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# The Strategic Dilemma of a World Adrift

**Chester A. Crocker**

Strategy is a much debated notion, and there are some who doubt whether it is possible or desirable to have a coherent, grand strategy, or even a central strategic concept such as ‘containment’, in today’s global environment.<sup>1</sup> The literature on strategic thought has grown even as the challenges to intellectual coherence have multiplied.<sup>2</sup> In times like these, policymakers improvise in reaction to events and policy intellectuals struggle to find some basis for strategic clarity. Henry Kissinger’s latest book, *World Order*, seeks to provide – as he likes to say – a ‘conceptual framework’ for developing one.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this essay is not to add to this impressive output. Rather, it is to better understand today’s disorderly mixture of turbulence and drift in relationships among the leading powers and key regional states, and to reflect on its implications for statecraft. This is hardly the first time in modern history that world politics have been disorderly. But today’s examples are stunning in their variety and breadth: a lurch backward towards the repolarisation of Europe; an Islamic civil war spreading across borders in the Arabian peninsula, North Africa and the Sahel; dynamic geopolitics among major powers and regional states in the Asia-Pacific region; and the unpredictable and sometimes half-hearted engagement of the United States and other Western states in managing interventions and crisis diplomacy.

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Some of the drivers of today's global drift have been developing for a number of years, and most are widely acknowledged. But what is striking is that these drivers coincide with and feed into each other in ways that severely complicate policymaking. The evidence of disorder and drift shows up in populist firestorms placing nominally strong governments on the defensive; in direct challenges to national and regional stability that go unaddressed; in a generalised sense that the 'old order' – globally and in turbulent places like the greater Middle East – has been weakened and is not being replaced; in the widespread perception that geopolitical hierarchies are in flux; and in the declining capacity of governments everywhere to cope. Zbigniew Brzezinski argued recently that we live in 'the kind of world in which there is enormous turmoil and fragmentation and uncertainty – not a single central threat to everybody, but a lot of diversified threats to almost everybody'.<sup>4</sup>

Before analysing the main drivers of global drift, it is necessary to set aside some explanations commonly featured in policy journals, media coverage and partisan narratives about the 'causes' of today's malaise. The drivers are deeper and broader than often imagined. While human agency plays a central role in history, the depth of the problem cannot be captured by focusing on Vladimir Putin's revanchist and aggressive behaviour or Barack Obama's equivocating and sporadic engagements in statecraft. Juxtaposing American decline with the imagery of a rising China cannot explain today's turbulence. Such a testosterone theory of world affairs distorts the dynamic and varied sources of power and influence in the international system. Similarly, the campaigns of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) are best understood not as the prime drivers of today's destabilisation but as a reflection of the deeper upheaval within Islam and within specific societies. We are experiencing multiple types of destabilisation across diverse sectors and regions, so it simply will not do to focus on a single factor or driver. While there are plenty of 'trigger' events that serve as catalysts for our malaise, strategic thinking should focus on the underlying dynamics.

Sailors know that when a boat loses wind or the sails luff during a change of course, it loses steerage and is effectively adrift.<sup>5</sup> Today, the international system is in a rudderless transition. Disorder in a world adrift is not mea-

sured narrowly in terms of wars or human casualties, though there are plenty of both taking place. Some recent periods, including the Cold War years, saw more conflicts and more war-induced killing than occurs today.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, human casualties are a direct and powerful metric for weighing disorder, as citizens in Cambodia, Sudan, Colombia and Mozambique will testify. But the impact of today's global drift and disorder is best measured in opportunities lost, problems left to fester until they become critical, power vacuums left to implode, and the political initiative handed over to those who are most determined and best armed. It is not measured in body counts – at least not yet.

### **Norms and power**

Compared to the environment of the mid- to late 1990s, today's international system has been partially re-polarised by a toxic mixture of normative issues and power dynamics. Clashes over norms centre on the place of human and individual rights versus the sovereign right of states (and especially their governments) to dominate their societies and economies and ward off foreign interference in internal affairs. The clash goes back to the early post-1945 years as decolonisation swept the globe of most empires (apart from the Soviet Union). It was evident in 1948 when the General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the Soviet bloc, Saudi Arabia and South Africa abstaining. Freed of the constraints of bipolar, Cold War-era bloc politics, Western and other democratic states promoted and exported Western-inspired liberal norms of good governance and transparency, accountability for humanitarian crimes, promotion of electoral democracy, advancement of gender equity, and the notion of limited sovereignty and the 'responsibility to protect' victims of atrocity. But the universality of these norms was always aspirational. Today, it has become much more difficult than it was in the early 1990s to speak of an 'international community' without noting its roots in essentially Western liberal norms.<sup>7</sup> These norms represent a universalist challenge with activist allies in many countries, notably including authoritarian ones.

