



The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

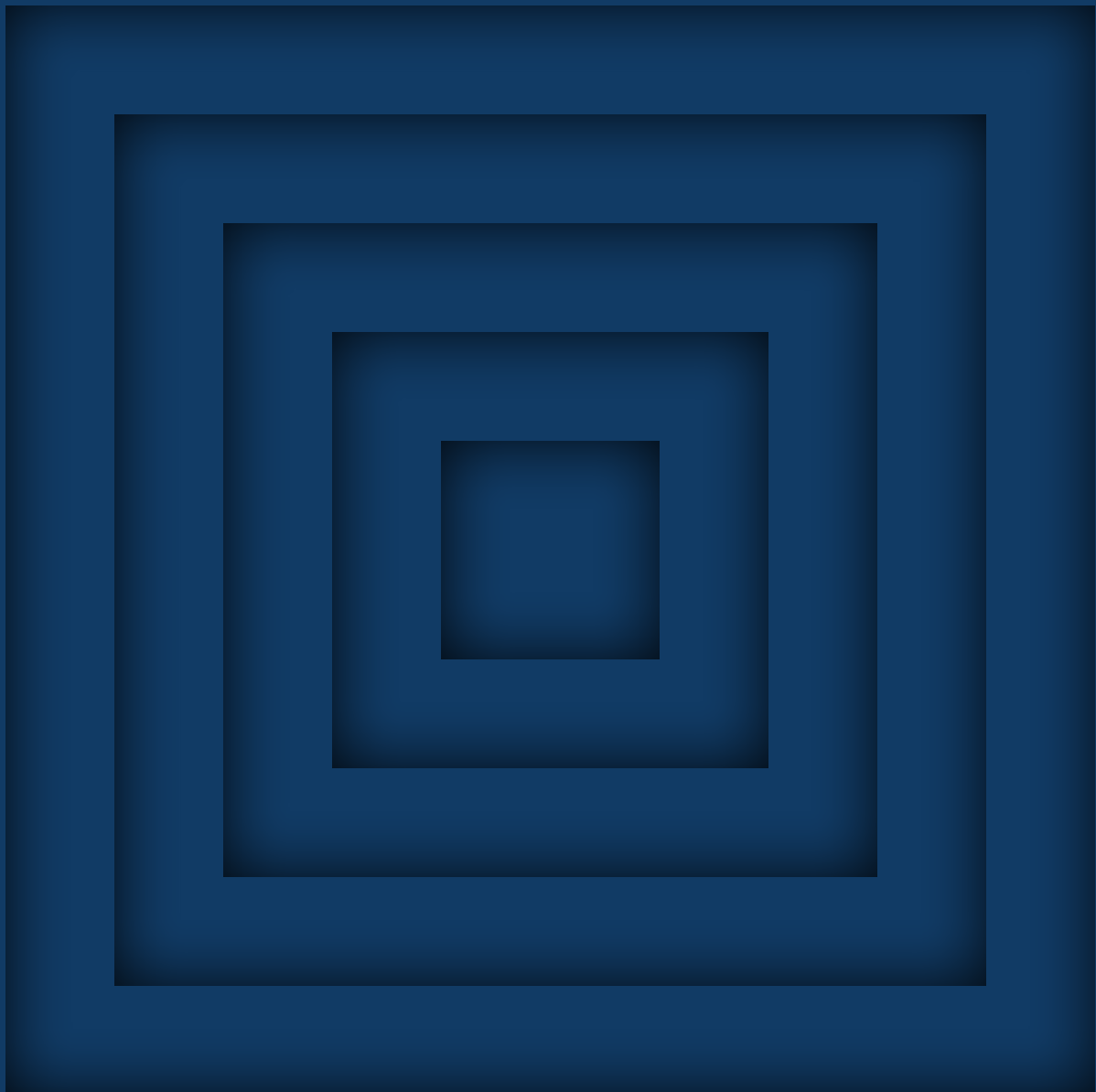
The Hague Strategic
Foresight Forum Talks

Navigating Tomorrow

The Future World Order

Pieter-Jan Vandoren

February 2025





The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

The Hague Strategic Foresight Forum Talks

Navigating Tomorrow

The Future World Order

Author:

Pieter-Jan Vandoren

Contributors:

Tim Sweijs and Davis Ellison

February 2025

© *The Hague* Centre for Strategic Studies. All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced and/or published in any form by print, photo print, microfilm or any other means without prior written permission from HCSS. All images are subject to the licenses of their respective owners.

1. Introduction

Global tensions escalated in 2024. As the Russo-Ukrainian war continued to rattle Europe, other regions faced similar tensions. The Middle-East and the Sahel descended further into turmoil. The re-election of President Trump meant that tensions between China and the US were bound to rise, thereby placing Asia in the cross-hairs of great power competition.

Historically, international orders have served as guardrails to prevent tensions from escalating. International orders emerging from the Congress of Vienna, the League of Nations, and the United Nations were formed to prevent future wars from taking place and provide avenues for deconfliction and dialogue. Yet history shows these orders often erode over time until a final crisis renders them obsolete.

