



QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT

Ukraine, Gaza, and the International Order

FEBRUARY 2024 | QUINCY BRIEF NO. 52

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Executive Summary

The ongoing crises in Ukraine and Gaza show the urgent need for a new internationalism that comes to grips with the increasing independence of middle and smaller powers around the world. Such a vision must reject the effort to re-impose a failed framework of unilateral U.S. primacy, or an effort to shoehorn multiplying regionally specific conflicts into an obsolete model of “great power competition” that recalls the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In both Ukraine and the Middle East, the United States has been unable to impose its will either militarily or diplomatically. Smaller nations have successfully defied American-backed military force. Even more concerning, a significant share of the global community has failed to follow the U.S. diplomatic lead and support the U.S. interpretation of international norms. But opposition to the United States has not been supported by a superpower peer competitor to the United States, along the lines of a Cold War model.

The current emerging world order is instead characterized by “regionalization,” a situation where middle and even small powers around the world feel free to circumvent or even defy U.S. interpretations of global norms based on more local interests and regional security concerns.

The stage was set for the current situation by the U.S. attempt to assert unilateral power during the War on Terror in ways that appeared to give the United States alone a de facto exemption from global norms and institutions. These actions reduced the legitimacy of the post-World War Two international order that the United States had helped to create, and led many in the international community to seek alternatives to a system that seemed to grant the United States almost arbitrary power to define the rules.

The U.S. foreign policy establishment must come to grips with the newly deglobalized and regionalized world order. A failure to do so poses a grave threat to U.S. power and influence, as relationships with key emerging powers such as India, or even traditional U.S. allies in Europe and Asia are not immune from the kind of de-globalizing and regionalizing forces seen in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Introduction

The Cold War ended long ago, but our political categories and imaginations still exist in its shadow. We continue to think of international politics in terms of great power competition, for example, and often understand it as a struggle between unipolar and multipolar visions of world order. This is curious, since the end of the Cold War gave rise to powerful new ways of thinking about the international order. Francis Fukuyama's 1992 bestseller, "The End of History and the Last Man," for instance, envisioned the future of global politics as a mopping up operation by Western liberalism.¹ And while it was criticized for being triumphalist, his book also betrayed some anxiety about the fate of freedom in a world without real competition. Samuel Huntington's equally popular 1996 book, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," on the other hand, foresaw the Cold War's great power competition being replaced by conflicts over cultural and religious identity occurring within and between states in a kind of global civil war.²

Whatever the merits and demerits of such visions, they had at least recognized the novelty of the post-Cold War situation and proposed ways in which the United States in particular should both understand and take command of it. And yet the Cold War continues to define our political imagination even when the kind of politics that actually defines the international system belies its concepts and prognostications.³ Given Russia's post Cold War reduced economic and political power, for instance, the United

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

² Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

³ For a recent recognition of this contradiction, see Fred Kaplan, "Nostalgia for Cold War diplomacy is a trap", *Slate*, Jan. 5 2024 <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2024/01/israel-ukraine-george-kennan-cold-war-diplomacy-trap.html>

States and its Western allies did not see the Ukraine war either as a version of great-power competition or a struggle between unipolarity and multipolarity. Supporting Ukraine in what was meant to be a slam-dunk for a unipolar order, nevertheless, has turned into an intractable conflict even without great-power competition. Similarly, the war in Gaza has redirected Western attention to a region it had sought to set aside in order to focus on the immense economic growth of the so-called Indo-Pacific and therefore on China as a potential great power competitor there.

While the United States remains by far the most powerful country in the world, it no longer helms a unipolar order.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, both of which could broaden into regional conflicts, do not represent distractions to the putatively more serious and long-term struggle between unipolarity and multipolarity in defining world order. They put the very idea of such a great power politics into question. While the United States remains by far the most powerful country in the world, it no longer helms a unipolar order despite the economic and military inferiority of its potential competitors. We have seen in the course of both these wars that curtailing the West's political reach and diminishing, if not demolishing, its hegemony globally does not require great-power competition or multipolarity. And though such a vision of international politics might inform many states outside the West, it is not one that we can see being exercised in the wars that confront us today. On the contrary, it is the role of middle powers and regional politics that seems to determine conflict in the international system, leading to the latter's transformation in the process.