The authoritarian, statist backlash has been a gradual process, and was much less visible ten years ago than it is today. Despite the polarising impact

of the NATO-led air war against Serbia over Kosovo and the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, it was still possible in 2005 for leaders to assemble at UN headquarters and approve a World Summit outcome document (based at least in part on the prior work of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's high-level panel) that enshrined principles reflecting some degree of liberal internationalism.<sup>8</sup> These included laying the groundwork for proactive UN steps to strengthen peacebuilding, to set up a mediation support unit, and to make operational the principles supporting the responsibility to protect. Though its roots go back decades, the adoption of the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court in 1998 (and its entry into force in 2002) represented another key milestone in this apparently steady process of building universal norms.

The mid-2000s appear to have been the high-water mark of this phase of liberal internationalism. How different global politics looks today. Russia's appetite for dismembering chunks of nearby successor states of the USSR goes back to the 1990s, but its seizure of two Georgian enclaves in 2008 was a more aggressive response to NATO and EU expansion. NATO's Libyan intervention in 2011 further deepened polarisation in the UN Security Council when Western-led humanitarian intervention resulted in regime change. In the economic and commercial sphere, a parallel phenomenon has taken place as the 'Beijing consensus' has come to rival the basics of the 'Washington consensus'.<sup>9</sup> The Bretton Woods institutions face mounting competition from Chinese banks (and potentially the BRICS New Development Bank), private-sector banks and private-equity funds, and a potent range of sovereign wealth funds. The Western capitalist definition of the terms of engagement for global actors in developing nations remains powerful, but it faces growing competition from state capitalism, as well as crony capitalism under the control of powerful patronage networks. Moreover, political and economic norms easily become conflated in the minds of elites as they define their stances and choices. Issues such as gender equity, gay rights, financial transparency, anti-corruption, external election monitoring, humanitarian intervention, structural adjustment and financial conditionality, the rule of law for citizens and investors – all these and many other topical agendas face a far more competitive environment, both between states and within

individual countries. Championed by Western as well as local NGOs, they encounter resistance wherever authoritarian regimes hold sway. A telling illustration came in Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's remarks on the margins of a recent investment conference, in which he contrasted Western and Chinese approaches. On structural adjustment, he quipped, 'How can you have structural adjustment without electricity? ... The Chinese understand the basics.' On the Western values agenda, he argued, 'You can't impose middle class values on a pre-industrial society ... The Chinese don't have these. They are more practical.'<sup>10</sup>

What is really going on here? To some extent, debates about norms and values reflect the perception (as well as the reality) of a rising China, the experience of Russia's revisionist pushback against various Western policies, and the increasing confidence of other major actors. Power is diffusing, and the relative power of the US and its Western allies has declined from its previous peak.<sup>11</sup> Canadian scholar and former Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff is right to ask if the authoritarian powers are winning the clash of norms and building a globally relevant alternative model with an 'expansionary ideology' based on 'state domination', state capitalism and a rejection of 'moral universalism'.<sup>12</sup> The strategic significance of a potential return to a bipolar global power structure is dramatic. In the first 15 post-Cold War years, the international system was apparently moving toward a more restrictive normative order based on agreed rules, cooperation and growing consensus. It appears that we are seeing a historic reversal, moving back toward a more permissive normative order based on *raison d'état* and the resort by some powerful states to war and threats of force as instruments of foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> If a broader 'return of geopolitics' is indeed taking place, as some observers believe, it is partly because normative change is now linked to a power shift.<sup>14</sup>

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*Power is  
diffusing*

Happily, the situation is more complex than one-dimensional 'reversal' imagery implies. It is by no means clear that the primary authoritarians share a framework of universalist norms, apart from a sense of historic grievance against the West. The backlash is a nasty brew made up of several distinct ingredients: an authoritarian rejection of Western liberal values and

principles, the opportunistic exploitation of Western economic woes and overstretched military resources, an assertive drive to be taken seriously in shaping global affairs, and nationalist reflexes against the long-standing presumption of American exceptionalism. Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd, a close observer of Chinese policy, argues that the Chinese 'see their own tradition as one which does not make universalist claims beyond China. Which ... they hold in contrast with what they perceive to be an arrogantly, irrepressibly evangelizing West.'<sup>15</sup> This, of course, does not prevent China from imposing its nationalistic claims against its neighbours.

