



Illustration by Getty Images)

# A Multiplex World: The Coming World Order<sup>1</sup>

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The term “world order” refers to the broad configuration of power, ideas, and institutions that underpin the stability of the largest section of the planet in a given period of history. Since the 19th century, if not earlier, world order has been shaped and dominated first by the European imperial powers, and after World War II, by the United States. The latter is itself an imperial power, inheriting many of Western Europe’s cultural and political ideas and institutions (including those about race and geopolitics) while adding a network of multilateral institutions that were nonetheless designed to preserve and legitimize Western hegemony. The longevity of the order known as the Liberal International Order (LIO), or the American World

Order, had been challenged for some time as a result of decolonization, the revival of non-Western powers, and the global financial crisis of 2008-2009.

Some developments in the past five years, however, have pushed the LIO closer to the brink of collapse. Three are especially noteworthy: the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the global COVID-19 pandemic since 2019, and the Russia-Ukraine war since February 2022. This essay looks specifically at how the Russia-Ukraine war affects world order. Briefly put, my argument is that far from leading a revival of Western power and prestige, the war has hastened the end of the LIO and accelerated the transition to what I have called “a multiplex world.”<sup>2</sup>



## An Anticipated Catastrophe

Though NATO apologists vigorously deny such claims, and nothing can justify the full-scale invasion of a sovereign nation with such bloody consequences (with possibly greater military casualties for Russia and far greater civilian casualties for Ukraine), the Russia-Ukraine war was neither unprovoked nor unanticipated.

Writing in the *New York Times* in 1997, George F. Kennan – the father of the U.S. “containment” strategy against the Soviet Union – warned that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.”<sup>3</sup> But he was not alone. A host of other Western policymakers and strategists, including Henry Kissinger, Malcolm Fraser, Edward Luttwak, Sam Nunn, Jack Matlock, Paul Nitze, Owen Harries, William Perry, and William Burns (current CIA director), had either opposed NATO expansion generally or Ukrainian membership of NATO specifically, or warned of its deeply dangerous implications. And in May 2022, Pope Francis caused a stir when he said in a media interview that NATO “barking” at Russia’s door might have either “provoked” or “facilitated” Putin’s attack on Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

While there is little question that Putin saw Western liberal values as a threat to his regime security, and that his foreign policy is driven in part by a desire to create a sphere of influence (a much more likely motive than to reassemble the former Soviet Union), it would be simplistic to see these as the main cause for his Ukraine attack. Russia had already conceded NATO expansion considerably closer to its frontiers. Throughout history, alliances like NATO have been known to provoke as much as deter conflict. Recognition of the war-causing effects of Europe’s alliances had led President George Washington to pursue a foreign policy “to steer clear of permanent alliances,” while the same distrust led Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt to advocate a universal security system.

Whatever its cause, the Russia-Ukraine conflict would have profound consequences for world order. Not only has the war paralyzed the U.N. Security Council and severely limited cooperation among the major powers, occurring in the heart of Europe not long

after the centenary of World War I, it has taken Europe “back to the future.”

Putin’s February 2022 putsch now seems to have been a dangerous miscalculation. It has darkened the future of not only both Ukraine and Russia, but also Europe more generally. Instead of making Europe more secure, NATO expansion has made Europe the “world’s most dangerous place.”<sup>5</sup> Major war has returned to Europe.

After the end of the Cold War, Europe presented itself as a model of world order-building at large. Not only did Europe itself seem “primed for peace,” as MIT’s Stephen Van Evera put it in 1991,<sup>6</sup> but European concepts such as “common security,” pan-European identity, or “European common home,” as articulated by the Palme Commission in 1982 and promoted by the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), drew global attention, even attraction. But these ideals have fallen by the wayside now. As the *Economist* magazine noted: “As much as the war’s reverberations are felt around the world, though, they sound most strongly in Europe. The invasion has upended the idea of a continent ‘whole, free and at peace,’<sup>7</sup> slogans which were once enthusiastically embraced not only by European leaders but also by U.S. presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton.”<sup>8</sup>

With the Russia-Ukraine war, the EU has had to forgo its fledgling desire for greater strategic autonomy. It has become ever more dependent on the U.S. for energy and arms, as the U.S. profits by becoming not only Europe’s but the world’s largest LNG supplier. While the EU was once led by its larger founding members such as Germany and France, its security is now being driven by its smaller and ideologically more zealous new members, who are reaping the benefits of NATO’s military protection, EU’s economic aid, and “European identity.” But it remains to be seen how long EU citizens will tolerate the growing economic costs and potential spillover effects of a high-intensity proxy warfare on their doorstep.

The strategic burden of the war also challenges America’s LIO rebuilding project. The LIO’s triumph in the Cold War was possible because the U.S. needed to focus on only one major challenger at a time; after U.S.-China rapprochement neutralized the Chinese challenge, attention turned to the Soviet Union. The



U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III (right) and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (left) speak during two-day defense ministers' meetings at NATO headquarters on Feb. 15, 2023 in Brussels. Defense Ministers of the North Atlantic Council allied countries also met at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. The U.S. also hosted the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. (Omar Havana / Getty Images)

question now is: Can Washington make the LIO great again against powerful challengers on two major fronts, Europe and the Indo-Pacific?