The United States has been trying to maintain its unipolarity and stave off any threat of a multipolar order since the end of the Cold War. But instead of being confronted by the kind of threats it predicted and expected, it has since the beginning of the new century

been compelled to address entirely different ones. First there were the non-state threats of global militancy, with the rise of al-Qaeda and then, as a result of American intervention in the Middle East, of ISIS. These crises, which seemed to play out according to Huntington's script, allowed the United States to solidify its unipolarity during the War on Terror. But this resulted neither in its hegemony nor even formal dominance of the international system. Indeed, the unilateral deployment of American power did more to dismantle this system than prop it up. Just when the world seemed to have become safe enough for the West to turn its attention to China, however, we had the war in Ukraine and then, just under two years later, in Gaza. The emerging global order, it appears, is being defined not by great power competition even in some distant future, but by quite different visions of international politics.

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The crisis of global politics

In his address to the nation on October 19, President Biden brought together the wars in Ukraine and Gaza to illustrate America's indispensable role in protecting the international order from threats like Russia and Hamas.⁴ It was a strange pairing. Russia, after all, is a vast state with nuclear arms, while Hamas is a non-state organization operating in a small strip of land whose borders, energy, food, and water are controlled by Israel. Perhaps Biden was responding to critics who accused him of hypocrisy in condemning Russian attacks on civilians but not Israeli ones. Yet he was right in putting the two conflicts together, because in both cases the United States and its allies have opted for war rather than the diplomacy, negotiations, and ceasefires that are the only means of bringing about a peaceful resolution to conflict. These must

⁴ For a recording of the speech, see "Hear President Biden's full speech to the nation on Israel and Ukraine", CNN, Oct. 20 2023 (<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/10/20/biden-full-oval-office-speech-israel-ukraine-vpx.cnn>).

apparently wait until the enemy has been sufficiently degraded to accept the terms they prefer. But this strategy has failed in Ukraine and is unlikely to succeed for Israel.

The similarity of the West's response to conflict in Eastern Europe and the Middle East suggests that it is not defined by the specificity of either case, but instead tells us something about the changing structure of American power more generally. In some ways, therefore, our arguments about Russian imperialism or Israeli settler colonialism, to say nothing of genocide, antisemitism or apartheid, are beside the point.⁵ Biden is correct in seeing both conflicts as challenges to America's hegemony and its global politics. Yet it is not the wars themselves that pose a threat to the unipolarity that has defined the international order since the end of the Cold War, but rather the unwillingness of many allied and even client states to go along with them. In Ukraine, invocations of World War Two and the Cold War on both sides failed to gain any traction in the world outside the West. There, it was the failure of the War on Terror in putting together a new international order that proved a more relevant and cautionary precedent dissuading countries from choosing sides in the war.

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While Western historical narratives about global conflict have been provincialized in this way, the rest of the world seems to offer no alternatives. Yet those refusing to align with the United States or Russia have managed to bring neutrality back to life as a fundamental principle of the international order, one pushed aside in the post Cold War

⁵ For the propagandistically successful but politically naive resort to accusations of genocide against Israel, for instance, see A. Dirk Moses, "More than genocide", *Boston Review*, Nov. 14, 2023 (<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/more-than-genocide/>).

period and especially during the War on Terror. From NATO members like Turkey to countries like India that are friendly to the West, it is neutrality rather than pro-Russian sentiment that defines policy. For these states realize that Russia's war is a regional one meant to place limits on America's global politics. They also see that Russia is neither interested in nor capable of engaging in a global politics of its own that threatens them. It is only her immediate neighborhood that is at risk. Neutrality has thus allowed the Ukraine war to be geographically limited and regionalized against American intentions, while also permitting countries like Turkey to mediate between its protagonists.⁶

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With global politics made possible by a unipolar international order threatened in Ukraine, the United States has reduced whatever regional autonomy the European Union possessed to create a Western bloc of countries, including Canada, the U.K., Australia, Japan, and South Korea, that is set against Russia. Now it faces the same quandary in the Middle East, where Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023 also demolished the region's post-Cold War politics, which had been defined by a globally-agreed and guaranteed peace process leading to normalization. By contrast, the extra-legal activities of the Palestinian movement in the 1960s and 1970s had been made possible by the Cold War, which allowed space for the PLO like the IRA, the Red Brigades, and other militant groups to operate internationally.⁷ All of these were pushed into various kinds of negotiated settlements shepherded by the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

⁶ For a discussion of the Global South and the war in Ukraine, see Faisal Devji and Galip Dalay, "The Ukraine war's impact extends far beyond Europe," *The National Interest*, 11 October 2022 (https://nationalinterest.org/feature/ukraine-war-s-impact-extends-far-beyond-europe-205268?fbclid=IwAR0mnrboP_E8MESH4BrrBDwQCASLUFq8GIkyU7nuZFlwiL_QWwe8kJcAOtY).