Importantly, the authoritarian backlash is only one aspect of today's normative polarisation. The re-emergence of old-fashioned nationalism is another, and it is not confined to Russia and China, but is increasingly apparent in the domestic politics of such very different societies as Japan, France, Denmark and India. The liberal-internationalist paradigm is on the back foot, and a fresh kind of polarisation is driven by the populist quest to reassert national sovereignty and check the influence of elite mandarins in international institutions.<sup>16</sup> There are multiple drivers of the nationalist reflex: uncertain geopolitical environments, tough economic times and threats to the established way of life. Power vacuums are an especially potent driver of nationalism, as the Balkans demonstrated in the 1990s. They are also a magnet for authoritarian personalities who assert the primacy of home-grown values and nationalist traditions against Western-backed NGOs and externally defined norms of governance, as demonstrated in such diverse places as Hungary and Egypt.

There is also plenty of normative variety among the emerging powers themselves. The normative coherence of the BRICS is put into question by an initiative such as the India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum, launched in 2003 to promote the interests and perspectives of leading countries of the South 'to counter their marginalisation' and to promote such principles, norms and values as 'participatory democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law and the strengthening of multilateralism'.<sup>17</sup> The forum's summits, ministerial conclaves, sectoral working groups, and wide-ranging governance and assistance initiatives point to an ambitious vision that contrasts sharply with that of China and Russia. Domestic politics will

likely shape the trajectory of these overlapping relationships. Interestingly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushed to play host to the next IBSA summit in 2015, and early indications suggest that he privileges India's democratic identity as a proud nationalist, even while recognising that geo-economics comes first.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, adding conceptual heft to these ideas, think tanks in Brazil, India, South Africa and the UK have published the results of a joint study on the capacity of democratic, market-oriented countries to achieve fast economic growth and poverty reduction without giving up 'individual freedoms, rule of law, independent institutions, a free press and regular elections'.<sup>19</sup> In sum, a key feature of today's complex normative map is multiple, cross-cutting alignments, presenting the strategist with the challenge of incoherence.

### **Global order adrift**

The end point of this dynamic interplay of norms and power relations is unknown. While there is plenty of polarity, there is less evidence of meaningful bipolarity. Nor is there evidence of an emerging 'concert' of the sort that Kissinger's work features. The international system is adrift because there is an unregulated diffusion of authority, agency and responsibility. Of course, the problem is more severe in some regions than others; reactions and responses to the challenge of diffusion also tend to be region-specific.

For example, the United Nations plays distinctly different roles in different regions. Despite its inability to forge agreement to end the Syria conflict during the 2011–14 period, the UN provided the indispensable aegis for the mediating efforts of special envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi. It would be hard to envisage even the start of such a process without some level of blessing from the UN Security Council. A classic example of UN-based diplomatic choreography helped to frame the tactical cooperation between the US and Russia over eliminating Syria's chemical weapons. The US and Russia hammered out a bilateral 'framework agreement', conveyed it as a 'draft decision' to the executive council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and undertook to achieve the simultaneous adoption of a UN Security Council resolution reinforcing the OPCW decision and creating a joint OPCW/UN mission to achieve the



elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. (The two actions took place on the same day, 27 September 2013.) This ballet closely reflected the state-based normative and diplomatic requirements of Russia (and Syria); therefore, it was immediately preceded by a Syrian 'decision' to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention and apply it on an expedited basis, enabling Russia and the US to declare that their agreement supported the application of the Convention's Article VIII, providing for referral of cases of non-compliance to the Security Council.<sup>20</sup> The final step in this norm-based diplomacy was UN Security Council Resolution 2118 which included reference to Chapter VII measures in the event of non-compliance 'by anyone in Syria'.<sup>21</sup> The joint mission declared its mandate fulfilled at the end of September 2014 after completing destruction of Syria's most dangerous declared chemicals, and 96% of its overall weapons stockpile.<sup>22</sup>

