

Enduring Hope for the Dream of Peace and Democracy at a Time of Disruption in the Global Order

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Introduction

We The Peoples of the United Nations Determined
to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and
to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,
[*United Nations Charter*, 1945, Preamble]¹⁾

After centuries of great power wars and two extremely destructive world wars, major thinkers and policy-makers have sought to contain the anarchy of international relations through the tools of international institutions, international law, and international norms. This effort first led to the creation of the League of Nations in 1919 and, second, to the creation of the United Nations in 1945. The same spirit also inspired efforts led by Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and others to initiate an institutional movement of European integration in 1950 (Schuman Declaration, leading to the creation of the European Steel and Coal Community).

This effort to advance the protection of human rights, freedom, dignity and prosperity while securing peace and defusing the propensity of states to go to war out of insecurity, ideology, or greed led to a great rise in international treaties, institutions, and laws after 1945. But it was also plagued by *three core unresolved dilemmas*.

First is the *delegation dilemma*: all supra-national governance and international law

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1) Source: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>.

ultimately depend on the delegation of sovereignty from states, since the Westphalian nature of our international system means that core sovereignty and power lie with states. There are simply no global government and no source of global authority and enforcement. This also means that a question always remains as to whether this delegation is temporary and can be taken back. The decades from 1980 to 2015 witnessed a strengthening trend in that delegation, to the point that many observers took it for granted. But the last decade since 2015 has been a rude awakening.

Second is the *hegemony dilemma*: building global institutions and international law is hard. It can be done the hard way through long slogging inter-governmental negotiations, as the European Union does it. Or it can be done more directly through hegemony. As argued later in this essay, the post-war global order has appeared to be rules-based in nature, based on a growing quasi-constitutional foundation. However, as shown by Ikenberry (2011), this was an illusion. At its heart, the post-war order was a hegemonic order, rooted in US dominance and US willingness to create a set of rules and, by and large, support these rules. In turn, US hegemony orchestrated a wider movement of delegation of sovereignty. That creates two core problems: first, if hegemony is diluted through the appearance of new rising powers, the core principle is eroded. Second, if the hegemon itself loses interest in the rules-based order, or, even worse, weaponizes its own domination of the rules and centrality in the system to coerce other members, the global system cannot be sustained.

Third is the *colonization legacy dilemma*. The Western sponsors of the post-1945 global order considered this a fresh start from a *tabula rasa*. They also assumed that the new rules-based order would be compatible with the existing hierarchy in the international system. The problem is that the distribution of global property rights and post-decolonization international system were bound up with the legacies of four centuries of violent empire-building. Over the years, the claims for justice and equal voice by rising Global South populations have clashed with the focus of Western powers on preservation of the order as is. In the case of the US, the position has become that the preservation of dominance and hierarchy had to come first, even at the cost of the rules-based order itself.

These dilemmas and recent disruptions have grown into a systemic crisis of the global order. Elements of the order and the architecture of global institutions and international law remain resilient. But others are increasingly under threat. We have entered a period of global order transition and rising powers and existing powers are increasingly competing over the contours of a future order, whether such an order can even come together or not.

In this context, this paper asks the following questions:

1. What made existing institutions of a global order sustaining peace and democracy possible in the first place? What were core dilemmas?
2. What is the nature of current order crisis? And what do we observe? What are the

risks?

3. What explains some continuing successes in global institution-building despite such a crisis?
4. What lessons can we draw regarding the strengthening and even advancing of a global order rooted in peace, justice, and mutual respect?

The paper unpacks the nature of the current crisis as a global order transition. It argues that explanations rooted in purely ideological or nationalistic explanations tend to be misguided. The paper also argues that an order transition tends to trigger security dilemmas and arms races. Psychological biases and trait ascription biases tend to make things worse and blind various actors to the more structural nature of the problem. Defusing emotion-driven reactions rooted in ancient human nature is critical to overcoming such crises.