⁷ See, for example, Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

From Camp David to Oslo and the Abraham Accords, this was the kind of politics that characterized the unipolar moment. But it is one which the United States can now defend only by opting for war to restore the status quo ante. This might then allow it to push for a two-state solution in which the Palestinians might be funded and managed by the international order, as represented, perhaps, by wealthy Arab countries. This, too, is part of the post-Cold War playbook of global politics as exemplified by Bosnia and Kosovo, East Timor and South Sudan, all wards of the international order rather than sovereign states. The dated nature of this vision is evident in the historical narratives that underpin it. If in Ukraine it was World War Two and the Cold War that gave the conflict meaning, in the Middle East it is 9/11 that is routinely mentioned. But this is a bad precedent given its consequences, while President Biden's invocation of an inflection-point in history is not matched by any new vision of the future.

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While the Hamas attack of October 7th is routinely compared to 9/11, the difference in the way each has been understood is striking. The attacks of 9/11 were seen as unprecedented not only in their scale, but also because they heralded an entirely new political conjuncture. This is not true of the present conflict, which is seen in the West as a continuation of the past. It either represents the past of Palestinian and more widely Islamic terrorism in the view of Israel and its supporters, or a continuation of colonialism and apartheid for those supporting the Palestinians. The victimology of one is matched by that of the other in an intimacy that shows up the failure of the political imagination on both sides. It is only when we look at the narratives and actions of the so-called Axis of Resistance bringing together Hamas with Hezbollah, the Shia militias of Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Iran, that we see a recognition of novelty that goes beyond the terminology of the international order. Here Israel is losing its war and the

international order being transformed. Victimology is displaced by martyrdom in a worthy and victorious cause.⁸

The aftermath of 9/11

What 9/11 did result in was the destruction of the international order put in place during the Cold War, one which had allowed for diplomatic, economic, and other relations between its rival camps. With the disappearance of the U.S.S.R. and so any opposition to the remaining superpower globally, the United States was able to marginalize the entire U.N. system by the expansion of pre-emptive strikes, unilateral and third-party sanctions, confiscations of sovereign funds, the legitimization of torture and extra-judicial killings, limitations of citizenship rights, and the dismantling through anti-terrorism laws of civil liberties like privacy, free speech and the right to protest. Elaborated through interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also Pakistan, Syria, and Libya, such practices came to constitute a “rules-based international order” that enjoys no formal agreement and therefore differs from the international law that had defined the U.N. order during the Cold War. We are seeing the consequences of the latter’s final destruction in Eastern Europe and the Middle East today.

The development of political practices outside international law was meant to be reserved for the United States and its Western allies. Seen as exceptions to established civil liberties in the name of security, such practices were not meant to be normative and thus were unable to create a new international order. But they have come to be invoked by many countries as a new norm. Russia has cited American practice in the War on Terror to justify its actions in Ukraine, while Israel both invokes and goes beyond them in referring to the Allied bombing of civilians during World War Two to justify its bombardment of Gaza.⁹ In both cases, political practice now takes its models from the period before or after the establishment of a post-war international order and its rule of

⁸ See, for example, the Iranian supreme leader’s speech, “Zionists’ crimes won’t be forgotten even after it is destroyed by the grace of God”, *Khamenei.ir*, 9 Jan. 2024 (<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/10469/Zionists-crimes-won-t-be-forgotten-even-after-it-is-destroyed>).

⁹ See Adam Taylor, “Israel leans into World War II rhetoric to justify Gaza war”, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 1, 2023 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/01/israel-historical-comparison-world-war-two-ii/>).

law. International law, in other words, seems to have become the exception rather than the rule in defining the actions of states today. Are such practices coming to constitute a new, if as yet informal, model of international relations, or do they signal the breakdown of such an order altogether?

