Thinking beyond contemporary world order: The report for the DOC Rhodes Forum 2019 — a taster

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Introduction

The 2019 DOC Rhodes Forum will explore dialogue-based strategies to address the dysfunctional state of contemporary global (dis)order. In preparation for the Forum, the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute (DOC) commissioned a review of world order. This review became the report produced for the Forum. Titled *Civilisations, states, and world order: Where are we? Where are we heading?* the report does three things:

- it provides a ‘state of play’ description of the contemporary order, and especially the challenges to the long-standing American led liberal international order;
- it identifies the key obstacles inhibiting the prospects for the reform of that order;
- it identifies, by implication, five alternative models of future of world order.

The report is long, at some 40,000 words. This short paper captures its essence. It is, of necessity, an exercise in assertion. Readers wishing to see the full argumentation and documentation supporting these assertions are invited to read the full report.

Scholars and practitioners have traditionally used two sets of distinct lenses through which to analyse world order: the *politico strategic* and the *economic*. For too long these lenses have been used separately. This is no longer appropriate. More importantly, and this is perhaps the report’s major innovation, we must also use a third set of lenses which the report calls *cultural and civilisational*. 
The increasing recourse to the language of the ‘civilizational state’ by China, India, Russia, and Turkey especially – but not exclusively – necessitates the importance of this third set of lenses. But the report also goes a step further than the highly specialised normal approaches to looking at world order. It recognises that the pursuit of three distinct and separates roads to analysis is no longer useful. The report is thus what Albert Hirschmann (1981) calls a necessary exercise in cross-disciplinary trespassing. This is of course messy, but it reflects the complexity of modern world order.

This article is made up of three sections. Section one details our three understandings of world order – geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural – and identifies the major issue determining the future direction of world order, namely the currently deteriorating US-China relationship; section two looks at the preferred views of world order emanating from the major actors and some scenarios for the shape of future world order. Section three asks to what extent ‘civilisational dialogue’ offers a way to negotiate the reform of the contemporary world order.

1. Looking at world order

The changing nature of the political world order

Put boldly, we have never had a liberal world order, notwithstanding the use of that nomenclature for over 50 years. We have only had a geo-spatially partial and selectively liberal American World Order (AWO) (Acharya, 2017) underwritten by an occasionally “self-binding US hegemony” (Martin, 2004). This AWO is challenged now more than at any time since 1945.

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to talk about the end of a US-led liberal order. These challenges to a US-led liberal order are multi-dimensional. In point form only, they are reflected in:

- the emergence of a “populist-nationalist zeitgeist” (see Higgott and Proud, 2017);
- the emergence of the new “Great Game” in Asia and Eurasia;
- the backlash against economic globalisation;
- US assistance in the challenge to its own order over time through poor domestic policy choices.

It is worth noting here that the internal US challenge to the liberal order did not begin with Donald Trump. While Trump is an accelerator, he is not the original instigator; he is a symptom, not a cause. US policy had been changing throughout the terms of the previous four presidents (Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama).

**The changing nature of international economic order**

The international economic order is in as much trouble as the political order. Five factors are important here:

- Data (presented in the report) supports the argument that de-globalisation, or certainly the slowing of globalisation, has picked up pace; the global trade regime exhibits shrinkage and protectionism has gradually increased since the global financial crisis of 2008.
- This has, of course, dramatically escalated with the development of US protectionist policy – especially but not exclusively towards China – since the second year of the Trump administration.
- There are also genuine questions to be raised about the lasting relevance of comparative advantage as a theory of international trade. This is in an era when trade is principally in services and advanced technology, conducted through complex supply chains, and when opposition to an open liberal trading regime has become the favourite weapon of populist politicians actively encouraging an era of “new mercantilism” (see DOC Research Institute, 2019, pp. 32-36).
- The utility of international economic institutions as vehicles for collective action problem solving and dispute resolution, especially but not only the WTO, are increasingly challenged.
The international financial system is fragile and the prospects of a currency war between the US and China are growing. As Robert Kagan pointedly puts it, “... jungles can grow back” (Kagan, 2017).