The current 'rules-based international order' is in dire straits. Structural drivers of change push the world and the order governing it further apart, leaving the world with an unrecognisable order and vice versa. This growing discrepancy fans the flames of discontent as the benefits of this order seem unjustly distributed amongst countries.

As the absence of international order often heralds chaos, waiting for its obsolescence is no option. In the 20th century, the breakdown of global orders triggered two World Wars that killed millions and scarred Europe. Dismissing the current order as outdated without presenting an alternative could lead to unforeseen consequences. After more than 75 years without significant change, its legitimacy is under scrutiny. A reconfiguration of the international order is therefore due.

On December 11th 2024, HCSS organised the third Strategic Foresight Forum Talk titled 'The Future Global Order'. Experts from America, Asia and Europe offered perspectives on the flaws and merits of the current order and laid out the contours of the future global order. This third and final Forum Talk built on previous discussions to glimpse the emerging contours of a new global order.

2. An order under pressure

2.1. Systemic disruption

Over the past 75 years, multiple drivers of change have reshaped our world. Unequal demographic growth has shifted global power centres, prompting a critical mass of non-Western nations, sceptical of the current order's power distribution, to emerge. While many merely voice dissatisfaction, others reject the order outright.

Disparate economic growth has generated frustration amongst populations across the globe. While Asian countries largely benefitted, populist movements in the US and Europe emerged from this economic discontent. In the US, citizens marched on Washington to hold the "liberal elite" accountable, while many African countries abandoned Western economic models such as the Washington Consensus.

International competition has driven technological innovation. The quest to emerge victorious out of the 4th industrial revolution has unleashed a frenzy to develop new technologies, most notably artificial intelligence, the dangers of which are not yet fully understood. The resulting speed of change causes unrest internationally and populism domestically, where democratic governments are placed on their back foot, struggling to meet the demands of their constituents. The absence of regulatory frameworks for emerging technologies further erodes the effectiveness and importance of the order.

Climate change intensifies these forces. It renders regions uninhabitable, hampers economic growth, spurs technological development, and displaces millions. Despite being a truly global challenge, efforts so far have been too small to turn the tide. International competition encourages free-riding behaviour, leaving those impacted to fend for themselves. The resulting resentment questions the effectiveness of this order. Once championed by the West, the current order finds itself without its principal backer and surrounded by critics.

2.2. Drivers of an eroding order

International orders consist of regimes and rules that govern the interaction between states, typically spearheaded by a great power that, either alone or in coalition with others, is able to uphold the fundamental rules of the system. Orders should adequately reflect the distribution of power within the international system and at the same time offer sufficient benefits to its members for them to adhere to continue to the order. If states, including the leading state, break the rules associated with these norms, it leads to the erosion of trust in the order and affects the international hierarchy that upholds the order.

As the panellists noted, the US repeatedly disregarded its own rules. Its invasion of Iraq became a lightning rod for powers seeking to circumvent established norms, undermining America's moral authority. The recent re-election of President Trump suggests that the US will not try to reclaim a position of international moral leadership, reducing the order's ability to uphold and enforce its rules and norms.

One of the criticisms of the so-called rules-based international order associated with the Pax Americana, was its focus on establishing liberal democracies. Mentioned in previous Talks as well, participants lamented the persistent efforts to establish liberal democracies, even taking priority over development in impoverished regions. With hundreds of millions of people still living at or below subsistence levels, it was argued that it demonstrates a certain detachment from reality to blame autocratic countries for not having their priorities straight.

A final issue according to participants in the Talk was the failure of richer countries to support poorer countries within the existing order. Impoverished countries expect more assistance for development and to deal with the effects of climate change. The 29th UN Conference of the Parties (COP) was the most recent example of this dynamic. While emissions are emitted by wealthy countries, less-developed countries bear the brunt. A fund proposed at COP 29 to address these inequities fell short of its goals as a result of Western intransigence.

Our panellists concluded that relations with countries from the nonaligned movement have suffered. Take climate change: lacking Western backing, these countries often turn to China—leader in green technologies—for support. Meanwhile, the West continues to claim moral high ground based on liberal democratic values, further alienating nonaligned states.

3. A brave new world

Experts agreed that a flawed order is preferable to no order. However, creating a new order will not be easy. Old grievances and new challenges are to be addressed simultaneously, even as support for international dialogue wanes. Despite having the odds stacked against them, our panellists suggested the following features of a new order.

3.1. Return of the nation-state

Legitimacy granted by nation-states remains crucial. Experts therefore argued that any new order should steer away from enforcing international norms that infringe on the sovereignty of the nation-state, to maximise support. This argument, echoing points made in prior Talks, leads to a more equitable relationship between the various nation-states and the order itself. This, in turn, gives rise to the following key tenets.

