Two decades ago the abrupt end of the Cold War elicited a pervasive euphoria among the United States and its major allies. The collapse of the Soviet Union appeared to vindicate the Western model of democracy and free markets, and raised the prospect, at least in some US minds, of a more peaceful “new world order” under benevolent American hegemony. The ensuing twenty years would prove more turbulent—and global events less tractable to US influence—than US strategists had anticipated in the early, heady days of the “unipolar moment.” By 2011, globalization and other forces had transformed the structure of world politics by altering the security, economic, normative, and institutional context in which sovereign states operated, and complicated the challenge of building a cooperative world order. These major structural changes included (1) the decline of American hegemony; (2) a shift of global economic power to emerging economies; (3) the declining incidence of war; (4) the rise of a new transnational security agenda; (5) the persistence of authoritarian rule and the rise of failing states as major strategic concerns; (6) the emergence of regionalism and regional organizations; and (7) evolving norms of sovereignty and non-intervention. To cope with this daunting global agenda, states increasingly turned not only to formal treaty-based international organizations. but to more flexible arrangements of collective action.

The unipolar moment

“The structure of the international system is always oligopolistic,” the great French political theorist Raymond Aron wrote in 1967. He meant that world
order has always depended on the managerial role of multiple great powers. Aron, however, did not envision the international system that suddenly emerged in 1991. The abrupt demise of the Soviet Union left the United States as the world’s sole superpower. The advent of the “unipolar moment,” as Charles Krauthammer christened it in *Foreign Affairs*, was unprecedented in the history of the Westphalian state system, in at least two senses. First, the new order emerged not in the aftermath of major interstate war, as in 1815, 1919, or 1945, but through the peaceful collapse of one major player. Second, the new landscape left a single dominant power with no conceivable peer competitor. Not even imperial Britain, at the height of its nineteenth-century maritime influence, had enjoyed such status.

America’s post-Cold War primacy proved surprisingly resilient. Contrary to the assumptions of classical balance of power theory—and the predictions of some officials and academics—US preponderance did not inspire the formation of a counter-hegemonic coalition, either in the form of “hard” or “soft” balancing. During the 1990s, the overwhelming response was “bandwagoning,” as potential rivals sought to align themselves with US power. This was partly a function of weakness. The Soviet Union had collapsed, leaving an anemic Russia and multiple successor states. Europe, meanwhile, was mired in slow growth, preoccupied with German reunification and, more generally, absorbed with the deepening and enlargement of the European project. Japan, so recently viewed as a rising challenger, was entering its “lost” decade of zero growth. Finally, China was engaged with its own internal development and only beginning its meteoric rise. Given this global correlation of forces, the determination of US defense strategists to thwart any “peer” competitor was irrelevant. The ease with which the US-led coalition reversed Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait during 1991 reinforced this sense of US omnipotence. In the aftermath of that victory, President George H. W. Bush heralded the advent of a “new world order” under benevolent American hegemony.

But it was not merely US material power that deterred potential challengers. It was also the open, liberal nature of the US-led hegemonic order, which proved more attractive than threatening to major centers of world power.

---

2 While dominant in much of the global periphery, Great Britain continued to participate in a complex balance of power on the European continent.
Some history is relevant here. In structural terms, as John Ikenberry has written, the Cold War essentially comprised two orders: The first, “outside” order was bipolar and pit the United States and its allies against the Soviet Union and its satellites, with intense competition for the loyalties and resources of peripheral states. The second, “inside” order was liberal, and centered on core “Western” states, notably—North America, Western Europe, and Japan. Relations among these states (and to a lesser degree other partners) were based on shared liberal principles, including common attachment to political democracy, market economics, and institutionalized cooperation, with multilateral regimes governing trade, security, and political relations. In stark contrast to the Soviet system, this was no coercive “empire,” but a consensual system marked by consultation and compromise between the hegemon and its partners, who themselves enjoyed ample “voice opportunities” and were able to bargain over the norms and rules of Western order. In return for shouldering disproportionate burdens, including in providing armed protection and promoting economic growth within an open capitalist world economy, the United States enjoyed a legitimate form of leadership, including authority to shape Western agendas, set the parameters of policy debates, and take the initiative in decision-making.

Reinforcing this optimism was the conviction, most palpable in the United States, that the defeat of communism had discredited the last serious ideological challenge to political and economic liberalism. Francis Fukuyama expressed this sentiment most forcefully in a celebrated essay in The National Interest. Published shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall in summer 1989, “The End of History” contained a provocative thesis: the triumph of liberalism over its twentieth-century competitors, fascism and totalitarianism, was a world-historical development. To be sure, “history” would continue as a succession of prosaic events—“one damn thing after another”—as Toynbee once said. But the human experience would no longer be marked by the clash of universalist world views.

Certainly, the demise of the Soviet threat removed some of the security “glue” binding Western allies to Washington, reducing US leverage. But the end of the Cold War also opened the possibility that the open liberal

international order the United States and its Western partners had cultivated might expand to encompass not only a Europe “whole and free,” but other regions of the globe. The Clinton administration encapsulated this vision in its 1994 *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*. The strategy envisioned gradual incorporation of Cold War adversaries and the developing world into an ever-expanding coalition of market democracies. Throughout the 1990s, the United States worked to expand and consolidate major multilateral global and regional institutions and alliances. This included the eastward march of NATO, first through Partnership for Peace agreements, and subsequently enlargement to include new members; the replacement of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) with a new World Trade Organization (WTO)—to which China would be admitted in 1995; the creation of an Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum; and the negotiation of a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and proposal for a Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (FTAA).

With vigorous support from Washington, the 1990s witnessed advances in economic integration. Dynamic emerging markets were incorporated into the global economy. Globalization accelerated, driven by advances in information and telecommunications technology, new financial instruments, deregulation, and the privatization of public sector assets under the Washington Consensus. Between 1980 and 2000, global trade expanded dramatically, outpacing GDP growth by 280 per cent. The surge in cross-border capital flows was even more impressive, with foreign direct investment and portfolio investment growing by almost 600 per cent.