In the final section, the paper draws lessons from recent successes in global institution-building and draws lessons for a resilient and more hopeful future order. Global governance entrepreneurship is the essential mechanism for progress. It requires the creation of new ideas and patterns, new coalitions, new platforms and cross-cutting experimental forums, and more inclusive mechanisms. Eventually, now is the time to work on future global institutions and legal structures that can overcome the limits of the UN generation of institutions.

This paper proceeds in five sections. Section I outlines the vision that created the post-war global order. Section II outlines its limits and tradeoffs. Section III outlines forces unleashed during the current critical decline of global order transition and disruption. Section IV reviews dynamics that enabled successes in advances in the creation of the 2015 SDGs, the 2016 Paris Agreement, the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework, the 2023 BBNJ Treaty on Protecting the High Seas, and the 2025 Pandemic Treaty. Section V explores the way forward for a new global order 2.0 that can still sustain peace, democracy, as well as elements of justice.

I. The Vision and Institutions of a Global Order Rooted in Peace and Democracy

“The Purposes of the United Nations are:

1. To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;
2. To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of

equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;

3. To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; and
4. To be a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.”

[*United Nations Charter*, 1945, Article 1]²⁾

In its most expansive form, the post-World War II vision of a new global order is embodied in the hopes and words of the United Nation Charter, as well as the United Nation Declaration of Universal Human Rights. This vision embodied decades of work to make the wanton destruction, violence, and human suffering of the two World Wars impossible. The UN formation in 1945 is the accomplishment of decades of efforts to thwart the “might is right” doctrine that justified 19th century imperialism and World War I (Hathaway and Shapiro 2017). It represents a large effort to build international institutions, law, and norm to constrain the excessive use of power in external affairs, and, hopefully in internal affairs as well (with the cross-border application of human rights protection law). It includes the human rights revolution.

Given the core assumption in international relations that states are the core units of the system and that they live in a natural state of anarchy, political scientists do not see this expansion of a super-structure above states as the result of “natural law” or human evolution. Rather, it is explained either by inter-governmental agreements among states to work toward mutually beneficial cooperation (a liberal view), common beliefs (constructivist view), or because of the presence of a dominant power or hegemon that is able to shape the new system (a realist view).

A key scholar on the post-war liberal international order (or LIO) is John Ikenberry. He is often seen as a liberal institutionalist, but his model actually embeds hegemony at its core. For Ikenberry, “political order refers to ‘governing’ arrangements among a group of states, including its fundamental rules, principles, and institutions” (Ikenberry 2001: 23). Ikenberry defines three dominant types of political order over history: balance of power order (relying on the equilibrium of power among key states), hegemonic order (relying on the preponderance of power by one state), and constitutional order (relying on limits on the return to power) (24).

Furthermore, for Ikenberry, the LIO integrates elements from the British Empire, Wilsonian liberalism of post-World War I, and liberal institutionalism of Bretton Woods (1944) and the post-World War II period (Ikenberry 2011). In sum, the post-WWII version

2) Source: *ibid*

of the LIO was a combination of a hierarchical order and of constitutional order, with a “loose system of multilateral rules and institutions.”

Japan, Europe, Australia, Canada, and other democratic countries prefer using the term of “rules-based international order,” but this ignores the fact that the order is rooted in US hegemony.

II. Limits and Trade-offs

For international relation theorists, the presence of sustained, predictable, and institutionalized cooperation is actually a puzzle, given the absence of a central authority. Hegemonic realists do accept the possibility of the hegemon creating this order (Gilpin 1981, Ikenberry 2011, Keohane 1984, Kindleberger 1986). But these conditions are exceptional and contingent on the capability and benevolent willingness of the hegemon. Other traditional realists see such institutions as epiphenomena that are simply unsustainable and insignificant over time, since insecurity and competition between states always will reassert itself (Mearsheimer 2019, 2018, 2014). On the other hand, idealists and institution-alists believe that international institutions and norms can grow over time and embed and constrain states. These assumptions are now being tested in real time (section III).