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Its liberation from international law does not make politics more realistic. It is not clear, for example, what can be achieved by Israel's onslaught on Gaza, which, apart from wreaking a kind of Biblical vengeance on Hamas, seems an impossible effort to regain the deterrence its leaders think keeps their country safe.¹⁰ In truth only a political settlement can do that. But whether such deterrence succeeds is immaterial, for the United States must retain its unipolarity to prevent the regionalization of politics that Hamas's attack signaled by discarding international mediation. The Abraham Accords had instead represented the region's division within a global context. They were meant to embed Israel as a leading power within a Sunni bloc set against Shia Iran and its allies.¹¹ It was even suggested that if Saudi Arabia made peace with Israel, the Sunni world would fall into line. This project, drawn from orientalist stereotypes, is now in tatters given the Palestinian refusal to be shoehorned into it. Instead, we see a surge of regional support for the Palestinian cause putting authoritarian Arab regimes on edge.

America has therefore had to scupper Israel's autonomy just as it had the European Union's at the start of the Ukraine war in order to re-globalize the conflict and so maintain its unipolarity in the face of an emerging regional politics. Its navy and air force

¹⁰ For the meaninglessness of deterrence in these circumstances, see an interview with the former head of Shin Bet only a few days after the Hamas attack. Joanna York, "Former Israeli security chief Ami Ayalon: 'The military can defend us; it cannot secure us'", *France 24*, 13 October 2023 (<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231013-former-israeli-security-chief-the-military-can-defend-us-it-cannot-secure-us>).

¹¹ See, for instance, "Full text of Netanyahu's UN address: 'On the cusp of historic Saudi-Israeli peace' *The Times of Israel*, 22 Sep. 2023 (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-netanyahus-un-address-on-the-cusp-of-historic-saudi-israel-peace/>).

have been deployed to the Middle East so as to prevent the regionalization of its politics. But rather than defining it in terms of Israel's national security, this array of forces has made the conflict a global one. Israel recognises the regional context of Hamas's attack and with its attacks on Lebanon and Syria appears to want the war's expansion so that, with American support, it can dismantle it. Meanwhile, the Americans have responded to attacks in Iraq and Yemen in a way that accomplishes exactly what they fear: the war's regionalization. Whereas we tend to think about the war's regionalization in terms of its expansion, however, the opposite is true since it may shift its center of gravity away from politics at the global level and reduce the United States to a powerful yet inevitably external actor in a conflict it cannot fully control.

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But there are other and less destructive ways in which the conflict may be regionalized. Just as the Ukraine war has been regionalized by the neutrality of countries outside the West, however, so too might the war in the Middle East. Here it calls for a ceasefire that represents neutrality. And though they have not for the moment proven successful, such calls indicate there is little sympathy globally for the politics of unipolarity. It is no accident that voting patterns on the U.N. resolutions dealing with Ukraine and Gaza are so similar, the West's punitive measures having been repudiated in both cases.¹² These defeats will not stop the United States and its allies from continuing with their policies, though the remarkable anti-Israeli shift in public opinion among their own citizens might give them pause for thought. Yet they had not been deterred by the even larger demonstrations of anti-war feeling in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Both

¹² See, for instance, "Full text of Netanyahu's UN address: 'On the cusp of historic Saudi-Israeli peace' *The Times of Israel*, 22 Sep. 2023 (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-netanyahus-un-address-on-the-cusp-of-historic-saudi-israel-peace/>).

cases indicate the separation of executive power from public opinion and even democratic accountability, with foreign policy remaining the last domain of sovereign discretion. But what looked then like the hubris of untrammelled power now looks like desperation, as a failed project of global transformation is tried out again, this time to pull a region back under U.S. management.

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The failure of the political imagination here is complete, with the reliance on force or the threat of its use indicating the collapse not only of the remnants of the Cold War's international order, but with it that of Western authority as much as hegemony in the Middle East and beyond.¹³ For no new political order guaranteeing peace and stability can be established by fear alone, however many local interests are served by it. It took the attack by Hamas to demolish the post-Cold War Palestinian movement, dominated by the language of international law and a moribund peace process. Whether Hamas will survive the transformation it made possible remains to be seen, though it seems Israel's defense doctrine will not. A hugely expensive policy built on military and technological superiority came undone in a few hours, its walls and bases unable to prevent the planning and execution of a major attack from a small territory subjected to intensive surveillance. Israel's brutal response to this attack may even result from its loss of options in managing Gaza, which it can neither govern nor clear of its population.¹⁴

¹³ For a recent study of this collapse by one of France's most eminent sociologists, see Emmanuel Todd, *La Défaite de l'Occident* (Paris: Broché, 2024).