First, it was suggested that in the period to come, the form of domestic government is the prerogative of a nation-state. Normative prescriptions that dictate how a country should be governed, will be removed. This means that the distinction between autocracies and democracies should form less of a dividing factor in international relations.

Second, the territorial integrity of a nation-state may have to take centre stage again. Previously agreed-upon principles that could violate the territorial integrity of nation states, such as the responsibility to protect (R2P), will have to be reconsidered. Having become a source of suspicion after its invocation in Libya in 2011 led to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, the principle seemingly did the order more harm than good.

Third, the formulation of economic policy rests solely with nation-states. Economic theories championing the liberalisation of markets and integration into the world economy will need to be shelved. Adhering to “winning” formulas such as the Washington Consensus created ill will in the Global South, where these prescriptions were seen as an unsuitable straitjacket.

3.2. The global menace

Emerging technologies and climate change pose global challenges requiring a global response. Experts throughout the sessions recognised the value of an international order that is primarily focused on tackling these issues.

First, a new order should recognise the threat of climate change and act accordingly. The 29th COP meeting ended dissatisfactory, with only a sliver of the budget allocated towards climate adaptation. While the Global North's temperate climate zone has insulated it from the worst,

I think that in any new world order, R2P will no longer exist, in fact R2P will be gone.

its Southern counterpart is facing the brunt of the change. The problems of the South become the problems of the North eventually. Waiting for significant impact in the North to take action will therefore be too late.

Second, emerging technologies, and especially AI, requires global cooperation but currently breed intense competition. This complicates rule-setting processes as parties have become reluctant to place restraints on themselves. Nevertheless, the perils associated with uncontrollable AI are too high without safeguards. Recent agreements between the US and China to ban AI from nuclear decision-making, is a step in the right direction, but there is still a long way to go.

3.3 The security dilemma strikes back

Europe is at risk of becoming a secondary player in global affairs.

Despite agreement on the need for adaptation of the international order, distrust persists. The security dilemma, where a state's efforts to increase its security inadvertently decrease the security of other states, remains central to this dynamic. As tensions rise, relations deteriorate, reducing the chance of a peaceful adaptation.

While no country is poised to dominate the new order, a breakdown will damage some more than others. The European Union (EU) for instance, itself a product of multilateralism, will see its core assertions on interstate relations challenged.

One panellist reminded us of the possibility of multiple regional orders replacing a global order. This in turn could give rise to hybrid orders that combine elements of the Asian tributary system with the Western Westphalian system. However, the dynamics of the security dilemma could very well pit these regional orders against each other, thereby derailing the hope for an easy solution through regional orders.

Regardless of the order's constellation, it was agreed that non-state actors will continue to play an important role. Far from fading, technological innovations only seem to magnify their influence.

4. Key Takeaways

The panel concluded with the following two key takeaways.

Less is more

An overregulated order may end with no effective rules at all. The perceived domestic interference of the rules-based international order caused a backlash with rising powers who demand changes toward a more equitable system. Maintaining an order that prioritises global challenges over domestic styles of governance appears to be amenable to more countries. Although this new international order could give autocratic regimes enough room to suppress dissent and maintain control, it could prevent a collapse in global stability preserving more lives in the long run.

Adapt or perish

The changing nature of the world order requires states to adapt as well. As normative concepts such as free trade and democracy are placed on the backburner, competition takes centre place. The 2024 Draghi report stressed that the EU should utilise all levers of power to increase its innovation and competitiveness or risk falling behind. According to one speaker, the EU should adopt a 'Dallas mindset', where regulation is low and taxes non-existent, facilitating economic activity. The US and China, unhampered by Brussels' complex decision-making, seem to have already shifted gears, leaving the EU playing catch-up. For now.

Europeans do not have a problem with their vision.
But they do have a problem with their will to act.

5. Conclusion

Transforming the current order requires those in power to relinquish certain privileges. Although major powers understand that having a widely supported order will benefit them, their fear of losing power vis-à-vis, direct competitors prevents them from taking action. As time runs out to make meaningful changes, chances of a peaceful transition are getting smaller. The short-sightedness linked to this collective action problem risks pushing this order to the brink, with no replacement in sight.

Who will have the courage to blink first and move away from the edge? Many point to the US, linchpin of the existing system, as best placed to lead reform. Surprisingly, the incoming Trump administration could bring the change required. Its aversion to an overactive international order, could set in motion an order that pivots away from domestic interference and restricts itself to tackling global challenges.

Amidst the dark clouds hanging over us, some silver linings emerge as well. A clear understanding of the challenges today and the desired end goal seem to be emerging. While the destination might be clear, the path toward it remains to be taken. While there is plenty of vision, it seems that the will to act remains scarce. Strong leadership is required to take the first step on the treacherous path toward a new equilibrium, but respect for international guardrails is necessary, if we do not want the world to fall off the track.

The order we have known is ending and is not coming back.



The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

HCSS

Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA The Hague

Follow us on social media:

@hcssnl

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies

Email: info@hcss.nl
Website: www.hcss.nl