As a simple approximation, our global order is a combination of several components:

- Sovereign power lies with the states (Westphalian concept);
- The United Nations provides global legitimacy and norms, but little direct power to change things, except in the areas of environment, development, human rights, and peace-keeping;
- Global security is managed by the balance of power and alliances involving great powers, with some functions provided by regional organizations (OSCE, ASEAN);
- Global economic governance is managed by the G20, along with the IMF, World Bank, and regional organizations (like EU or ASEAN);

I argue for middle approach to global governance and define it as a set of limited anchors of predictability and sustained cooperation in the midst of competition that includes:

- Cooperation towards elements of information-sharing, rule-making, trust-building, and certainty in the context of international anarchy;
- Institutional anchors of cooperation in the midst of global competition and risk;
- Trade-offs between cooperative benefits and loss of sovereignty
- Varying across to issue areas and time – fluid

A more formal definition for global governance is as follows:

“Global governance is the sum of the informal and formal values, norms, procedures, and institutions that help all actors – states, inter-governmental organizations (IGOs),

civil society, transnational corporations (TNCs or MNCs), and individuals – to identify, understand, and address trans-boundary problems” (Weiss and Thakur 2010).

The First Statement on Global Governance produced by the UN was written in 1995 in the report titled “Our Global Neighborhood” (Commission on Global Governance). It defined global governance as “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs.”

The UN System itself is an interesting hybrid experiment. It embeds truly idealistic aspirations toward peace, conflict reduction, and human rights (through the separate Universal Declaration of HR, 1948). The Charter of the UN was built on the basis of the experience of the League of Nation (1919-1945) and the UN inherited the League’s building in Geneva. It was signed by 50 founding members only (as most of the world was colonized). But the UN is based on the system of sovereign and independent states and states determine what the UN can and can’t do. Most importantly, the UN charter has given veto rights and unique powers to 5 countries: the US, Russia, China, France, and the UK. When they disagree, nothing significant can move forward. However, the UN is the scene of complex negotiations among these 5 and other states, and progress can happen on many files.

The UN system does have some strengths. In particular, it codifies a prolonged effort to thwart the “might is right” doctrine that justified 19th century imperialism. And it did achieve some real successes. To cite just a few recent ones:

- 1. September 2015: Adoption by the UNGA of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, a universal road map for all of humanity (following on Addis Ababa road map)
- 2. December 2015: Adoption of Paris Agreement on climate change at the UNFCCC COP 21
- 3. December 2022: the UN Convention on Biodiversity adopts the Kunming Montreal Framework with 27 actual targets.
- 4. Human Rights advances (recently UNDRIP on the rights of indigenous people).

But the UN is also plagued by serious weaknesses, particularly:

- The Veto power of great powers: the UN can only act when great powers agree. Great power rivalry erodes UN capacity;
- An Outdated Power structure (5 veto powers);
- The enduring domination of state sovereignty in international relations;
- Weak Budget and power, and cases of corruption;
- Conflict with the US over decades (budget, authority, ICC, Iraq War, etc..)
- No control by the UN over core economic institutions (Bretton Woods institutions of IMF, WB, FSB, G20)

- Controversies over R2P and authorization of force (Libya, Kosovo)

Recent Failures include:

1. Climate change struggles in 2016-2025, as the US pulled out and other stakeholders block progress;
2. Failure of effort to reform the UNSC in 2005 under US and Chinese vetoes (outcome: lack of representativeness);
3. Struggles with the application of Responsibility to Protect (Rwanda failure, Somalia failure, Kosovo complex, Libya, Georgia, Syria);
4. Struggles with authorization of force for domestic abuses (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Georgia)

III. The Difficult Decade: Rules-Based Order and Democracy Under Duress

In addition to the structural problems faced by our post-war global order, the post 2015 decade has seen much more serious threats to the architecture of this order. This is because we have clearly entered a period of global order transition and major disruptions.