¹⁴ See, for example, Emma Graham-Harrison and Quique Kierszenbaum, "Ex-Shin Bet head says Israel should negotiate with jailed intifada leader", *The Guardian*, Jan. 14, 2024 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/14/shin-bet-ami-ayalon-calls-on-israel-release-intifada-leader-marwan-barghouti>).

Hamas had proven a reliable if occasionally troublesome interlocutor in the past, but now it apparently cannot be allowed to run Gaza. This heralds the strip's looming internationalization in a departure from Israeli policy, with the Palestinian Authority's delegitimization ensuring Hamas's return to it even if under another name. The bombardment of Gaza seeks to buy time. In addition to recovering their deterrence, the Israelis may also want to degrade Hamas and render Gaza uninhabitable so as to delay the establishment of a Palestinian state there and in the West Bank. But their efforts to do so are daily squandering what goodwill Israel enjoys among its allies while whittling away at U.S. hegemony everywhere. Enabling Israel also allows the US to prevent the regionalization of politics and thus its own irrelevance to them. This requires maintaining undemocratic regimes with pliant leaders across the region, of which Israel itself is now the chief one dominated by religious extremists. At the end of Israel's unwinnable war in Gaza, the Americans might force the creation of a Palestinian state under international auspices in the hope it will become another Bosnia or Kosovo. But these Balkan territories are surrounded by hostile states while the Palestinians will have regional support.¹⁵ No return to the past is possible, and Israel will either join the region or be an increasingly embattled American protectorate within it.

Deglobalization

Taken together, Ukraine and Gaza allow us to see the trajectory of post-Cold War history more clearly. It now appears that America's undisputed unipolar moment only lasted a decade, from 1989–2001, when it was interrupted by the emergence of al-Qaeda as a non-statist threat in a context where the United States faced no serious rivals. Al-Qaeda's globalized militancy was meant to disrupt the social cohesion of countries rather than posing any kind of military challenge to them.¹⁶ Its aim was to expose the hypocrisy and weakness of the West's liberal societies and destroy them

¹⁵ For a recent analysis of American plans, see Akbar Shahid Ahmed, "A top Biden official is pushing an urgent post-Gaza plan that's alarming some insiders", *Huffpost*, Jan. 12 2024 (https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/biden-saudi-israel-gaza-brett-mcquark_n_65a19ee2e4b07bd6950cd152).

¹⁶ For an analysis of Al-Qaeda's organizational and strategic form, see Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

from within. Responding to 9/11 as an opportunity to reinforce its unipolarity and remake the international order, the United States ended up fulfilling al-Qaeda's aims by demolishing the Cold War international order it had done so much to put in place. While the end of the War on Terror promised a return to some version of the U.N. system, events in Eastern Europe and the Middle East belie it by turning to unilateralism, brute force, and the crushing of dissent around the world.

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Already with the emergence of ISIS from American prisons in Iraq, it had become clear that the War on Terror had led to a shift from global to regional forms of militancy by territorializing the conflict. Though it continued to draw from a global population of recruits, ISIS was unlike al-Qaeda in its desire to capture and hold territory. It also turned its wrath from the West to internal enemies among Muslims themselves, most prominently the Shia and their would-be representative in the Islamic Republic of Iran. ISIS prefigured the regionalization of the post-9/11 international order, even as its diminution by the coordinated action of Kurdish, Iranian, and Iraqi militias with the United States allowed the latter to imagine returning to a new kind of global politics in which it prepared to contain the rise of China. Instead, it was faced with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, another effort to regionalize politics that the Americans unsuccessfully tried to turn into a global conflict. And now there is Gaza.

While the Americans imagine a global politics in which their unipolarity must triumph over any attempt to create a bipolar or multipolar international order, historical developments appear to be moving in a rather different direction. Neither China nor Russia is in a position to take on the Cold War role of a superpower and so threaten American unipolarity. Instead, it is a regional politics that has come to the fore internationally, one in which middle powers like Turkey and Iran in the Middle East, Brazil

in South America, or South Africa on its continent are starting to play leading roles. The destruction of the U.N. system by the West has made such regionalization a paying proposition, as has the failure of the rules-based international order to guarantee an equitable distribution of global goods even in times of crisis, with the West's hoarding and monetization of vaccines during the pandemic serving as a good example of this.