The changing nature of international cultural order

Contest at the international level has moved beyond geopolitics and geo-economics and now also reflects a growing contest around issues of a cultural and civilisational nature. This is reflected in a number of factors, four of which should be mentioned here:

- The growing resistance to the assumed universalism of ‘Western values’.
- The re-assertion of the historical traditions of the great civilisations, notably China and India.
- Renewed talk of the prospects of a “clash of civilisations” of the kind initially envisaged by Samuel Huntington (1993) and increasingly underwritten by seemingly politically irreconcilable narratives emanating not only from the historical civilization states such as India and China but even the US. The US position is captured in the words of Donald Trump: “The West will never be broken. Our values will prevail. Our people will thrive. And our civilization will triumph” (@realDonaldTrump, 6 July 2017) and Kiron Skinner, a former Assistant Secretary of State, who saw the Cold War with Russia as “a fight within the Western family” while China, by contrast, was the “first great power competitor that is not Caucasian” (Ward, 2019).
- The Rise of “Quantum Politics” (see Thornhill, 2019) in which digital communication, social media, and atomised, individualist online activity (invariably aggressive and self-feeding) have revolutionised the nature of politics, both domestically and internationally (Sunstein, 2017).

The major challenges to the future of the international orders are multiple, but it is the deteriorating relationship between the US and China over the last several years that provokes the most concern. It has become clear that the trade imbalance in the US-China relationship is merely a second-order problem and the rationale for a much bigger contest
for global ascendency, especially in the contest to be the global leader in the development of advanced technology, artificial intelligence, cyber security, and indeed ideas. Section three reflects on these challenges for world order reform.

2. Preferred visions of a new world order

The US under the presidency of Donald Trump is an *economically revisionist* but *politically status quo* power. Its economic record on globalisation is mixed: massive benefits have been secured for and by US cosmopolitan and corporate elites while other sections of the US community have suffered disastrously negative distributional consequences. This is especially the case in those manufacturing communities that have undergone de-industrialisation.

Politically, the US has not coped well with its declining global status; much of its difficulty is self-inflicted by bad policy choices and has been rapidly exacerbated since the arrival of Donald Trump. Hence, the US wants a revisionist bilateral, transactional, and mercantilist economic world order which puts China back in its place through a process of de-coupling. But in the political order it wants a *status quo*, which sees it remain as the unchallenged global political leader.

By contrast, China, and India, are *economically status quo* powers and *politically revisionist* powers. Both great powers have benefitted massively from economic globalisation and are, not surprisingly, invested in the reform of globalisation, not its overthrow. They are more wedded to wider, dare we say multilateral, international economic reform than the US. But they are keen on the revision of the international political order where they want a greater share in the global decision-making processes than they have had in the past. They want no repeat of past historical humiliations, be it the Opium Wars for China or the legacies of British imperialism in India. They also want recognition of their great historical standing as well as their contemporary great power status.
Russia has been less a beneficiary of economic globalisation and, as a consequence, is less economically and politically invested in international economic reform. While clearly a revisionist power in its attitude to the current world order, its aims are more limited but no less strongly held. Politically, it wants a restoration of prestige lost in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of NATO into what it considers its legitimate orbit after the end of the Cold War. In short, it wants its own sphere of influence. Its governing economic and political elite are also deeply concerned with system maintenance. In the words of Anders Aslund (2019), it is keen to ensure the survival of the Russian “kleptocratic state”.

Europe is something of an outlier from the other major players. It is an unambiguous supporter of an international order underwritten by liberal principles and multilateralism built upon the practices of collective action problem solving via international institutions. It is what I would call a reformist status quo power with lingering love for an idealised multilateral order that never was.

But the EU’s effectiveness as a policy actor has been limited by its self-acknowledged “existential crisis” (EU, 2016) of the last five or so years, the rise of populism and nationalism across the continent, growing opposition to the accretion of power to Brussels, and the Brexit crisis. While the populist-nationalist surge was contained somewhat in the May 2019 elections, it is too early to tell what kind of role Brussels can play in the future debate over world order given the tensions between its in-principle commitment to a multilateral order and the strong nationalist and anti-globalisation tendencies of a considerable number of its member states.

If, on the back of this analysis, we were to speculate on the possible direction of future world order, perhaps five different scenarios present themselves:
1. A partially liberal, but post-hegemonic, order of the kind envisioned by US and European liberals (see for example Luce, 2018 and Ikenberry, 2018). This order would keep much of the diplomatic and institutional infrastructure of multilateralism, but with a greater role for other major states. In this order, negotiable reform is possible provided some accommodation can be found for Chinese and the other emerging power interests. This is unlikely to happen however with the current administration in Washington.

2. Not dissimilar to the first scenario is what Acharya (2017) calls a “multiplex” world order in which reform is negotiable but limited to dialogue between consolidating manageable regional structures like the trans-Atlantic, Asia Pacific/East Asia, and Eurasian structures. Both these first and second scenarios will be reliant on the growing hybridity of non-state actors in international relations to substitute for the limited future reach of international institutions. We might call both eventualities reformist transformations, which are not as strongly revisionist as projections three-to-five.

