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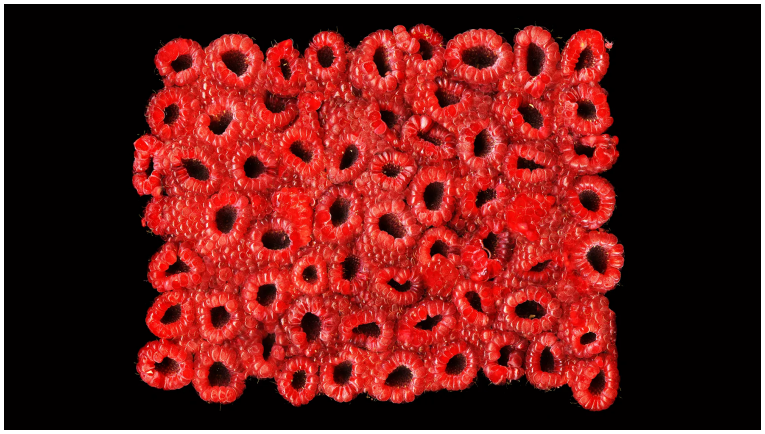
Globalization

Is a World Order Even Possible?

Just because globalization leads to a decentralized world order doesn't mean it must wither. The future belongs to the networks.

Von **Parag Khanna**

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Sweet raspberries: the art of conflation can be alluring – not only in the summer. © Pelle Cass

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American "hyper-power," *Pax Sinica*, the "G-2 world," a "new Cold War." Confident slogans announcing the grand geopolitical architecture of our age have appeared as frequently as Italy changes governments. This polemical exercise betrays one foundation of what defines *global order* at all: a stable distribution of power. But if our description of power dynamics changes with each American administration or act of Russian aggression, is there even an order to speak of? Or is it conjecture masquerading as analysis? In the age of Twitter, it's easy to conflate the two.

Our received wisdom is an oversimplified historiography. How about this maxim: The age of sovereignty began with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Of course it didn't. Not only did borders and imperialism not disappear in Europe – Europe's colonial ambitions also achieved global scale, subjugating the rest of the world

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under its hierarchy for centuries. A world of sovereign but still unequal states has only meaningfully existed since the decolonization of the 1950s or the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Take another Olympian fallacy: World order is a succession of unipolar orders led by superpowers – Britain, America, and as the baton is (violently or peacefully) passed westward, inevitably China. How neat and simple – and wrong. Neither British- nor American-dominated eras were peaceful or stable. Britain faced rebellion from Ireland to India – policing yourself doesn't mean being a de facto global policeman. The Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese wars hardly imply Britain dictating all global affairs. America soared in economic and military prestige after World War I, but then came Hitler and World War II in Europe and Asia, followed by U.S.-Soviet bipolarity with proxy wars from Latin America to Africa to the Middle East to Indochina. Again, unipolarity can only be said to have emerged in 1991, but the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Balkan wars, Rwandan genocide and Congolese civil war and the nuclear tests of 1998 by India and Pakistan don't suggest a world under America's thumb. The 2003 invasion of Iraq backfired spectacularly, and already by 2005, China was throwing commercial and military lifelines to a dozen countries America had labeled "rogue states," from Venezuela to Iran to North Korea.

The word "order" implies an era stretching decades, but the "unipolar moment" coined by Charles Krauthammer in 1990 proved to be just that. Ask yourself: When did the "global rules-based international order" – the phrase always at the tip of any talking head's tongue – *really* exist? When did United Nations-centered multilateralism prove decisive in arbitrating among great powers? Our vision of "orders" bears little resemblance to reality. A catalog of global mythologies matches our national ones.

Measuring raw power – territorial and population size, economic weight and industrial output, natural resources and technological prowess – denotes "order" on paper alone. But the reality of order is a messier milieu shaped by geography, alliances and diplomacy. Even the deftest statecraft has proven to be nothing more

than a brief respite from the true norm of geopolitical life: entropy. If we are to find any order in the future, it will need to be, paradoxically, within the relentless *diffusion* of power rather than in its concentration.