This type of UN role has parallels in Central America and the Caribbean, but none in South America or Southeast or East Asia. In Eastern Europe, crisis management is unlikely to get far in the Security Council. When the time came for a natural-gas deal to be hammered out for the winter of 2014–15, Ukraine and Russia negotiated under the aegis of the European Commission, whose financial support and guarantees, along with IMF support, provided the appropriate institutional context. The home-grown Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, not the UN, plays the lead role in attempting to cool down the undeclared war in conflict-affected areas of eastern Ukraine. By contrast, the place of the UN system in the African region is central – recruiting and deploying peacekeepers, partnering with the African Union (AU) in hybrid peace operations, overseeing the war-to-peace transition in post-conflict countries, responding to refugee emergencies, fielding special envoys to conflict zones, offering mediation support staff to assist African peace processes, and supporting the Ebola response effort in affected countries.<sup>23</sup>

In an age of diffused authority, regional organisations offer a potential alternative or complement to UN and great-power leadership in regional security affairs. In several regions, these bodies are standing up state-based procedures and structures that could, in theory, enable them increasingly to assert their role as legitimisers and gatekeepers of inter-

national action. However, regional groupings such as ASEAN and the African Union also differ in their mandates, cultures and capacities for action to bolster regional order; and few regions are coherent in mobilising the resources to create their own diplomatic and coercive toolkits. Modelled in some respects on European institutions, the African peace and security architecture demonstrates the need for partnering with external states and the UN, which assist with command and control, logistics, mobility and financing.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, there are examples of a resurgent regionalism, but more often security challenges prompt ad hoc, improvised responses within and between regions, and between regions and the UN.

In cases of ‘collective conflict management’, individual states cooperate with international and regional bodies, sometimes adding NGOs and private-sector actors to the mixture.<sup>25</sup> Such spontaneous, case-specific types of collective effort by diverse actors are becoming more common, such as the Colombian peace process,

the protracted negotiation between the Philippines government and Islamic rebels in Mindanao, in the composite P5+1 process (paralleled by private back channels) on the Iran nuclear issue, the complex multinational response to Somali piracy, and the AU–UN–France stabilisation mission in Mali. This composite type of international response to disorder and conflict, in which challenges often exceed the grasp and ambition of any single actor, is tailored to the case at hand. Increasingly, leaders face a world where rules and hierarchies are fuzzy and official mandates unclear. In an environment of new challenges, contested spaces and diffused capacity, ad hoc ‘collective conflict management’ may become the norm as leaders and institutions struggle to respond tactically to problems as they arise.

By definition, however, the problem with an ad hoc system for maintaining security and order is that its operation is entirely spontaneous and discretionary. Where there is a strong cluster of shared or overlapping interests – for example, on Somali piracy – the result is firm coercive, diplomatic and legal action. The Mali operation ‘worked’, in the short term at least, because of French interest and capacity and due to the peculiar decision-

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making dynamics of the French government at a given moment. Mali also worked because there is a strong African interest in checking Islamic jihadism and sustaining the territorial integrity of AU member states; Africans provide nearly 60% of the blue-helmet troops in the UN peace operation.<sup>26</sup> African support provided indispensable diplomatic cover for Paris, which would not have intervened without African and UN blessing, as well as airlift support from several allied states. But Mali also worked because no major power opposed the intervention. Major states see benefit in helping Africa's fledgling security institutions respond to crises rather than stand backing and witnessing the collapse of the territorial order inherited not so long ago from European empires. A mixture of commercial and diplomatic interests, historical commitments, humanitarian and development imperatives, and counter-terrorism concerns underpin the situation. While there is low-key diplomatic commercial competition and soft-power rivalry in Africa, major powers such as China, Brazil, Russia, the US, India and Japan (as well as the Gulf states, Turkey and other Asian nations) view the region as a place to 'do good' and be seen doing so.

