием перераспределения материальных сил в международной системе, но также связано и со стремлением других держав, в особенности Китая, играть более значимую роль. Отчасти в этом повинны действия администрации Д. Трампа, провозгласившей принцип «America First». Следовательно, неотложные проблемы, такие как борьба с изменением климата, которые, как представляется, требуют международного сотрудничества, вероятно, будут усугубляться и станут еще более трудными для решения. В данной статье подробно описывается и анализируется набор структурных элементов, которые в совокупности сформировали современный международный порядок, но которые испытывают возрастающее напряжение. Некоторые из этих факторов, такие как относительный упадок США, «подъем осталь-

ных», сохранение авторитаризма, являются знакомыми чертами долгосрочных исторических изменений. Как представляется автору, значимыми в наше время их делает скрытый в них потенциал сопротивления столь необходимому международному сотрудничеству, необходимому для решительного преодоления коллективных проблем. Новый международный беспорядок несет в себе риск приостановки действия любого порядка как такового – или по крайней мере того порядка, в котором можно было бы жить.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: администрация Д. Трампа, возвышение Китая, БРИКС, международный порядок, изменение климата, политика

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