In military terms, the United States stood unchallenged. By 2000, it spent as much on defense as the next ten countries combined. Clinton administration officials acknowledged the unique US position, but sought to reassure the world that its power would be used beneficently, for all humanity. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright observed, the United States was the world’s “indispensable power,” one that “stands taller and sees further into the future” than other actors. Such rhetoric grated even on European allies. French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine fretted that the United States had become a “hyperpuissance” (hyperpower), unbalanced by other international actors. Nevertheless, as Ikenberry writes, “the twentieth century ended with world politics exhibiting a deeply anomalous character—the United States had emerged as a unipolar power situated at the center of a stable and expanding liberal

---

international order.” The United States was at peace and enjoyed good relations with all major centers of world power—not only with its allies in Western Europe and Japan, but also with Russia and China. “The other great powers had neither the ability nor the desire to directly challenge—let alone overturn—this unipolar order.”

**The US imperial turn and the crisis of hegemonic order**

The election of George W. Bush as US president would transform international views of the United States. The country embarked on an assertive and often unilateral course. The United States, of course, has long possessed an ambivalent and selective attitude toward multilateral cooperation—a function of its overwhelming power, its exceptionalist political traditions, and its constitutional separation of powers. Yet, from the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States had promoted international institutions as the foundation for US global leadership. From the moment it assumed office, however, the George W. Bush administration signaled its desire to escape from these historical constraints. The new president presided over an administration deeply skeptical of the United Nations and other standing international organizations, alliances and treaties. The administration simply doubted their capacity to confront new threats to national and global security, particularly terrorism, rogue states, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The attacks of September 11, 2001 accentuated these instincts, reinforcing the administration’s insistence on absolute freedom of action to defend national security. In an age of catastrophic threats, other countries or international organizations could not be permitted to limit America’s use of its massive military capabilities. The rise of mass casualty terrorism and the proliferation of WMD meant that dangers could arise with little warning from non-state actors, rendering traditional models of deterrence obsolete. Consequently the time-consuming process of multilateral diplomacy became a luxury the United States could no longer afford. By erasing the comforts of time and distance, the new threat environment required a new national security strategy based on anticipation, speed, and flexibility. The Bush administration declared a

---

13 Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan.
“global war on terrorism,” with the Manichean assertion that countries were “either with us or against us in the fight against terror.” The Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy explicitly articulated a new doctrine of unilateral “pre-emption,” expanding traditional conceptions of imminence to include emerging catastrophic threats. In effect, the new strategy embraced a doctrine not of “pre-emption” in the classic sense (as an enemy prepares to strike), but rather a doctrine of preventive war. The administration seemed to be challenging international order, declaring itself unbound by traditional constraints on the use of force. Even many US allies believed, in the words of EU commissioner for foreign affairs Christopher Patten, that the United States was moving into “unilateralist overdrive.”

In contrast to its predecessor, the Bush administration was forthright in its pursuit of global primacy. As the president declared at West Point in June 2002: “America has, and intends to keep, military strength beyond challenge, thereby making destabilizing arms races pointless and limiting rivalries to trade and other pursuits.” By virtue of its overwhelming power, the United States aspired to transcend world politics. Not only would it serve as the unilateral guarantor of world order but, more radically, the country would lead a global democratic revolution. The Bush administration’s grand strategy was, in effect, one of Wilsonianism without international institutions.

The unilateralist thrust in US foreign policy, especially the controversial doctrine of “pre-emption,” was deeply unsettling across the globe. But it was the Iraq crisis of 2002–2003 that most damaged international confidence in a benevolent US hegemony. After failing to secure UN Security Council (UNSC) authorization for military action to end Iraq’s suspected WMD program and enforce past UNSC resolutions, the United States and coalition partners launched Operation Iraqi Freedom. On March 19, 2003, they invaded Iraq, despite the objections of close postwar allies like Germany and France. The collapse of Security Council diplomacy reinforced Bush administration skepticism of UN-centered collective security, while leading many abroad to doubt that Washington would accept any constraints on its power. The episode marked the nadir of US–UN relations.

The imperial turn in US foreign policy proved short-lived. It was unacceptable abroad, suggesting an America that wanted to “rule,” but not be bound by rules. Other major centers of world power—including US allies—considered

---

18 Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan, 270.
such a coercive leadership style illegitimate. It was also unsustainable at home, promising to entangle the United States in unending overseas adventures that required it to bear disproportionate costs and risks. Indeed, despite its instincts, the Bush administration wound up returning to the United Nations repeatedly over the next several years, not only to assist in the stabilization and recovery of Iraq, but also to address multiple trouble spots throughout the world—from Haiti, to Lebanon, to Sudan.

More enduring, arguably, was the Bush administration’s distinct approach to multilateral cooperation itself. Beyond its willingness to act alone, the administration preferred a selective and limited form of collective action, including (as in Iraq) the use of “coalitions of the willing” that could coalesce for discrete purposes. Several convictions informed this preference. First, the Bush administration believed that multilateralism must be a means to concrete foreign policy ends, rather than—as liberal internationalists seemed inclined to believe—an end in itself. Second, the administration regarded many standing international institutions, including the United Nations, as hopelessly dysfunctional, given to lowest common denominator policymaking and reflecting a consensus often at odds with US interests or ideals. Third, conservatives within the administration regarded “unaccountable” international institutions and the expanding reach of international law as a growing threat to US sovereignty and the supremacy of the Constitution. Fourth, America’s traditional multilateral alliances, notably NATO, were of dwindling utility, given widening asymmetries in military and technological capabilities between the United States and its allies; such arrangements reduced US freedom of action without any appreciable benefit. Fifth, the Bush administration was convinced that unilateralism—or its threat—could, at times, be an essential catalyst for effective multilateral action.¹⁹

Finally—and most fundamentally—the Bush administration believed that multilateralism was most successful when it reflected a true convergence of interests and values. Rather than relying primarily on the UN and standing alliances, the United States should adopt what State Department policy planning chief Richard N. Haass termed an “à la carte” approach, by assembling opportunistic and flexible coalitions to address specific challenges.²⁰ A case in point was the Proliferation Security Initiative, a voluntary arrangement under US leadership to interdict shipments of weapons of mass destruction and related technology.