This is part of the reason why China has come to view the UN system as the ideal venue to demonstrate responsible great-power status and visibly to provide global public goods. China now ranks just behind the UK, Germany and France in its share of the UN's peacekeeping budget,<sup>27</sup> while its troop contribution now includes small combat units and outnumbers the other P5 members combined.<sup>28</sup> Chinese leaders apparently view these efforts as having 'relatively low domestic and global cost and much potential for gain'.<sup>29</sup>

While it is fashionable in certain Western circles to write dismissively about the UN's role in global security affairs, this misses the point: many other major states, including the authoritarian powers and a larger number of middle and small powers, value UN bodies precisely because they serve as brakes on perceived US hegemonic behaviour and as channels for influencing security and other policies. China's embrace of UN-based endeavours and statist norms – combined with support of other statist countries and a broad range of smaller powers – is a critical dimension of today's order. As Oxford scholar Rosemary Foot writes:

A state-based order with some elements of hierarchy that accords status to countries such as China, and helps promote multipolarity, attracts Beijing's support. The strong and continuing attachment of many other member states to the Westphalian vision of state sovereignty and the sovereign equality of nations reflected in the UN provides more comfort than bodies such as the World Bank or the IMF, where weighted voting patterns give China a lesser role.<sup>30</sup>

What passes today for global order confirms that no one is in charge.<sup>31</sup> It assures that some – perhaps many – problems will fall between the cracks, as vacuums fester and local disorder spreads across borders of nominally sovereign states. And it tends toward ad hoc (if any) forms of conflict response, and the lowest common denominator of international cooperation.

### **Troubled regional orders**

The dangers of discretionary, case-by-case engagement in security crises arise in regions where there is no great-power consensus and unpredictable risks if major powers act unilaterally. It is especially fraught in places where established regional state systems and their territorial boundaries have come under question; where states fall apart under internal and external pressure; and where unresolved geopolitical relationships have been left to fester. In this age of power diffusion, disorder can be triggered by the absence of mechanisms for adjusting, adapting and bridging differences, and by bad precedents that appear to invite destructive behaviour. It is not by accident that there has been relative inter-state peace since 1945, and that outliers such as India–Pakistan, the Balkans, Israel and the Arab states, and the Horn of Africa remain the exceptions to this generalisation. The reasons are well known. The international system has delegitimised territorial conquest, while advanced technologies and economic interdependence render it less attractive. Most important, the Cold War system helped to freeze the territorial legacies derived from European imperial rule and the world wars. Successor states in Latin America, Africa, and much of Asia and the greater Middle East have clung fiercely to the often irrational, externally defined territorial boundaries they inherited, knowing that to do otherwise would open Pandora's box.

But this apparently stable picture faces serious challenges today. The forces unleashed in the early months of the Arab Awakening in 2011 have brought positive political change in Tunisia but civil conflict and violent strife in five other Arab nations. In the Syrian case, this opened the door to the territorial revisionism of the ISIS campaign to found a new caliphate and overturn the boundaries of Iraq and Syria carved by Europeans out of the Ottoman Empire in 1916. Some four years of major-power gridlock and inaction precipitated this challenge, but so fundamental did this new threat appear that many Western and Arab leaders managed to cobble together a military coalition to go after ISIS in Iraq and Syria. On the political front, global and regional leaders coordinated to adopt unanimously UN Security Council Resolution 2178 in late September 2014 directing member states (under Chapter VII)

to prevent and suppress the recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, and the financing of their travel and of their activities.<sup>32</sup>

Apparently, then, ISIS has catalysed a staunch defensive stand on behalf of existing state borders. But these are early days, and it could be a Herculean task to restore the political as well as military basis for regional order. The counterpunch is not helped by the bizarre obstructionism of Turkey, a leading regional power whose president withholds decisive support, instead opining publicly that ‘each conflict in this region has been designed a century ago’ when the Ottoman Empire was cartographically dismembered.<sup>33</sup>

While the regional and global powers disagree about the legitimacy of the Assad regime in Damascus, their actions (and inaction) tacitly leave it in place in order to focus on defeating the revolutionary claims of an insurgent jihadi movement. Syria represents a striking contrast with the strategy of Western powers (with some Arab and African support) when they inter-

vened decisively to support Libyan militias in overthrowing Muammar Gadhafi in 2011. The disappearance of his idiosyncratic regime – odious, but probably less barbaric than Assad’s – removed at a stroke a significant player in Africa’s regional order. The unintended consequences of the intervention were a near-total vacuum of authority inside Libya and a destabilising flow of arms and trained fighters into neighbouring lands across the Sahel, fueling local terrorism and spawning multiple types of militia violence.