In my book co-authored with Zaki Laidi, we define a global order transition as “a critical juncture, during which the structure of the existing order is eroding, due to rapid changes in the balance of power and ensuing competition between established power(s) and rising power(s). This competition includes tit-for-tat dynamics and even self-inflicted damage by the dominant power ([Ikenberry 2018](#), [Kagan 2018](#), [Mearsheimer 2018](#), [Walt 2018](#)). We measure order transition as a period when significant economic power is shifting (~20% for global economic power) and significant uncertainty and volatility are present. The process also involves significant consolidation around major powers (the US and China). The simultaneous presence of a technological and industrial revolution intensifies the dynamic” ([Laidi and Tiberghien 2026](#)).

“We define the current hybrid transition as imperfect bipolarization and partial multipolarization: the two great powers are increasingly engaged in an intense period of competition. Their intense rivalry is exerting its gravitational force on the rest of the world. Compared to twenty years ago, global power has diffused widely (with 20% of global GDP shifting from OECD countries to Global South countries)³⁾, and a group of large [Global South Middle Powers] has emerged with considerable assets and capabilities (alongside a rising China). Their presence and actions constrain the move toward bipolarization ([Laidi and Tiberghien 2026](#)).

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, during his [Senate Hearing on 1/15/2025](#) went as far as

³⁾ Source: IMF World Economic Outlook and authors calculations. G7 total GDP decreased from 65% of total world GDP in 2000 to 45% in 2020 (and in 2024).

stating:

“At the end of World War II, the United States was, in the words of then Secretary Acheson, tasked with creating a world order “a free half” out of chaos “without blowing the whole to pieces in the process (...) “In the decades that followed, the global order they created served us well” (...) At end of cold war this order was remade in the “Liberal International Order:” “This wasn’t just a fantasy; it was a dangerous delusion (...) **The postwar global order is not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us.**”

Under such conditions, the current situation is an unstable hybrid one. There are already elements of an intensifying US-China Cold war, in which each side uses the intense competition and resulting security to justify any erosion of the rules-based order (Beckley 2023, Christensen 2015, Doshi 2021, Mearsheimer 2021, 2014, Niblett 2024, Skylar Mastro 2024, Tunsjø 2018, Westad 2024). But the current transition has also conferred significant power and autonomy to many rising states, such as India, South East Asian states, the Gulf States, Brazil, South Africa etc.. So, it is also more a multipolar order in nature.

In addition, we are currently experiencing several critical disruptions:

- The global economy is increasingly securitized and globalization weaponized;
- In a tit-for-tat fashion, massive pillars of the post-war order are being tested or unraveling. China has a greater and greater role. The Global South as well. And the US is now a coercive/extractive power;
- Two industrial revolutions are raising the stakes and intensifying the sense of competition among states: the AI/digital revolution and the green technology revolution’

These cumulative and interactive disruptions challenge all humans, groups, and leaders. During periods of disruptions, humans tend to follow the more intuitive and instant system 1 of decision-making (Kahneman 2011). In turn, intuitive responses are channeled by past experiences, myths heuristics, simplifying devices, ideologies and may lead to trait ascription biases. Experiences of past generations may have generated fears, insecurity, and programming in our minds that channel our responses to current challenges. Additionally, Groupthink and social media cascade effects reinforce rapid support for solutions that may be based on wrong evaluations. All this makes long-term thinking and complex cooperation less likely.

IV. Some Enduring Successes: SDGs, G20, Climate, Biodiversity, Oceans, Pandemics

As the US pulled back from support for the post-war global order under President Trump and as the US-China competition intensified, we have logically seen a pull-back from support for global human rights, the erosion of democracy, and decaying global

institutions. It is shocking to observe the once-creator and supporter of global institutions and international law abruptly turn against them and undermine many of them.

However, in this context, it is also important to note significant recent progress and successes. In all of those, except the cases of the SDGs in 2015, the Paris Agreement in 2015, and the G20 in Bali in 2022, the US has been entirely absent, but the rest of the world (including China) has chosen to come together and keep the process of global cooperation and global rule-making going.