The rise of multipolarity and the decline of US hegemony

By the end of the Bush administration it was clear that America’s “unipolar moment” was coming to an end. Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, pledged the United States to a “new era of engagement.” Central components of this strategy included a return to multilateral cooperation, the collective management of transnational problems, the peaceful accommodation of rising powers, and the modernization of international institutions. His approach presumed an enduring role for US leadership, but placed less emphasis on the pursuit of American primacy.

Obama’s strategy reflected new geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century. Economic and political power is diffusing, particularly to fast-growing emerging nations—notably to China, but also to India, Brazil, Russia, Turkey, and others. By 2010, the developing world was, for the first time, responsible for nearly half (49 per cent) of all global economic activity; by 2025, its share may exceed 60 per cent.

Power, of course, has multiple dimensions, making power analysis a tricky business. Traditionally, analysts have distinguished among at least five categories of power: (1) basic material capabilities, notably military and economic assets; (2) relational power, or a country’s influence over actors and outcomes; (3) structural power, or the ability to define the context in which other states operate; (4) “soft power,” or the normative attraction of a country’s ideology and institutions; and (5) the state’s capacity to extract resources from its own domestic political system. On nearly all of these measures, US power has declined in the twenty years since the end of the Cold War.

Consider material power. When it comes to military might, it is true that the United States retains overwhelming advantages. In 2009, US defense expenditures represented 43 per cent of the world’s total, six and a half times what China (6.6 per cent), its nearest competitor, was spending. When it comes to economic power, however, the world is clearly multipolar. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in 2009 the EU possessed the world’s largest economy as measured in nominal US dollars, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of $16.447 billion, followed by the United States at $14.119 billion, Japan at $5.068 billion, and China at $4.984 billion. (The picture is slightly different if one uses purchasing power parity, in which case the United States still comes out on top, with 20.42 per cent of global GDP, followed by the EU (15.08 per cent), China (12.56 per cent), Japan (5.96 per cent), India (5.05 per cent), Russia (3.02 per cent), and Brazil (2.88 per cent).)

---

Particularly striking, since 2000, has been the dramatic rise of the so-called “BRIC” economies (Brazil, Russia, India, and China).

What is equally clear is that the United States often finds it difficult to translate its material power into effective control over actors or outcomes—a phenomenon political scientist David Baldwin labels “the paradox of unrealized power.” In part, this is because power is often not “fungible” across different realms: for instance, US military dominance is of limited utility in global trade negotiations. But even within the military sphere the United States often struggles to translate technological dominance into desired outcomes, particularly as potential or actual opponents employ so-called “asymmetrical” strategies that serve to level the playing field. A case in point is the decade-long US-led counterinsurgency and nation-building effort in Afghanistan.

More generally, the changing nature of world politics has complicated US relational power. As the “game” of international relations shifts from great power competition to the management of transnational issues, success requires cooperation among multiple actors. Here, climate change is the archetypal example. At a minimum, emerging market economies retain impressive “blocking” power. They are capable of thwarting an international bargain. Moreover, institutionalized multilateral cooperation—increasingly required to address issues from climate to trade—tends to level the playing field by devaluing and delegitimizing the brute exercise of power.

American structural power has also declined. As conceived by the late political economist Susan Strange, “structural power” is the ability to define the global context in which other countries operate. Beyond shaping international rules, institutions, and organizations, the United States during its post-1945 hegemonic heyday dominated the four main “structures” of the world economy: it shaped the “security structure,” by offering protection against the threat of violence in an anarchical international system; the “production structure,” by influencing what goods will be produced, where, and in what manner; the “financial structure,” by controlling the availability of credit and the terms of foreign exchange; and the “knowledge structure,” by controlling the acquisition, development, and storage and communication of knowledge and information.

By 2010, the United States still dominated the global security structure (though it faced challenges in East Asia from China and, to a lesser degree, in the Persian Gulf from Iran). But its hold over the other three “structures” had slipped. This was most notable in the financial

---


24 Hart and Jones, “How Do Rising Powers Rise?”

and trade arenas. The United States depended on massive credit from China to cover enormous US current account deficits and to maintain the role of the beleaguered dollar as the world’s main reserve currency.

America’s soft power, so celebrated in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, may also be a dwindling asset. The coercive turn in US foreign policy during the Bush administration—including an overreaching “freedom agenda” and the excesses of the “global war on terrorism”—is partly to blame for damaging the US “brand,” as well as discrediting (at least temporarily) US global efforts to promote democracy and human rights around the world. Likewise, the US economic model—to say nothing of the long-reigning “Washington consensus”—has been badly tarnished by the global economic crisis that began in the United States itself in autumn 2008 and had devastating international consequences.

Finally, the domestic foundations of US global leadership—economic as well as political—have eroded since the end of the Cold War. Historically, the US-led liberal world order has depended on US willingness to provide global public goods, from an open world economy, to stable and secure oil supplies. America’s parlous fiscal situation, however, is likely to encourage a period of retrenchment in US global engagement, particularly after an era of perceived overstretch. Domestic political dynamics will likewise complicate US leadership, given the collapse of the post-1945 internationalist consensus and toxic levels of partisanship within the US Congress and broader polity.26

In the coming decades, these trends suggest the critical world order problem will shift from harnessing (and sometimes constraining) US power, to managing relative US decline. The trick will be to do so while preserving the stability of the Western liberal order the United States and its allies endeavored to promote and protect for six and a half decades.

The strategic challenge of integrating rising powers

Effective multilateral cooperation in the twenty-first century will depend on mutual accommodation between established and rising powers on the basic norms and rules of international conduct—and on the willingness of emerging players to embrace the responsibilities inherent in their global power.27 Integrating emerging players as “responsible stakeholders” (in the

---

26 This was apparent, for example, in the determination of House Republicans to cut US foreign aid, as well as contributions to international organizations. See Mary Beth Cheridan, “House Moves to Restrict US Foreign Aid,” Washington Post, July 21, 2011.

words of former US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick) will be tricky, for several reasons.