In this respect, the initial hopes that the sweeping Western sanctions against Russia would rekindle Western unity and U.S. leadership in global affairs might prove too optimistic. Soon after Putin's attack on Ukraine, Stewart Patrick of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote: "In one fateful step, the Russian president has managed to revive Western solidarity, reenergize U.S. global leadership, catalyze European integration, expose Russia's weaknesses, undermine Moscow's alliance with Beijing, and make his authoritarian imitators look foolish."<sup>9</sup> In this view, Putin had given the idea of "the West" a fresh lease on life. As a columnist for Slate magazine put it, "Pro-Ukraine feelings in search of an organizing principle are coalescing around a category of identification that hasn't enjoyed real, popular international relevance in a good long while: 'the West'—a category Vladimir Putin has long railed against, but which Westerners themselves haven't, at least in recent years, claimed with much personal attachment or ideological loyalty."<sup>10</sup>

But Western analysts were not alone in such thinking. From China, Hu Wei, vice chairman of the Public Policy Research Center of the Counselor's Office of the State Council, expects that as a result of the Ukraine crisis, "The power of the West will grow significantly, NATO will continue to expand, and U.S. influence in the non-Western world will increase ... no matter how Russia achieves its political transformation, it will greatly weaken the anti-Western forces in the world. ... The West will possess more 'hegemony' both in terms of military power and in terms of values and institutions, its hard power and soft power will reach new heights."<sup>11</sup>

Yet insofar as the Global South is concerned, a totally different plausible outcome might be that instead of reviving the West's dominance of world order, it could hasten its demise, or create a more level playing field between the West and the rest.

Commenting on the world order implications of the Russia-Ukraine war, Fareed Zakaria observed, "One of the defining features of the new era is that it is post-American. By that I mean that the Pax Americana of the past three decades is over."<sup>12</sup> Zakaria had first proposed the "post-American world" in 2008. But he was then talking about the relative decline of the U.S. power, rather than the U.S.-built order, resulting from the "rise of the rest." He had until now refused to accept the end of the LIO, long after other analysts had done so.

Although the Global South is not a singular category, most of its nations, including most Asian countries, do not see Russia as a threat and are genuinely not interested in taking sides in an ideological competition and military rivalry between NATO and Russia or between the West on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. They see the Russia-Ukraine war as a European and trans-Atlantic mess-up, yet feel profoundly victimized by it, as they bear a disproportionate share of the cost of higher energy and food prices and disruption of global supply chains. Moreover, while condemning Putin's aggression, the Global South countries are not necessarily supporting the revival of the U.S.-led order (LIO). Aside from the fact that China, India, and South Africa abstained from voting on the March 2, 2022, U.N. General Assembly resolution condemning Russia, 28 African countries



voted in favor and 17 abstained. Brazil and Mexico voted for the resolution, but refused to join Western sanctions on Russia. In other words, as far as the Global South is concerned, condemning the Russian invasion out of principle, not breaking sanctions out of fear (of U.S. retribution), and the dislike of Western “internationalism” and double standards are not mutually exclusive.

This ambivalence is hardly surprising. Western sanctions remind Global South countries of the coercive economic power of the West, which would be used against them if they challenge Western interests and expectations. The pressure being put on them by Western policymakers to choose sides by joining the sanctions against Russia, backed by the threat of secondary sanctions, is reminiscent of the pressure they were under during the Cold War. Moreover, African and Middle Eastern opinion also points to the harsh treatment of refugees from these regions in Eastern Europe, including by Ukraine. Then there is the memory of the West’s long history of self-serving military interventions. As Gilles Yabi, the founder of WATHI, a “citizen think tank” in Senegal, notes, “In Africa, we are ... stunned by this invasion of Ukraine by Russia. ... This is unjustifiable, as were the interventions of the United States and NATO, as in many countries, sometimes under false pretenses and in flagrant violation of international law.”<sup>13</sup> This shows that attempts by Western policymakers and analysts to reject any moral equivalence between Russian and U.S./NATO interventions are not entirely convincing in the non-Western world.

With its membership expansion and growing interventions in conflicts inside and outside Europe, NATO is no longer seen in the Global South as a “defensive military alliance,” as Western policymakers and media such as the BBC<sup>14</sup> frequently try to project. Rather, NATO looks like the last stand of a fading Western hegemony. The harebrained idea of a global NATO, championed by influential U.S. think tanks and the U.K., would expand the perimeters of world disorder by dragging European nations — which do not see China as an existential threat — increasingly into the U.S.-China competition in Asia, and Asian nations — which do not view Russia as a threat — into the Russia-NATO conflict in Europe. It is useful to keep in mind that many postcolonial nations viewed Western

multilateral alliances such as NATO, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as a “return in a pact form to colonial rule.”<sup>15</sup> Such sentiments led India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indonesia’s founding president, Sukarno, to denounce SEATO, especially at the Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955. Now Global South countries resent Western pressure to join the fight against Russia, as revealed in former Pakistani Premier Imran Khan’s “Are we your slaves ...?” outburst in March when confronted with a missive from Western ambassadors to condemn Russia.<sup>16</sup>

Kennan’s prophecy about NATO expansion being a grave American strategic blunder is yet to finally come true. Much depends on whether the Ukraine conflict ends with the humiliating defeat of Russia or the collapse of European and Western unity. But a war at the heart of Europe that has already cost hugely in human lives and destroyed the future of both Ukraine and Russia is not a glowing advertisement of the world order that the West built. With it, the idea of Europe (and the West) as a model of peace and prosperity for Global South regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, or Latin America, has suffered a fatal blow.