Globalization is the singular force that has accelerated this ever more decentralized global order. The foundations of global trade were laid by Britain and America, but Western outsourcing to Asia hastened the rise of Japan and China, and now everyone else as well, allowing each region to claim an active role in global value chains. Mapping supply chains for computers, cars and semiconductors makes clear that so many goods should be relabeled "Made everywhere."

Globalization thus began with imperial power, but it has become something greater than its progenitors. Its foundation is no longer the static territory of states but the dense networks within which they and other units function. Connectivity is the system itself, a playing field that no one power controls. Any two states across the globe can exchange goods, capital and technology. Witness how globalization has been declared dead four times in just the past two decades: After the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, with the financial crisis of 2007, the twin shocks of Brexit and Trump in 2016 and in 2020 during the COVID pandemic. Yet onward it marches in the flows of goods, services, capital, technology and people.

The Network of Globalization

Just because globalization is no longer only "made in America," doesn't mean it must wither. To the contrary, globalization is both our universally expanding physical and digital networks and the sum of all cross-border interactions that rely upon them. It is made up of all international transactions, not just the ones Washington likes. Today, we have not one version of globalization but competing American, European and Chinese systems and rules for military hardware, satellite technology, electric vehicles and Internet regulation. With so many spiders spinning threads of transport, energy and communications infrastructures, the capacity for global connectivity has reached unprecedented heights. Great powers rise and fall, while the global matrix steadily advances and subsumes us. America built the Internet but can no longer shut it down.

Globalization, then, has become a deeper layer of order than one power or the other, whether America or China, or even the rivalry between them. It empowers ever more nodes – states, cities, companies – that compete and collaborate with each other. State power is not absolute but relational. Order, to the extent it exists, is a vignette of relative leverage. The 21st century far more resembles medieval Europe on a global scale than *Pax Americana* or *Pax Sinica*.

There are many reasons China was never going to become a singular global hegemon. For one thing, even as the world's largest economy, it represents a mere 15 percent of global GDP. By contrast, at the end of World War II, the United States accounted for 50 percent of the global economy. Population and economic growth have created a world of many multitrillion-dollar economies less dependent on a single anchor.

Perhaps even more importantly, no society on Earth, save for China itself, *wants* China to lead the world. The ink was barely dry on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) before it was heralded as China's blueprint for global domination. But while BRI has offered Chinese-style modernization, the African and Asian societies where it has been deployed have lasting memories of colonial subjugation and Cold War manipulation. They are all on high alert against Chinese neo-mercantilism. A debt trap and default such as Sri Lanka becomes the exception to the rule: One should *use* China to stimulate industry and draw the interest of Western investors rather than become a cog in its imperial machinery.

Rather than BRI recreating the British East India Company's muscular ascendance, it is the backlash against it that has become the more important story. Whereas it took 300 years for Afro-Asian colonies to eventually oust the British, countries from Nigeria to Indonesia have pushed back on BRI in a mere three years. European colonizers didn't have to reckon with actual sovereignty; China does.

The China Cassandras of 2016 also missed the West's reactions to China's actions. In the years since BRI launched, America, Europe, and Japan have launched more than a dozen initiatives to counter BRI, with G-7 governments – rallying under the banner of Build Back Better World (B3W) – at their June summit at Schloss Elmau in Germany announcing $600 billion in financing for sustainable infrastructure from Angola to Laos, precisely the countries China has most infiltrated. Again, it is global networks at play, with the West shifting investment from China to friends and allies elsewhere across Asia, accelerating the rise of confident new powers such as India and Indonesia who will flex against China and forge their own new connections across the Indian and Pacific oceans.

If global order has a visible emergent structure, then, it is a multipolar world of meaningful continental regions, with North America, South America, Europe and Africa becoming ever more coherent and integrated – and Asia itself multipolar with China, Japan, India, Australia and Russia each asserting its interests. But no region is a bloc. Rather, they are sponges. Witness the rapid rise of the "Quad" comprising the U.S. and Asian democracies, which some liken to a "Global NATO," and Europe's commitment to robust Indo-Pacific engagement through free trade agreements and naval operations.