First, established and rising powers are often locked in strategic competition and fundamental clashes of interest. The Obama administration’s 2010 National Security Strategy conceives the major challenge of world politics to be the collective management of shared global problems, adding that “power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero-sum game.” In fact, strategic rivalries persist, and the diffusion of global power is likely to exacerbate rather than mitigate these. The world’s most powerful nations are playing more than one game simultaneously: they may cooperate for some purposes—counterterrorism or financial stability, for instance—but also compete for regional influence, military advantage, market share, and strategic resources. This duality of great power relations is most obvious in Sino–American relations. Notwithstanding their high levels of economic interdependence, the two nations hold fundamentally incompatible visions for the future of East Asian security—one predicated on Chinese dominance, the other on a balance of power.

Second, most emerging powers do not share Western views on global order—at least not entirely—and are determined to test, dilute, and revise existing principles, norms, rules, and institutions to suit their values, interests, and preferences. Whereas the Cold War United States could be confident of normative solidarity within its broad “Free World” coalition, today’s rising powers are at least moderately revisionist in outlook, and intent on being rule-makers, rather than merely rule-takers. Nor do they recognize the authority of the United States—or the wider “West”—to define what constitutes “responsible” behavior—and indeed they are all too ready to point out the hypocrisy and shortcomings in Western conduct. If the main international debate during the George W. Bush administration was about whether the United States should “obey the rules,” it is now shifting to “whether ‘the rules’ as they stand promote or impede the interest of other countries.” One should not expect major emerging countries to endorse a US, or even a broadly Western agenda, simply out of gratitude for being able to join those exclusive clubs and have a seat at the table.

 Accordingly, normative diversity is likely to be a hallmark of the twenty-first century, as the world’s most powerful nations debate fundamental values, such as the appropriate boundaries of national sovereignty, the correct balance between states and markets, the role of religion in national and

---

international politics, the authority of the state to regulate information flows, and the proper foundations of domestic political legitimacy. Cooperation may be especially difficult between established democracies and authoritarian regimes like China, or quasi-authoritarian ones like Russia. (Consider cybersecurity, where the Western preference for an open, private, and largely anonymous Internet collides with a Chinese vision predicated on the principle of state control.\textsuperscript{30}) Established and emerging powers will need to show greater tolerance for pluralism. A crude analogy might be with the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, which involved not simply a multipolar balance of power, but a balance of rights, satisfactions, and responsibilities among major players—within a system capable of bridging differences in domestic regime type and political values.\textsuperscript{31}

Third, rising powers are more inclined to enjoy the privileges than shoulder the obligations of power. Their status as developing countries reinforces an instinct to free ride on the contributions of established nations, including the United States, Europe, and Japan. Most emerging powers, after all, are caught between two worlds. They are status conscious, and seek entrée into, and weight within, the major decision-making forums of international life, from the IMF to the UNSC to the G20. At the same time, they are preoccupied with enormous internal development challenges, including bringing tens or even hundreds of millions of citizens out of grinding poverty. They naturally resist commitments, such as binding greenhouse gas emissions reductions that might constrain or jeopardize their growth prospects and social welfare goals. In some cases, emerging powers lack objective capacities to exercise leadership, adequate regulatory capacity to meet international obligations, or military assets to help guarantee global security. Beyond this impulse to “free ride,” the tumultuous internal politics of many emerging powers—particularly democracies—can hinder cooperation with established powers, as political leaders seek to reconcile an increasingly complicated and intrusive multilateral agenda with complex domestic bargains and the volatile force of nationalism. A common commitment to democracy provides no guarantee of smooth cooperation with established Western powers. Indeed, some of the most robust developing world democracies—Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa—are also leaders of blocs such as the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), whose ideologies put them at frequent loggerheads with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations.

The key question for the future of world politics is whether today’s rising powers—and particularly China—will continue to sustain and benefit from Western liberal world order, or instead challenge that order in fundamental ways, either by promoting non-Western norms, or accelerating the world’s fragmentation into distinct regional orders. Although the future is difficult to predict, the fact that today’s rising powers are revisionist rather than revolutionary offers grounds to hope that the coming era will see gradual adjustments to the status quo, instead of a frontal assault on the existing order. Given the diversity of interests and identities of the world’s emerging powers, we are unlikely to witness the consolidation of a single, coherent, counter-hegemonic (or counter-Western) bloc. Rather, emerging countries will continue to coalesce into more flexible “minilateral” associations and forums to pursue particular interests—as they have already in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—uniting Russia and China with four Central Asian states—the IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa) forum, and the BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) caucus.

Finally, integrating rising powers will require difficult negotiations to adapt existing international institutions to newcomers. Global institutions are, of course, notoriously resistant to change, thanks to the vested interests of current power-wielders. Beyond the inertia of existing structures, would-be reformers typically confront trade-offs between three valued goals: efficiency, legitimacy and like-mindedness. The first of these calls for the smallest possible grouping; the second, the most representative body possible; and the third, a membership that shares a similar normative outlook.

In the wake of the global financial crisis there has been some modest adaptation of institutional arrangements governing the world economy. The most significant of these is the elevation of the Group of Twenty (G20) to the leaders’ level, and its designation as the “premier forum” for global economic coordination. The G20—the only international body in which the world’s most important established and rising powers meet exclusively at the highest level in a situation of formal equality—is arguably the most important innovation in global governance since the end of the Cold War. G20 members have also agreed to modest adjustments to “chairs and shares” (that is, seats on the executive boards and voting quotas) within the international financial institutions, to the benefit of major emerging economies. They have also created a

---

32 Ikenberry, Liberal Leviathan.
34 For a discussion of these trade-offs, see “Prix Fixe and a la Carte: Avoiding False Multilateral Choices,” The Washington Quarterly, 32:4 (October 2009), 77–95.
Financial Stability Board, charged with creating common norms and rules to govern major cross-border financial institutions that might pose systemic risks to the global economy.\textsuperscript{35}