After Iraq and Libya it is clear that overthrowing existing regimes may not be good for regional stability and order unless, firstly, there are internal structures that are capable of organising a new government and, secondly, there is external coherence and the political will to support the transitional regime for as many years as it takes to put down roots. Since these conditions seldom exist, outsiders are more likely to be fence-sitters who stand back and resist the temptation to take sides in increasingly ugly local struggles. The result is that the Middle East–North African state system will become more, not less, violent because the use of force by local parties and neighbouring states will be seen as the one thing that works in advancing political goals.<sup>34</sup>

Europe’s modern territorial borders had apparently been settled for good by the late 1990s, when the Balkan bloodletting was finally done. But this was an illusion. The Europe born of the Cold War-era Helsinki process and the dramatic events of 1989–91 had fluid, not stable, foundations. On one side, these included the dynamic, eastward-expanding European project based on democratic, market-economy principles, paralleled by NATO’s own reinvention and expansion to the east; on the other, a skeletal shell founded on the borders of the former Soviet republics. While the Central European and Baltic states managed a successful transition and joined Western institutions, the Soviet borderlands of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia remained in a ‘near-abroad’ limbo or participated with varying degrees of interest in the Eurasian Economic Union and its predecessor bodies. Their fates would depend on their own local circumstances, but also on Russia’s domestic evolution and on the outcome of various East–West experiments in arms-length cooperation and dialogue. A new security order was discussed and debated, but Russia

and the Western nations failed to find each other. As Carnegie Endowment scholar Dmitri Trenin noted nearly ten years ago:

The Kremlin's new approach to foreign policy assumes that as a big country, Russia is essentially friendless; no great power wants a strong Russia, which would be a formidable competitor, and many want a weak Russia that they could exploit and manipulate. Accordingly, Russia has a choice between accepting subservience and reasserting its status as a great power ... The United States and Europe can protest this change in Russia's foreign policy all they want, but it will not make any difference. They must recognize that the terms of Western-Russian interaction, conceptualized at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse 15 years ago and more or less unchanged since, have shifted fundamentally. The old paradigm is lost, and it is time to start looking for a new one.<sup>35</sup>

Debates will continue over who 'lost' Russia, and who is to blame for the emergence of the dangerously revisionist Russia captured in Putin's far-reaching speech in Sochi on 24 October 2014.<sup>36</sup> The Ukraine crisis did not emerge out of thin air. Its roots go back to the failures of Western-Russian diplomacy that left a large hole in the European order, to the venal elite networks ruling Kiev and to the failure of a genuine democratic transformation in Russia itself. The European disorder, like the Middle East-North African one – and the uncertain future of state-to-state relations between China and its Pacific and Southeast Asian neighbours – will not be resolved by pivots or speeches. Nor will disorder in the world's most sensitive regions be fixed at the strictly local level. In sum, the problem is systemic and can only be fixed by the system's leading powers.

### **Controlling the public space**

Another source of the current disorder is the declining authority and relative capacity of the state itself in relation to other claimants. Moises Naim, former editor of *Foreign Policy*, argues that elites in all institutions – corporations, churches, armies and states – are losing their power to dominate decision-making and impose their will on institutions and outcomes.<sup>37</sup> Naim's



hypothesis leads to questions about the impact on local, regional and global order of a world where states (and their governments) are facing growing competition from other players, including ordinary citizens. The underlying reasons for the 'decay' of power, as Naim puts it, include (but are not limited to) the impact of new technologies and social media, which support growing competition from non-state actors of all kinds – civil-society groups, the 24-hour news cycle, corporations and global markets, supra-national institutions, criminal enterprises, and violent militias and terrorists. When the barriers to entry into the public space collapse, the implication is that eventually no one is in charge. Admittedly, this is a gradual process, but the classic image of a leviathan state capable of controlling, coercing, restricting, regulating, taxing and conscripting citizens (and corporations) is outdated.<sup>38</sup>

Yet the impact of weakening states is not uniform across the international system. If states (governments) are losing authority to other domestic as well as external parties, they may be less capable of maintaining internal control, inviting challenges from the street. In some countries, the state will lose control, opening the door to some form of political transition whose trajectory is unknown. In others, the challenge from the street may trigger an authoritarian backlash that serves to heighten polarisation. Sometimes, this may prompt the state to undertake destabilising foreign-policy actions to deflect attention from domestic issues.