Last month, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's adviser Jens Plötner caused a firestorm by soft-pedaling on Russia and China. An axis of Berlin, Moscow and Beijing – Ribbentrop, Molotov, and Mao – as a counterweight to Anglo-American dominance evoked conspiratorial Orwellian imagery: Eurasia and Eastasia forging an alliance against Oceania. But such a specter will never materialize amidst each power's multidirectional opportunism. Remember that the Soviets saw China as a threat in the 1960s after Mao's nuclear tests, thus seeking detente with – and pipelines to – the West. Two generations later, an estranged Russia has tilted back to Asia's giants China and India as its main partners, even though India is also a founding "Quad" member.

An Element of Global Strategy

My fellow academics excel at oversimplified models of geopolitics. But reality usually has a different opinion. Beware grand proclamations aimed at defining our times and those that lie over the horizon. Such coinage likely captures the moment that has just passed and is all but guaranteed to soon be passé. The scarier the scenario we conjure, the more the actors in the system overreact to prevent it from occurring. The system thus evolves in nonlinear directions.

This is the simplest definition of complexity, a situation that arises precisely because of the innumerable connections and chain reactions enabled by a globalized world. States don't singularly impose their version of order on the system. Rather, they push within the system – and the system pushes back.

Neither America nor China have proven particularly clever at deciphering this complexity. This would entail anticipating the reactions to their actions, and thus acting differently *a priori*. Perhaps this would have meant the U.S. *not* invading Iraq or pushing for Ukrainian membership in NATO, which provoked Russia's numerous spasms ever since. Better foresight from Beijing might have meant China *not* dumping its excess steel and surplus workers on countries and turning their populations against it.

World War III has been predicted a dozen times since the Cold War ended, especially in 2014 on the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I. But whenever it happens, World War III won't look like World War I or II, for they already happened. History doesn't repeat itself, and even its rhymes are off-key. If World War III does break out between the U.S. and China, count on Europe to reap the rewards as a safe haven, and on other Asian powers to become the more trusted faces of globalization. We don't know which power, if any, will prevail, but we know that the system carries on with each turn of the historical wheel.

If every power took to heart what we now know about complex system dynamics, we might choose a new path. "Grand strategy" is the term for each power's blueprint for channeling its resources to promote its vision for the world. Yet each grand strategy – whether Rome's or London's, Napoleon's or Hitler's, Washington's or Beijing's – has always met the same fate: imperial overstretch, domestic decadence, backlash and decline. It's become as predictable as time moving forward.

Why not supplement our futile grand strategies with an element of *global strategy*, a rational according to every society of some dignified role in the global division of labor? Beyond this, we might share some resources to stave off global ills such as pandemics and climate change. Technology transfer to promote renewable energy, robust new trade partnerships to expand value chains and grow markets and skills partnerships to fill gaping labor shortages – these are just some of the many obvious priorities that greater and lesser powers already agree upon but should more formally codify into law and institutions. Such maturity – a super-ego for the world – is what continued connectivity and globalization represent even as some powers seek to manipulate it for their own narrow interests.

As a 20-year-old sitting on the hard carpet floor of the Freie Universität zu Berlin's library on Garystrasse, I encountered the works of famed British historian Arnold Toynbee. In his hastily written book "Civilization on Trial," composed amidst the ashes of World War II with U.S.-Soviet nuclear bipolarity firmly in view, he forcefully argued that we have no choice but to acknowledge that we have become one global civilization – "Civilization with a big 'C'," as he put it. He was wise in observing the advent of an interdependent planetary system, but naive in prescribing a single world government as salvation. The arc of history, which Toynbee more thoroughly documented than any scholar, is actually toward more small "c" civilizational centers that flourish as the lessons of their predecessors radiate through commercial and knowledge networks.

A world with no center sounds like chaos, yet the most desirable order is one in which everyone connects but nobody controls.