Other institutions have proven more resistant to change. The most glaring is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the world’s primary body for international peace and security, whose permanent membership has not changed since 1945. Barring a cataclysm, such as a world war or nuclear use, reallocating influence within the UNSC will be an uphill struggle. China and Russia oppose any new permanent UNSC members, and the United States—despite the Obama administration’s determination to integrate the Council’s increasing number of rising powers—remains ambivalent at best. On the one hand, US officials acknowledge that the Council is increasingly removed from global power realities, threatening its long-term credibility and perceived legitimacy.\textsuperscript{36} On the other hand, the administration remains skeptical that any conceivable enlargement would be in the US national interest and—even if it were—that the United States could possibly bring it about. For the United States to eventually support and spearhead such a change, Washington would need to be confident that any expansion would be modest in size, and that any new permanent members would be prepared to accept the weighty responsibilities of defending global peace and security.\textsuperscript{37}

**The declining incidence of war**

Among the most noteworthy trends since the end of the Cold War has been the declining incidence of war, not only between states—where it has become extremely rare—but also within them. Globally, the number of armed conflicts peaked in 1992, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, at more than fifty. It has since fallen steeply, so that by 2010 analysts recorded only thirty active armed conflicts in some twenty-five locations. The average intensity of violence—measured in terms of actual battle deaths—has also declined. These changes have been most impressive in sub-Saharan Africa, where armed violence declined from sixteen active conflicts in 1998, to only eight in 2010.


\textsuperscript{36} In November 2010, President Obama for the first time offered US endorsement for an eventual permanent UNSC seat for India, as well as reiterating longstanding US support for Japan.

By 2010, all of the world’s armed conflicts were internal, rather than interstate. At the same time, nearly a third (nine) were internationalized—involving the presence of foreign or international troops assisting one or both of the parties to the conflict.\(^{38}\) Such was the case in Afghanistan, for instance, where the US-led coalition Operation Enduring Freedom sought to bolster the government of President Hamid Karzai against the Taliban; and in Somalia, where the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) sought to protect the beleaguered Somali government from al-Shabaab extremists.

Analysts have proposed several hypotheses for the declining incidence of intrastate war. These include rising levels of economic development, a growth in the number of democracies, the end of Cold War proxy wars, and the actions of the international community. While all have played a role, the most important factor may well be an extraordinary surge in international security activism, particularly through the United Nations. As Andrew Mack of the Human Security Report enumerates, these initiatives include a tripling of UN and non-UN mandated peace operations between 1988 and 2008; a surge of UNSC Chapter VII resolutions from zero to forty between 1989 and 2009; increased use by the UN Secretary-General of special representatives and “contact groups” to mediate conflicts; a thirteen-fold increase in multilateral sanctions regimes from 1991 to 2008; and a dramatic growth in programs for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants.\(^{39}\)

### Transnational threats and security interdependence

It is not only the *structure* of world politics that has changed since the end of the Cold War, but in many respects also its *substance*. For centuries, the primary focus of international security has been managing the balance of power among the world’s leading nations, particularly during periods of rapid power transition. That imperative has not disappeared, as persistent frictions between the United States and China (and also with Russia), and between China and Japan (as well as India) attest. But while great power war will always be possible in a system of sovereign states, the principal national security challenges of the twenty-first century are as likely to be global and

---


transnational in nature, and emanate from non-state actors or forces. These cross-border concerns include both purposive, malevolent threats—such as terrorism, crime, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—as well as “threats without a threatener,” such as pandemics and climate change. This new threat environment poses fundamentally different strategic challenges to the world’s leading states than the management of global and regional balances of power. While zero-sum competition persists in some areas, major powers also find themselves coping with new logics of security interdependence.

Terrorism, of course, is not a new phenomenon. From Guy Fawkes’s efforts to blow up the Houses of Parliament, to Gavrilo Princip’s assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, individuals and groups have planned and executed terrorist acts to advance political and ideological agendas. What has changed is the potential scale of such attacks, and the sweeping objectives of some perpetrators. Terrorist groups have emerged that aspire not merely to local goals, but to undermine global order and transform the international system. Simultaneously, the diffusion of new technologies of mass destruction could provide them with the means to accomplish their ends.40

Despite the death of its leader Osama bin Laden in spring 2011, al Qaeda remains the most dangerous transnational terrorist group the world has ever known. Since 9/11, al Qaeda has evolved from a hierarchical organization into a looser network of affiliates and franchises, with cells in scores of countries worldwide. The experience of 9/11 illustrated how damaging even a conventional attack by a modern terrorist group could be—and how difficult it is for even the world’s most powerful state to respond to such asymmetric threats. Bin Laden boasted that 9/11 had cost the terrorist group just $500,000 to pull off, and yet cost the US economy some $500 billion—giving al Qaeda a return on its investment of a million to one. Were al Qaeda to gain access to, or develop, WMD capability, the implications for global security could be catastrophic, particularly given the lack of a clear “return address,” which could render traditional strategies of deterrence irrelevant.

Beyond the terrorist threat, the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons poses perhaps the greatest threat to global security in the early twentieth century. Contrary to the dire expectations several decades ago, actual nuclear proliferation to date has been limited. Beyond the five acknowledged nuclear weapons states (NWS) under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)—the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom—only four states (India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel) have developed this capability. The world may, however, be approaching a tipping

point. The ongoing North Korean and Iranian defiance of Security Council resolutions, Pakistan’s rapid build-up of its nuclear arsenal, the clandestine spread of nuclear weapons technology, growing global interest in nuclear energy, and the slow progress by NWS in meeting their obligations on disarmament have all eroded the bargain at the heart of the NPT. The development of nuclear weapons by Iran and North Korea threatens to set off regional arms races. Exploitation of nuclear energy raises problems of misuse of dual-use technology and diversion of fissile materials. Perhaps most alarming are revelations about the nuclear black market run by the notorious Pakistani scientist A. Q. Khan, who for years ran the “Walmart” of nuclear arms trafficking. Today, some forty-nine nations possess the know-how to produce nuclear weapons. Even if most states’ intentions are peaceful, the spread of nuclear technology could present opportunities for sophisticated terrorist groups such as al Qaeda to pursue their nuclear ambitions.