In 2015, the world found a new way of generating inclusive global governance. Over three years of unprecedented bottom-up processes of deliberation coo-chaired by leaders from the Global North and the Global South, the UN generated the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets applying to all countries in the world. It was the first time that humanity had a common roadmap of achievable targets for a better humanity and better planet. All members approved them at the UNGA, even though the US later turned negative about them under President Trump.

In 2015, under French presidency, the UN Framework on Climate Change generated the Paris Agreement, another unprecedented milestone of cooperation (Allan, Roger, Hale, Bernstein, Tiberghien and Balme 2021)

In 2022, in the absence of the US, the UN Convention on Biodiversity concluded a multi-year process with the historic adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Protocol under joint Canadian-Chinese hosting. This was followed by the March 2023 adoption of the BBNJ Treaty on the protection of the high seas.

In 2025, under the aegis of the WHO, all countries (minus the US) came together around a new pandemic treaty that included strong systems of cooperation for future pandemics and a compromise between North and South over intellectual property sharing for vaccines.

Finally, the G20 has continued to move forward, even with limitations. In particular the 2022 G20 in Bali saw Indonesia manage to save the whole exercise through a compromise between G7+ countries and Global South countries over the Ukraine war.

These cases offer some essential clues and sources of hope about the continued resilience and advancement of a global order that can sustain decent life, peace, and elements of justice.

V. Going Forward: Sources of Endurance and Global Governance Innovation

What lessons can we draw from the cases cited above? All these cases are cases of global governance innovation and new forms of global cooperation.

Ultimately, peace and cooperation may be the ultimate anchor values for the entire human exercise of progress. Without peace, there is no possibility of decent human life of

any kinds and for democracy to survive.

Peace requires building systems, habits, and practices of mutual understanding and mutual empathy to avoid cycles of misperceptions, trait ascription biases, and tit-for-tat cycles of destruction.

Beyond these general principles, recent advances in global cooperation can be shown to embed a process of multi-level competitive reinforcement (Schreurs and Tiberghien 2010, Tiberghien 2021). This can be defined as a “general positive competitive dynamic, where the cost of staying out gradually becomes significant – the dynamic generates its own gravity. Five conditions are needed:

- 1. Oligopolistic core: large players need to be coopted or neutralized;
- 2. Legitimacy: a narrative must come together to claim the moral high ground and popular support;
- 3. A Competitive mechanism around a catalytic anchor (entrepreneurship source) must exist;
- 4. Side deals are often necessary to buy off meaningful opponents;
- 5. And Connectivity to domestic audiences (relevance) a degree of inclusion and participation in the process.

Given the great entropy (forces of fragmentation) in the system, a source of energy and momentum is required at the origin. It can be one or several powerful individuals, or a coalition of middle states and non-state actors.

Future progress may necessitate the following principles:

- **Think out of the box:** question practices. Think of multiple pathways and equilibria;
- **Inclusivity:** stale status quo situations shut out many voices. Releasing the diversity of these voices brings many new ideas to the agenda;
- **Empowerment:** encouraging all stakeholders to be part of a search for new solutions: women, youth, all diverse components of societies, civil society, local actors etc..;
- **Hybrid (polymorphous) coalitions** with new forms of coordination (cf model of Paris Peace Forum);
- **Competition** among grassroots initiatives to evaluate strong solutions and eventually reproduce and generalize.

Stepping Back – Some Personal Thoughts on Handling this Period of Disruption and Risks (especially for students)

1. This is a complex time with interactive change and confusing news. It is noisy and fast.
2. Personal resilience and mindfulness can be huge assets in such time, both for self-care and for deeper understanding of big picture.
3. Incorporating ancient and diverse sources of wisdom from many traditions is

crucial. We need this great human repertoire to overcome challenges of our human hyper-modernity.

4. Nurturing diverse teams and avoiding groupthink (the person who says No could be the right one) are essential.
5. Time with nature is a huge asset.
6. Time for community and family as well.
7. Time with great minds of present and past (reading) can open up new sources of understanding and show examples.

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