### **The Next World Order: Possibilities, Not Predictions**

Despite the Biden administration’s efforts to rebuild it, the decline of the LIO is accelerating and seems irreversible. But we are not entering a multipolar (as conventionally understood), Sinocentric, or bipolar (U.S.-China) world. The emerging world order is more likely to be post-hegemonic, meaning there would be no globally dominant country or bloc, no globally dominant ideology, and no single cooperative global institution. The future world order will be culturally and politically diverse. It will still be interconnected, but any reglobalization and connectivity is as likely, if not more so, to be led by the East as the West.

It’s also likely that a more regionalized world order will emerge. Regional orders would include not just regional organizations such as the EU or ASEAN, but also informal arrangements born out of the interactions among regional powers that constrain, if not eliminate, the influence of extra-regional powers. While some great powers may try to achieve



Indonesia's President Joko Widodo delivers a speech at the EU-ASEAN summit at the European Council headquarters in Brussels on Dec. 14, 2022. EU leaders met with their counterparts from Southeast Asia at the summit to bolster ties in the face of the war in Ukraine and challenges from China. (John Thys / AFP via Getty Images)

this by pursuing exclusionary regional spheres of influence (Russia and China come to mind), others, especially small and medium powers, may pursue accommodationist and communitarian regional orders, such as Indonesia through ASEAN.

Global governance in a multiplex world will continue to pluralize with the emergence of regional and plurilateral institutions and various forms of complex and hybrid arrangements among state and nonstate actors, such as corporations, foundations, and social movements. This trend toward “G-plus” governance will not displace the current state-centric U.N.-led structure, or the Gs, such as G-7 or G-20, but would offer some competition to it.

In the multiplex world, there would be no “end of history.” World order will be shaped by the competitive and coexisting elements of Chinese communitarianism, Western liberalism, Indian eclecticism, and the worldviews of Islam and other civilizations.

To be sure, such a world order would not be free from conflict; no world order is. But conflict and violence resulting from the demise of the LIO will affect both the West and the rest. Europe might return to its historical place as an epicenter of global disorder, in stark contrast to during the Cold War, when Europe and the West were spared major conflict while the non-Western world bore the brunt of it.

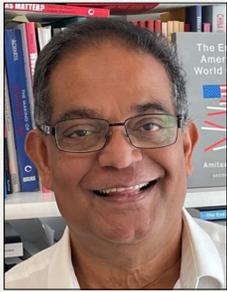
Although older civilizations, such as those of China, India, and Islam, would play a more influential role in shaping world order than has been the case for the past several centuries, there is no reason to believe that the world would experience intensified intercivilizational conflict. Conflict is as likely to occur within civilizations as between them. Coexistence and understanding among civilizations is less rare than is often assumed. Today, we see many examples of cross-civilizational cooperation. For example, Ukraine, an Orthodox civilization, has moved decisively closer to the West, despite Huntington's prior assertion that an Orthodox civilization would never fight with fellow Orthodox Russia (as he put it in his 1996 book, “If civilization is what counts, violence between Ukrainians and Russians is unlikely”). India, itself a multicivilizational state, is pro-Western politically and



technologically, while maintaining closer energy and economic ties with Iran and China, its supposedly civilizational rivals.

World orders, like empires and nations, rise and fall. But the LIO is not going to disappear entirely. It could survive in a truncated or rump state, returning to its initial form as a club of the Western nations, rather

than as an inclusive global framework, contrary to what its proponents had hoped for when the Cold War ended. But in the interest of global stability, the West, instead of bemoaning the passing of the world order that it created and nurtured, or pining fruitlessly for its extremely unlikely revival, would be better off seeking accommodation with the emerging powers and the orders built by other nations and regions.



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American World Order” (Polity, 2014, 2018); “Why Govern? Rethinking Demand and Progress in Global Governance” (editor, Cambridge, 2016); “The Making of Southeast Asia” (Cornell, 2013); “Whose Ideas Matter?” (Cornell, 2009); and “Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia” (Routledge, 2001, 2009, 2014). He has received two Distinguished Scholar Awards from the ISA, one in 2015 from its Global South Caucus for his “contribution to non-Western IR theory and inclusion” in international studies, and another in 2018 from ISA’s International Organization Section that recognizes “scholars of exceptional merit ... whose influence, intellectual works and mentorship will likely continue to impact the field for years to come.” In 2020, he received American University’s highest honor, the Scholar-Teacher of the Year Award.

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## Endnotes

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