Nuclear weapons are not the only concern, of course. Steady advances in biotechnology will “almost inevitably place greater destructive power in the hands of smaller groups of the technically competent.” Given low barriers to entry, compared to nuclear weapons, most experts believe that bioterrorism may present even greater risks. Although likely to be less devastating than nuclear terrorism, biological weapons, including “designer bugs,” could still kill people on a massive scale, cripple public health systems, induce widespread fear, and cause catastrophic economic shocks.

Of course, naturally occurring pathogens are also capable of generating global public health crises. The scourge of HIV/AIDS, which has claimed some 30 million lives over the past thirty years, and which continues to infect more than 6,500 new victims per day, is the most prominent example. Potentially scarier are rapid-onset, short-wave pandemics, of which influenza is the most serious. Over the past decade alone, the world has faced outbreaks of avian influenza (H5N1), so-called “swine flu” (H1N1), as well as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Medical experts concur that with the right mutation, a major flu pandemic could kill tens (if not hundreds) of millions of people worldwide, and cause a prolonged global economic crisis. The emergence of new infectious diseases—and the reemergence of old diseases in new and more virulent forms—makes clear that we live in an “epidemiologically interdependent world.”

---

Over the long term, potentially the greatest existential threat to global security is the looming planetary catastrophe posed by climate change, “the most difficult collective action problem the world has ever faced.” According to the American Meteorological Society, there is a 90 per cent probability that the earth’s average temperature will increase between 3.5 and 7.4 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. The dire consequences of global warming are likely to include melting of polar ice caps and dramatic rises in sea levels, extreme weather patterns, desertification, water shortages and famine, accompanied by mass population movements and, conceivably, violent conflict. While some regions may benefit from climate change, these are likely to be dwarfed at the global level by negative effects. Avoiding the worst consequences of a warming planet will require dramatic cuts in greenhouse gases and major investments in adaptation, neither of which appears on the immediate horizon.

Deepening security, economic, and ecological interdependence is transforming the nature of world politics, increasing incentives for cooperative problem-solving to address mutual vulnerabilities. In an increasingly interdependent world, the challenge for state leaders is to create effective structures of “global governance”—conceived (in the words of the National Intelligence Council) as “the collective management of common problems at the international level.” Governance, of course, differs from government, which implies “sovereign prerogatives and hierarchical authority.” It refers rather to pragmatic problem-solving, through both formal and informal structures. Governance also is conducted not only between states, but international and regional organizations, transnational networks, and non-state actors, aligned in an effort to provide public goods and mitigate transnational “bads.”

The persistence of autocracies and the specter of failing states

Over the past two decades, world politics has come to focus less on great power rivalry than on the spillover consequences of venal or dysfunctional governance in the developing world. The frustrating vitality of authoritarian regimes and the failure and collapse of other states have become major threats to global order.

---

46 National Intelligence Council and EUISS, Global Governance 2025.
The post-Cold War era began with enormous optimism about a global democratic revolution. In fact, the road to democracy has proven far bumpier and uneven than many in the West predicted following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In country after country, politicians have exploited electoral processes, only to subsequently subvert constitutional liberalism, including the rule of law and basic human rights, and to govern in an autocratic fashion. The hard lesson, as Fareed Zakaria observed in 1997, is that democracy is no guarantee of liberty.\textsuperscript{47}

In its most recent annual report, \textit{Freedom in the World 2011: The Authoritarian Challenge to Democracy},\textsuperscript{48} the non-governmental organization Freedom House reported that global freedom had declined for the fifth year in a row. The reasons behind this trend, as Joshua Kurlantzick notes, are various: in some countries, such as Venezuela, demagogic populists have subverted democratic norms to move their countries in authoritarian directions; in others, including Thailand and Honduras, middle-class voters have supported coups against left-wing leaders. Authoritarian rulers everywhere have found support and succor in the examples of the world’s most influential autocrats — establishment democracies in the developing world, such as India, Brazil, and South Africa, have shied away from criticizing the authoritarian tendencies of autocratic leaders, such as Robert Mugabe or the repressive Burmese junta. They ignore their brutality on grounds of Third World solidarity and an absolutist, postcolonial respect for the internal sovereignty of fellow developing countries.\textsuperscript{49}

A parallel global trend has been the rise of weak and failing states. Historically, students of international relations have conceived of world politics as an “anarchical,” Hobbesian realm, in contrast to the relative stability of the sovereign domestic political arena. In the post-Cold War world, the reverse has been closer to the truth. Put simply, the locus of instability and violent conflict has shifted from the interstate to the intrastate realm. Since 1991, the world has experienced very little warfare among states, but high levels of internal conflict and civil war. These include protracted situations of often brutal violence such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where some four million people may have died of war-related causes since 1997. Thanks in part to a major expansion of UN efforts at conflict prevention and

\textsuperscript{48} <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1310>.
peacekeeping, global levels of intrastate violence have declined since the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, internal conflict remains a central preoccupation of the UN Security Council. As of 2010, the United Nations had some 100,000 troops—the second-largest globally deployed armed force after the United States—in sixteen peace operations around the globe.

The “failed state” phenomenon first rose to international prominence in the early 1990s, in the wake of the collapse of Somalia, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the horrific genocide in Rwanda. During the 1990s, the West’s primary preoccupation with such states was humanitarian—a desire to alleviate human suffering. This strategic calculus changed fundamentally following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Al Qaeda was able to launch the most devastating assault on the United States in US history from Afghanistan, one of the world’s poorest and most wretched countries. This persuaded the Bush administration, in the words of the 2002 National Security Strategy, that “the United States is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.” Suddenly, the Westphalian problem of great power rivalry had been eclipsed by risks from “pre-Westphalian” states—countries unable to exercise even the rudimentary functions of sovereignty, with potentially devastating consequences for global security. Such preoccupations carried into the Obama administration, with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warning of “the chaos that flows from failed states.” Her counterpart, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, likewise predicted in 2010: “Dealing with such fractured and failing states is, in many ways, the main security challenge of our time.” This new threat perception has driven a slew of US institutional innovations spanning the realms of intelligence, defense, diplomacy, and development.