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Deglobalization is not about states taking hold of the economy through protectionist measures. This was an idea emblemized by terms like re-shoring, which emerged during the pandemic in opposition to off-shoring and the threats posed by its just-in-time supply chains in moments of global crisis. While legislative acts like President Biden's Green New Deal may succeed in making the United States a hub for new technologies and innovation in this way, they cannot push back the economic development of rivals like China or demolish the economy of enemies like Russia even by the massive use of sanctions.¹⁷ The economy and its technologies remain global and have freed themselves from politics to the degree that we might be seeing the coming apart of political economy as a founding concept of modern capitalism. It is this separation of state from economy that makes deglobalization possible in the political arena, not least because global economic growth is no longer confined to or controlled by the West.

Not all international politics, of course, can be regionalized. The West, for example, has been shaped by the United States into the rump of a global formation through the wars

¹⁷ For the history of sanctions and their destructive if also largely unsuccessful results, see Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

in Ukraine and Gaza. Other parts of the world contain powers too big to be fully absorbed within regional politics but not powerful enough to count as superpowers. China, for instance, is fully integrated into her neighborhood economically, including with Taiwan, but enjoys no political hegemony over it despite the military threat it poses to certain countries there. Her only allies are North Korea and occasionally Pakistan. She is thus a regional political actor by default, but her inability to gain the political support of her neighbors prevents China's emergence as a global actor. India enjoys neither economic nor political hegemony in South Asia and must therefore assume a global role only in alliance with the United States. India is neutral on Ukraine but wavers on Israel because it can forsake neither the West nor the non-West. It makes common cause with the former not so much by appealing to democracy, as in the past, but rather to anti-Muslim feeling, even as India identifies with Israel as a strong state in a hostile neighborhood.

Torn between her global and regional ambitions, India's ambiguous international status reveals a great deal about the position of all the West's alleged rivals. Even when it sought a leadership role in an Asian or Afro-Asian political project, dating from colonial times, India also wanted to be included within a Western geopolitical order. But this meant abandoning its own neighborhood to make common cause with the West. In earlier times, this was done in the language of a shared Aryan or Indo-European origin that brought together India, Iran, and Afghanistan in a relationship with the West that excluded the rest of Asia and the Arab world in particular. The regional dimension of this political imagination is still evident in the commonplace references to Iran as a civilizational peer of India's from pre-Islamic times. A related if also more recent way of globalizing India also requires abandoning her immediate neighborhood, this time identified as Muslim, to make common cause with the West in matters of counter terrorism.

It is as if India can only assume global status through Islam, though not by adopting its universality so much as identifying with its supposed enemies. After the War on Terror,

however, this is a policy with diminishing returns.¹⁸ Communism, China's ostensibly global identity, has been reduced to its domestic politics, while its regional identity of so-called Asian values is shared by its pro-Western neighbor Singapore. But it is a remarkably weak civilizational project defined largely against the West and so negative in character. The same is true of Russia, whose civilizational and so regional vision of itself is based on Orthodox Christianity and social conservatism, the latter again defined negatively against Euro-American liberalism.¹⁹ India, therefore, might identify herself as a civilizational state by way of Hindu nationalism, but is unable to fashion a regional identity out of it. Russia and China do possess such regional identities, though they are both old-fashioned in their derivation from 19th century models as well as being negative in substance.

But tawdry as they may seem, these references to civilization do not represent some effort to return to a 19th century world of imperial hierarchy. They are instead meant to enable a new kind of political imagination that repudiates the very possibility of unipolar hegemony in the international order. Replacing the ideologies that defined Cold War politics, each claiming universal dominance for itself, civilizations apportion the world into regions on the basis of their historical roots. Not geopolitics founded in great-power competition, in other words, but some more benign version of Huntington's civilizational logic seems to be at play here. By displacing though by no means doing away with states as the most important units of global politics, this civilizational vision aims to entrench regions as its real foundations. But doing so requires moving from a purely spatial understanding of international order to a temporal one supported by distinctive and non-replicable ideals. It is an essentialist vision of diversity mirrored in many ways by the West's own culture wars and political polarization. And these are

¹⁸ India's Minister of External Affairs has recently published a book about India as a civilizational state drawing upon ancient Hindu tradition but at the same time making common cause with the West on matters like counter-terrorism. See S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat Matters* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2024).