Democratic states experience weakness along other pathways: a legitimacy deficit, where populists succeed in undermining respect for national government, prolonged economic stagnation, or political gridlock. In tough times they are likely to cut defence spending and undertake fewer foreign-policy engagements. In Western democracies, weakness can undercut political will and the focus required to sustain coherent policies and the kind of thoughtful strategies pursued by the administration of George H.W. Bush, for example. The fact that this is occurring, as noted above, at a time of renewed global normative polarisation introduces an asymmetrical impact in terms of state-to-state relations. At the global level, such trends could feed into perceptions of power transition and Western decline. The impact at the regional level may include retrenchment by global actors and a further regionalisation of security, potentially enhancing the posi-



tion of local hegemons and raising questions about long-standing treaties and other defence arrangements.

It is important, however, to look beyond and inside national states and central governments. If the power of states is decaying and diffusing, the beneficiaries are not necessarily other states. Rather, the result is that central governments may become less able to maintain local order and deal with the many policy challenges they are expected to manage. Governments could become more vulnerable to the impact of technological advances and demographic mobility on identity politics in a rapidly changing global environment. Today, states must share the platform and interact with an ever-growing range of domestic and international players.<sup>39</sup>

If the state is no longer the primary focus of political identification and is challenged or replaced by language, religion or ethnic group, what are the implications for international order? Over time, the clout of national governments will become weaker unless they can respond more effectively to 'pressures from below ... from restive populations who have acquired a different understanding of the realities they live in relative to the elites in their countries, and [their quest] ... for greater agency in the ways they are governed'.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, when private high-tech firms empower citizens to resist official surveillance of their private communication, the social contract between central governments and citizens comes under strain. This example of backlash against official overreach by Washington and its allies may point to a broader phenomenon: an emerging tug of war between the state and technologically enabled citizens, a contest mediated by private companies.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that the state is on the defensive when the director of Britain's GCHQ publicly attacks 'Snowden-approved' apps sold to consumers and then calls for a new *modus vivendi* between intelligence agencies and technology companies, warning them that 'increasingly their services not only host the material of violent extremism or child exploitation, but are the routes for the facilitation of crime and terrorism ... they have become the command-and-control networks of choice for terrorists and criminals'.<sup>42</sup>

The state's struggle to maintain its primacy as the organising node for international order will play out in various arenas, such as the work of the

International Criminal Court and debates about the state's role in monitoring and governing the Internet.<sup>43</sup> States will be challenged in their response to the rise of non-violent but strategic protest movements – a problem not only for the state directly affected but for all states that have to decide what position to adopt toward targeted regimes and the organised activists confronting them. The dramas of Ukraine, Bahrain, Thailand, Egypt, Bolivia and Lebanon illustrate the dimensions of the problem.<sup>44</sup>

### **System overload**

Challenges to global and regional order are not confined to the high politics of war and peace, or democracy versus authoritarianism. Governments of all stripes and capacities face issues not on the agenda in earlier eras, and their enumeration is almost mind-numbing, including spontaneous migration, Internet governance, climate policy, marine conservation, Arctic navigation, human trafficking, biodiversity and traffic in endangered species, accelerating urbanisation, militarisation of outer space and cyber security. Some of these issues – space, oceans and cyber – could have direct connections to global and regional order because there is no hegemon to impose order in the global commons and few elements of agreed governance. In others – such as migration, climate and the urbanisation explosion – the pathways to conflict and disorder may be indirect, but their potential to serve as force multipliers for conflict and disorder is obvious and increasingly understood.<sup>45</sup>

As noted earlier, the practice of 'collective conflict management' is increasingly common in response to a wide range of today's security issues. When it comes to challenges such as climate and cyber, it may be that the international system and its leading actors are not capable of creating a bold new institutional architecture. As argued by Council on Foreign Relations expert Stewart Patrick, interested governments and others will need to consider 'ad hoc coalitions of the willing, regional and sub-regional institutions, public-private arrangements, and informal codes of conduct. The resulting jerry-rigged structure for global cooperation will not be aesthetically pleasing, but it might at least get some useful things done.'<sup>46</sup> It will be no small matter to orchestrate such cooperation on critically important but not headline-grabbing policy issues in an era of perceived power shift,

normative cleavages, uneven if not discredited global institutions, collapsed or eroding regional orders and decaying nation-states.