Nor has it been restricted to the United States. In recent years, senior UN officials have depicted state failure as the Achilles heel of global collective security, and UN reform initiatives have underscored the need for effective, sovereign states to contend with today’s transnational dangers. As the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, declared, “Whether the threat is terror or


52 This view was captured in a breathless document from the US Agency for International Development of 2003: “When development and governance fail in a country, the consequences can engulf entire regions and leap across the world. Terrorism, political violence, civil wars, organized crime, drug trafficking, infectious diseases, environmental crises, refugee flows and mass migration cascade across the borders of weak states more destructively than ever before.” USAID, Foreign Aid in the National Interest: Promoting Freedom, Security, and Opportunity (Washington, DC: USAID, 2003).

AIDS, a threat to one is a threat to all... Our defenses are only as strong as their weakest link.” Many national governments, particularly in the wealthy world, have adapted their defense, diplomatic, and development policies and instruments to help prevent state failure, respond to its aftermath, and quarantine themselves from its presumed “spillover effects.” In sum, much of the focus of global collective security has shifted from counterbalancing potentially aggressive powers, to assisting fragile, conflict-affected, and post-war countries in achieving effective statehood, including over so-called “ungoverned” areas.

The rise of regionalism

One of the most dramatic changes of the last two decades has been the rise of regional and subregional organizations as frameworks for collective action in addressing this new global agenda. By one count, the world boasted 173 such organizations at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Increasingly, such bodies complement, and sometimes compete with, universal institutions like the United Nations or the IMF. Regional integration is most pronounced in Europe, of course, where European Union member states have pooled their sovereignty in unprecedented degrees. This includes the adoption by a majority of EU states of economic and monetary union, and the EU’s movement, still formative, toward a common foreign and security policy. Notwithstanding the 2010–11 eurozone crisis, European integration remains an historic achievement in a region that for centuries witnessed recurrent, bloody struggles for continental hegemony.

Beyond Europe, regionalism is most developed in East Asia, which boasts a bewildering array of regional and subregional bodies to advance political, security, and economic cooperation. These range from encompassing forums like the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the East Asia Summit (EAS), to more limited entities like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three, and the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula. In the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, East Asian countries embraced the Chiang Mai Initiative, as a form of self-insurance against volatile capital flows. How this emerging Asian architecture will evolve as China continues its precipitous rise—and how it will relate to the enduring US network of (largely bilateral)

US alliances, and the historical US role as guarantor of regional security, remains to be seen.

In the Western Hemisphere, the venerable Organization of American States (OAS) continues to be the most encompassing regional body. At the same time, South American states are building economic and security links through the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), respectively, even as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has sought to organize a populist grouping, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. Perhaps the most surprising advances in regional cooperation over the past decade have taken place in Africa, where the dysfunctional Organization of African Unity has given way to the African Union (AU) and its regional economic communities. In contrast to its predecessor, the AU has embraced an ambitious mandate for regional peace and security, including a doctrine of “non-indifference” to undemocratic transfers of power. At the same time, the AU lacks the robust capabilities—and often the political will—to put its ambitions into practice.\textsuperscript{56}

Generally speaking, the emergence of regional and subregional organizations is a positive development. Chapter VIII of the UN Charter clearly envisioned a role for such bodies, which may be more effective vehicles for addressing transnational problems and providing global public goods. The members of regional organizations may face similar threats, have more at stake with a given challenge, possess closer cultural ties, and have longer histories of cooperation. Ideally, regionalism can provide a building block for more effective global governance, as well as permitting useful divisions of labor with more encompassing institutions. The trend is not without risks, however. Regional bodies can also increase the risk of global fragmentation into competing political, economic and security blocs, and create tensions with universal, treaty-based multilateral institutions, ranging from the WTO to the United Nations. Regional and subregional organizations also vary enormously in their capabilities and perceived legitimacy. At times, burden sharing may become “burden shifting,” as universal bodies like the United Nations slough off responsibilities (such as peacekeeping) to entities (say, the AU) that may be unprepared to fulfill those mandates. Such bodies also run the risk of being dominated by regional power centers, whether China in East Asia, India in South Asia, Brazil in South America, or South Africa (or Nigeria) in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite these risks, regionalism seems destined to grow as an international force.

Changing norms of sovereignty and intervention

State sovereignty remains, as it has been for more than three and a half centuries, the cornerstone of international order. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has come under significant stress. Traditionally, sovereignty has implied four things: supreme political authority over a given territory and population, including a monopoly over the use of armed force; the ability to control movements across its borders, including of people and goods; the ability to make foreign (as well as domestic) policy choices freely; and freedom from external intervention. To be sure, sovereignty has never been sacrosanct, and has often been violated in practice. Still, as Richard Haass has written, “each of these components—internal authority, border control, policy autonomy, and non-intervention—is being challenged in unprecedented ways.”

Take the first dimension. There are some 193 members of the United Nations that possess de jure sovereignty, recognized as members in equal standing. And yet, as the preceding section noted, many weak and failing states lack de facto sovereignty, finding themselves unable to marshal the capacity or legitimacy to translate their legal status into effective action. Over the past two decades, the international community has devoted hundreds of billions of dollars (with mixed results) to advance state-building in the developing world. Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq, these efforts have ranged from East Timor, to Liberia, to Haiti.

Second, globalization is testing capabilities of all states, including the most powerful, to control flows across their borders. The past two decades have seen an explosion of cross-border transactions, driven largely by private corporations and other non-state actors. States are struggling to cope with the swelling volume and accelerating velocity of the movements of goods, capital, technology, ideas and people. They are discovering that beyond providing tangible “goods,” such as economic opportunity, growing interdependence brings increased vulnerability to transnational “bads.” In an effort to regain some sovereign control over these transactions, countries are entering into new bilateral and multilateral arrangements to manage risks ranging from financial instability, to transnational terrorism, narcotics production, WMD proliferation, and infectious disease.