¹⁹ In his speech to the Valdai Club on Oct. 5th, 2023, President Putin proposed a civilizational understanding of international politics as a way of escaping its geopolitical framing in terms of hegemony and unipolarity. In this vision, civilization is meant to guarantee the diversity of the political imagination. See "Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting", *President of Russia* (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72444>).

themselves consequences of the fraying consensus that defined politics in the West during the Cold War.

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A new internationalism

Might we be entering a period in which two incompatible political models of the international order overlap? One is a global order made up of great-power competition in which the United States seeks to maintain its unipolarity against any future rivals. This is an old-fashioned vision modeled on the Cold War. The other is a regional one in which middle powers are active and great ones find themselves with a reduced political role, insofar as they are too big to actively take on their rivals without putting the international order at risk. This may lead to a politics of détente between them. How the US responds to these emerging arenas of international politics will define their future. At the moment, it maintains its unipolarity against non-existent threats while being unable to prevent the regionalisation of politics internationally. And yet it may be regional rather than superpower politics that eventually reduces America's scope for action globally, even without affecting its military or economic predominance.

We see this happening already, with non-Western allies and clients refusing to go along with the United States on Ukraine and Gaza. But the loyalty of Western allies, too, cannot be taken for granted, as we are seeing in Eastern Europe with the winding down of the war in Ukraine. The shrinking of the U.S.-led naval expedition against the Houthis in Yemen is another. One need only think of France and Germany breaking ranks with the United States during the invasion of Iraq for further examples. If such refusals have been made possible by the failure of the War on Terror to put together a new international order, they were preceded by the equally remarkable refusals of former

clients to accede to American demands. Manuel Noriega in Panama was perhaps the earliest example of this in the last century, followed by Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. They were all pragmatic leaders who survived by constant adaptation. And yet they all ended by opposing the United States in violation of their former behavior. Had they no other choices or did they deliberately choose self-destruction?

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More puzzling than the behavior of its clients in refusing to follow American directives has been that of the United States itself in trying to resuscitate its post-Cold War unipolar moment. America was largely responsible for inventing the international order at the end of World War One. Dominated by European empires and with the United States itself not a member of the League of Nations, this order only lasted 20 years and was destroyed by its inner contradictions in World War Two. The Americans then put together a more durable order with the United Nations. It lasted longer by bringing together the Cold War's rivals as well as former colonial and colonized countries in a joint enterprise where everyone had something to gain. That order was destroyed by the end of the Cold War and especially in the War on Terror. But instead of putting together a third international order while she retains the power and credibility to do so, the United States seems intent on destroying every vestige of one.

What made the Cold War order a success, insofar as it retained legitimacy and lasted more than half a century, was that it was premised upon a balance of power.²⁰ Unipolarity destroyed this order. Perhaps regionalization and its refusal of global politics will bring some balance back to international relations. Or we can imagine a new

²⁰ See, for this, Sandrine Kott, *Organiser le Monde: Une autre Histoire de la Guerre Froide* (Paris: Broché, 2021).

international order in which the United States and its allies would come to some agreement with their enemies as they had with the U.S.S.R. Such an order would give emerging Asian, African, and South American powers decision-making roles in place of fading European ones. We can imagine a U.N. in which the Security Council is entrusted with interpreting rather than ignoring the General Assembly's decisions in the way a bicameral legislature works. Or a Security Council deprived of veto powers which discourage negotiation and compromise. It might also comprise a larger group representing the world's regions and so making for more legitimate decisions.

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This is a fantasy which takes the U.N. as its basis. But at the moment all we are left with is fantasies which may become the basis of a new political imaginary. Such an idea will have to address the problem of how to bring together an old-fashioned great-power politics that is global by definition, with the new regional politics that seems to be emerging in various parts of the world. Interesting about the latter is that it appears capable of delinking from the former and ignoring it, as the United States has been ignored by much of the world over Ukraine. This refusal to compete with the superpower and instead circumvent it represents an extraordinary political development that may not always be viable but cannot be stopped. It constitutes a balance of power different from any we have seen before, since the task of those who speak in the name of neutrality is not to diminish or for that matter imitate American power but rather evade it. A dinosaur from some lost age, the United States remains immense and ferocious but belongs to another world.

About the Author

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