3. A nationalist, antagonistic, great power order with US and China competition at its core, as seen by US realist scholars and practitioners (Allison, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2018; and Kagan, 2017). Prospects for negotiated reform in this scenario are unlikely in an era of hyper-realist ‘strongman’ politics.

4. An Asian (China) dominated world order as envisaged by Kishore Mahbubani (2018) and Parag Khanna (2018). While economic, political, and social trend data would suggest this is a most likely scenario, a question mark still hangs – and will continue to hang – over the wider attractiveness of the Chinese model for the future of that order. Resistance in Asia to Chinese political influence is much stronger than resistance to China’s growing economic position.

5. Finally, the current interest in civilisational dialogue suggests that a multi-civilisational world order is not impossible (Coker 2019; Rachmann, 2019). Not unlike the nationalist model (scenario three), this suggests an irreconcilable ideological standoff, contest, and polarisation amongst the major competing ‘civilisations’ with the prospect of negotiated reform highly improbable.
3. Can ‘civilisational dialogue’ be a vehicle for negotiating world order reform?

The preceding discussion of attitudes to the current world order leads us to pose the ‘so what?’ question of how discussions over the future of world order might proceed. The growing debate over the role of civilisational states is causing some international voices to advocate global civilisational dialogue. Indeed, that is the self-assigned mission of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute. It is an undoubtedly laudable aspiration. But the pursuit of such a goal must be tempered by the reality of the cold light of day. While the report prepared for the Rhodes Forum treats the aspiration seriously, one of its major tasks has been to highlight the constraints that world order reform in the current era faces. Six constraints should be listed here:

- The negative impact of the rise of ‘quantum politics’ and the changing nature of political dialogue.
- The negative impact of enhanced civilisational and cultural difference that is enhancing conflict and coercion at the expense of consensus and cooperation.
- The venues and agents of dialogue are under strain and weakening. Specifically, we are seeing a decline in diplomacy as both an institution and a set of practices and a decline in multilateral institutions as venues for collective decision making.
- Growing disillusionment with (liberal) democracy as an instrument of ‘voice’.
- The dominant role in international politics of ‘strong man’ leaders of major powers, characterised by narcissistic and authoritarian personality traits. And note, they are all men – Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jair Bolsonaro, Benjamin Netanyahu, Mohammed Bin Salman, Rodrigo Duterte; and also the frustrated, still democratically constrained, ‘wannabe’ strongmen leaders such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson.
- The under-representation of women. A dialogue excluding more than 50% of the world’s population is inevitably destined to be limited and lacking legitimacy.
Conclusion: What can be done to advance a negotiated global dialogue?

Creating a meta-narrative of culture and civilisation, despite being several millennia in the making, has not and will not come about overnight. As one observer has noted,

“Moral narratives have enabled humanity to extend their cooperative units from the family to the tribe to the village to the city-state and from there to empires and nations. We now require narratives that enable us to extend our social and political boundaries to address the global problems arising from our global economy” (Snower, 2019).

Our genetic and cultural evolution has not yet extended to global cooperation. It has to be the next step. But the paradox of organisation and atomisation fuelled by ‘quantum politics’ and social media far outweigh humanity’s capacity for cooperation, let alone its ability to build a global civilisational dialogue. The rises of Huntingtonian “clashism” (Nossal, 2019) and irreconcilable civilisational narratives, perhaps as much if not more so than geopolitical and geo-economic conflict, are emerging as the major problems facing global order. We need an as yet unsecured system of cross-cultural discursive and negotiating practices that operate across multiple levels if we are to advance a dialogue of civilisations.

Specialists who work on questions of international order are not serving us well in this regard. International relations scholarship and practice needs innovative forward-looking thinking of the kind more likely to be found in management studies, behavioural economics, and psychology, as opposed to the standard “re-view mirror” thinking captured in the current obsession of international relations scholars with Thucydides-style analysis of the implications for the present day of war between Sparta and Athens over 2000 years ago (Allison, 2018). For sure, historical analogy has its analytical place, but it is clearly a deterrent to forward-looking innovative thinking.
Unlike the scholar of international relations, the behavioural economist and the psychologist would tell us that we need to link any discussion of world order to concrete interactions between people. The actors in this game are people, not civilisations. And the concept of ‘civilisation’ is a social and cultural representation. Dialogues between civilisations are interactions – speech acts and conversations – between people. Dialogue occurs in a series of fields that comprise different – individual, institutional, and cultural – moral orders. We must ask who has the right and the power to start, take part in, and conclude a dialogue? To answer these questions, we need to map the different storylines used in ‘civilisation-speak’ and analyse the basis of their competing moral positions. These processes are the precursors of the development of any civilisational dialogue. A task of the 2019 Rhodes Forum will be to seriously explore these processes.

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References