Third, in some cases, states are choosing to pool or delegate sovereign rights in return for the benefits of multilateral cooperation. This process is most

---

58 This section draws on Richard Haass’s 2003 speech, “Sovereignty: Existing Rights, Evolving Responsibilities,” which the author assisted in drafting as a member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff.
advanced within the European Union, whose members have taken unpreced-
ent steps toward economic and monetary union, as well as toward a
common foreign and security policy. Such supranationalism remains the
exception globally. But all states face a basic conundrum of how much free-
dom of action and policy autonomy to relinquish in return for the benefits
of institutionalized multilateral cooperation. The United States—by virtue of its
unexpected power, tradition of “exceptionalism,” and unique constitutional
structure—has been among the most resistant to delegating sovereignty to
international bodies and treaties. But even it is not immune. Under the
Chemical Weapons Convention, for instance, the United States has accepted
an intrusive inspection regime that requires it to open its military installations
and private industry facilities to international scrutiny. Likewise, under the
World Trade Organization, the United States has accepted to submit any trade
complaints to a binding dispute settlement mechanism, foresewing unilat-
eral action. (By contrast, the United States has not joined others in accepting
the International Criminal Court (ICC), on the grounds that it would subor-
dinate judicial decisions in the United States to review by an outside body—as
well as place US military troops and officials at risk of politically motivated
prosecutions).

Fourth, and most dramatically, the past two decades have seen renewed
debates over the limits of sovereignty. There is an increasing tendency to treat
it as something not absolute, but contingent on whether the state meets
fundamental obligations, both to its own citizens, and to wider international
society. According to this emerging view, which has been most strongly
backed by Western countries, a regime may lose its presumption of non-
intervention in its internal affairs in one of two conditions: if it commits
mass atrocities against its people or, alternatively, if it poses a grave threat to
global security by supporting or harboring terrorist groups or pursuing WMD
in contravention of its international obligations.

From the very foundation of the United Nations, of course, there has been a
tension between the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention
(pledged in article 2.7 of the UN Charter), and the UN’s parallel concern
(embodied in the Charter, and also in the Universal Declaration of Human
Rights) with the dignity and freedom of the individual. The contingency of
state sovereignty is clearest in the rise of a new norm, the so-called “respon-
sibility to protect” (R2P), which UN member states unanimously endorsed at
the UN World Summit in September 2005. Intended to help prevent future
Rwandas, Srebrenicas, and Kosovos—instances in which murderous regimes,
or their proxies, slaughtered thousands of unarmed civilians—the norm of
“R2P” establishes that each state has an unconditional obligation to prevent
atrocities from being committed against its inhabitants. (The genius of “R2P”
was to shift the international conversation away from fruitless debates over an
international “right to intervention” toward a more affirmative doctrine of sovereignty as responsibility). Each UN member state has an obligation to protect citizens from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. At the same time, the concept recognizes that sovereignty is, in effect, contingent, dependent on the state’s fulfillment of these fundamental obligations. When a government fails to discharge those obligations, either by making war on its citizens—or failing to prevent atrocities from being committed against them—the “responsibility to protect” transfers to the international community, which may take a variety of actions—including resorting to military force.

The international community continues to struggle with transforming the responsibility to protect into an operational norm. To preserve the fragile consensus, and in the face of considerable “buyers’ remorse” from some member states, the United Nations has placed much of its practical focus on capacity building, in accordance with the principle of state responsibility. What the international community has not yet done is to establish a clear threshold and triggering mechanism for launching more coercive interventions when states fail to meet their obligations. Such debates came to the fore in debates over UNSC Resolution 1973 of March 2011, which authorized the creation of a “no-fly zone” and the use of “all necessary means” to protect civilians from the threat of atrocities at the hands of Libyan leader Moammar Qaddafi.

Conclusion

In *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, his seminal treatment of international relations, the British diplomat and scholar E. H. Carr indicted the statesmen of the interwar years for neglecting the centrality of power in world politics, and for falling prey to utopian thinking. And yet Carr was no pure realist, for he understood the power of morality and idealism in international politics.60

In the two decades since the end of the Cold War, the world has experienced massive geopolitical, technological, economic, and normative shifts. Immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States embraced a privileged position as a benevolent global hegemon, inspiring many other countries to bandwagon with it, rather than oppose it. The result was a brief window of unchallenged US primacy, at a time of deepening global interdependence. That hegemony took a more forceful—and in many eyes coercive—

---

turn after September 11, 2001, when the United States sustained the worst terrorist attack in its history.

That “unipolar moment” proved fleeting. By the second decade of the new millennium, the structure and nature of world politics had altered. New centers of world power had risen, potentially challenging the US-led, Western liberal order. On the positive side, traditional warfare, both interstate and intrastate, had declined dramatically. More negatively, rapid technological change and deepening interdependence had transformed the global security agenda, enabling transnational threats—from WMD proliferation, to pandemic disease, to climate change. Meanwhile, the once-hoped-for worldwide democratic revolution had stalled, leaving authoritarian and failing states populating much of the developing world.

Coping with this daunting agenda will require reinvigorating multilateral cooperation. One approach is to retool and reform international institutions—always an arduous task, in the best of circumstances. Another is to experiment with new forms of collective action to generate global public goods and mitigate global “bads,” whether through ad hoc arrangements or new, standing regional and subregional organizations. And a third is to negotiate new legal norms and principles to make state sovereignty—and its attendant doctrine of non-intervention—conditional on the discharge of certain fundamental obligations.

The world of the twenty-first century is quite different than Carr’s day, of course. And yet the dialogue between the real and the ideal continues. Contemporary statesmen and women, no less than their predecessors, face the challenge of negotiating rapid power transitions, finding common ground amid competing interests and preferences, and developing new multilateral norms mechanisms to manage conflict and growing levels of interdependence. In navigating this age of turbulence, they too must strike a balance between the world as it is, and the world as they would have it be.