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The implications of this multidimensional disorder fall into three baskets. Firstly, it would be unwise to expect an improvement in global political relationships. On present trends, the leading world powers should anticipate a shrinking zone of lowest-common-denominator consensus (for instance, supporting tactical actions against ISIS, approving peace operations in Africa and confronting maritime piracy). Major institutional departures, such as UN Security Council reform to better reflect today's geopolitical reality, seem out of reach. There is little evidence to date of an ability to build an effective security regime in East Asia. The intersection of perceived power shift, normative tension, disorderly regions, weaker states (and their central governments) and new policy issues will confront decision-makers with an ever more complex task of setting priorities. Cooperation and joint endeavours could become more difficult to organise. Disorder comes with times of change, and we can expect plenty of both.

However, as seen above, there are more islands of cooperation and joint activity than this picture of disorder would suggest. This is an age in which leaders in all sectors and regions need to study the arts of cooperation and learn the lessons of success to see what works in fixing problems even when states and societies have very diverse interests and values.

Secondly, in an era of power diffusion and geopolitical drift there are some things that must be avoided. It may be tempting in tumultuous times to hunker down and concentrate on strengthening coalitions of the like-minded. While this reflex is necessary and certainly understandable, it is only half a strategy; heightened polarisation by itself is not a strategy, and it could lead to accidental escalation and violent confrontation when applied in potentially hot zones like East Asia and Eastern Europe. As former secretary of state George Shultz reminds us, power and diplomacy need each other to be effective.<sup>47</sup> When facing intractable conflict, as in the Syria–Iraq conundrum, there is a temptation to find a target to 'degrade and destroy'

with kinetic power; but that, too, is only a partial strategy, and it lacks the leverage required to change the political context on the ground or to reconfirm the territorial integrity of the region's states.

In general terms, leaders need to reflect on the interconnection of the issues they face. This means they must avoid the creation of dangerous precedents unless they have the means to deter others from acting like they do. Coercive interventions without UN sanction in the domestic affairs of recognised states have both normative and structural consequences, as the cases of Kosovo and Iraq demonstrate. Also to be avoided is the creation of vacuums, where external actors overturn one set of power relationships inside a country without thinking through how a new regime will establish itself and acquire legitimacy, how it will behave in its immediate neighbourhood, and what the change will mean for the broader region. Libya's evolution offers a striking case study of this problem. Above all, leaders will need to give greater attention to strategic surprise, to the potential side effects and unintended consequences of today's decisions (or lack thereof), and to the impact of actions in one sector or region on another.<sup>48</sup> The blind encouragement by leading European states of energy integration with Russia is a case study of failure to think around the corner.

The final basket of implications concerns the positive things that can improve security and order in an admittedly disorderly world. Western leaders need to learn to manage that which cannot be resolved today, and establish priorities in diplomatic relations with powerful states including Russia and China. They might reflect – at least by analogy – on the Concert of Europe, where quite diverse major powers developed habits of talking and listening in a forum where their arguments on concrete problems made connection and where statesmen were expected to justify their actions.<sup>49</sup> Today, we may have to settle for less centralised notions, and look instead for ways to maximise our 'coalitional' power,<sup>50</sup> seeking sources of diplomatic leverage wherever they can be found. As the Syria example painfully demonstrates, it will take power and diplomatic leverage to advance the norms we value most highly. Wearing those norms on our rhetorical sleeves may do little to advance them. Strategic leverage in an age of disorder comes when power in all its forms is harnessed to case-specific coalitions and formal institutions.

## Notes

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- <sup>3</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin, 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> David Rothkopf, 'A Time of Unprecedented Instability?', *Foreign Policy*, 21 July 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/21/a-time-of-unprecedented-instability>; see also Doyle McManus, 'Is Global Chaos the New Normal?', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 July 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-mcmanus-column-foreign-policy-chaos-20140730-column.html>.
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- <sup>8</sup> Document adopted as UN General Assembly Resolution 60/1, '2005 World Summit Outcome', A/RES/60/1, 24 October 2005, available at [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/1](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/60/1). For an analysis of these events, see Stephen John Stedman, 'UN Transformation in an Era of Soft Balancing', *International Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 5, September 2007.
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  - 18 See Niranjan Sahoo, 'Decoding Modi's Foreign Policy', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 September 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/23/decoding-modi-s-for-foreign-policy>. Sahoo predicts 'a mix of nationalist-led geopolitics and expedient geoeconomics'.
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- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1,095.
- <sup>31</sup> Charles Kupchan, *No One's World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
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