

Global (Dis)Order
international policy programme

The arrival of the multi- order world and its geopolitical implications

Trine Flockhart, European University Institute

Abstract

This article argues we are now in a multi-order world rather than a multipolar world. Portraying the world as multipolar belies the complexity, significance, and extent of recent changes and could have disastrous policy consequence. As signified by the current turbulence within the liberal international order, in a multi-order world, relationships within orders are as important as relations between orders. In this more complex, fragmented, and diversifying world, there is danger of the liberal international order splitting in two. At the same time, cultural diversity may be a positive aspect of the new ordering architecture. The concept of a multi-order world adds theoretical space to see new actors of global and international significance and to focus on the global structure of relations in addition to shifting patterns of power.

Introduction

Is global order a thing of the past? Is the liberal international order fraying and what is happening to previously stable alliances and cooperative relationships such as the transatlantic relationship or the relationship between the United States and Canada? Not such a long time ago, these questions would have been regarded as alarmist, but today the prospect of large-scale order transformation is part and parcel of daily debates. This rupture is probably as important as the transformation that followed the end of the Second World War, and together with the simultaneous transformations in technology and science, the impact on people and societies may well be on par with the Industrial Revolution. As Gramsci wrote from his prison cell, we live 'in times of monsters' where 'the old world is dying and the new one struggles to be born'(Gramsci & Buttigieg 1992). In these circumstances, we see the political consequences in populist parties as voters seek certainty in an uncertain and turbulent world, whilst policymakers struggle to find their feet in the emerging world and seek to manage the fallout from the ending of the old world.

To ensure that the policy decisions of today are relevant for the geopolitical reality of tomorrow, policymakers must have a clear sense about the likely outcome of the ongoing transformation – in other words what kind of global order will be in place and what kind of relationships can be expected within it? These are big and complex questions that have no easy answers, yet many scholars and policy practitioners seem to already have their answer - the world will be multipolar (Ashford 2023; Bekkevold 2023; Borrell 2021). At least anecdotally, it seems there is widespread agreement that the international system is transforming from a unipolar system anchored in American hegemony, to a multipolar system reflecting the shift of power to a larger number of states. However, although the idea that the international system will be multipolar is persuasive, and although the use of analytical concepts such as polarity can be useful for gaining an overview of complex matters, we must be aware that polarity as a concept rests on a specific form of analysis that tends to emphasize states, sameness, power and interest, and which is only partially sighted when it comes to values, identities, lesser powers and complexity. I worry that the focus on multipolarity, means that policymakers are trying to understand the current order transformation through conceptual lenses that are blurred and not very relevant.

This article presents a different position. It starts from the counterintuitive position that it is logically implausible for the global ordering architecture to return to an international system that was in place a century ago. Those suggesting that we are currently witnessing a return to multipolarity emphasise shifts in the global distribution of power and the rising number of powerful states, most notably China. These are certainly important changes, but

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other important changes are overlooked, which suggest a fundamentally different global ordering architecture is in the making. Continuing to portray the world as multipolar belies the complexity, significance, and extent of many other important changes. This paper presents an alternative interpretation of the ongoing global order transformation, demonstrating why it will be neither bipolar nor multipolar but rather multi-order.

A multi-order world is a global ordering architecture consisting of several international orders. Gramsci was right that order transformations take time, so the multi-order architecture is still in development, but can be glimpsed through the existence of three independent international orders already clearly visible within the global ordering architecture - the American-led liberal international order (albeit that American leadership under Trump is currently in question), the Russian-led Eurasian order, and the Chinese-led Belt and Road order.¹ Other orders and other forms of relationships of importance are also in the making suggesting a more complex architecture than a multipolar one. The paper does not claim to present a full picture of the emerging ordering architecture but seeks merely to demonstrate the importance of embracing new thinking to contemplate the possibility of an entirely new form of international system in which multiple international orders with very different dynamics and different behavioural patterns make up the global ordering architecture. The perspective brings into light important relationships and dynamics that are not readily apparent in the multipolar perspective – especially that relationships within orders are just as important as relations between different international orders, and it leaves room for considering other aspects than powershifts and for acknowledging the importance of other actors than just a handful of “pole states”. I argue that awareness of the subtle differences between the multi-order architecture and more traditional polarity-based understandings is an essential first step towards timely strategic policymaking fit for the multi-order world.

The paper proceeds in four moves. First, I outline three significant events over the past four years which only partially fit the polarity-based narrative. Second, I outline the multi-order perspective by focusing on order as a condition, a social domain, and as practices of ordering. Thirdly, I show how changes in three characteristics of the global system indicate a multi-order world rather than a multipolar one. Finally, I briefly consider some of the broader geopolitical implications of a multi-order world and demonstrate the importance of ordering dynamics within and between international orders. The picture that emerges challenges some of the most foundational assumptions about international relations and global order including the prospect of achieving convergence around common rules in multilateral governance to meet shared challenges.

Three challenges to the existing order and the limits of polarity thinking

The discipline of international relations and the thinking of policy practitioners has long been permeated by traditional realist thinking, seeing the international system as anchored in just three features: the condition of anarchy; the necessity of self-help; and the distribution of capabilities among its major structure-producing states (Græger et al. 2022). According to

1 I first presented the argument for a multi-order world in the prize-winning article 'The coming multi-order world' (Flockhart, 2016) and have since elaborated on it in several articles (Flockhart, 2020, 2021, 2024b, 2024a). The development and future prospect of governance in the multi-order world is the subject of an on-going research project: Anticipating Governance in the Multi-Order World.

this view, the first two features are static; therefore, structural change is only possible through change in the distribution of capability (power) between the system's main states (Waltz 2010). This line of thinking produces elegant and persuasive arguments, but rather than seeing the transformation of the global order as a harbinger of new and often unexpected forms of behaviour, it works on the premise of business-as-usual and assumes predictability and sameness of the units in the system. Most importantly, it cannot explain, and did not anticipate, many unexpected recent shocks in global politics, including why Russia would risk its international standing and (seeming) domestic stability by invading Ukraine, why China and indeed a large segment of the Global South would side with Russia (or at least not protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine), or indeed why the USA under the Trump Administration is willing to risk its standing and domestic stability by taking a wrecking ball to the global ordering architecture and the liberal international order – which were built by, and for, the USA.

Shock 1 – The Russian invasion of Ukraine

When Russia in the autumn of 2021, undertook the biggest mobilisation of troops and equipment since the Second World War, all indications pointed towards preparations for war. Yet, the prospect of a war of conquest in Europe was so shocking that many simply could not contemplate that Russia was preparing a full-scale invasion of Ukraine – nor why such a move would be in Russia's interest. When the invasion took place, it was a shock, not just because Europe witnessed a war of conquest directed at a neighbouring sovereign state but because once the shooting started it was quickly understood that the war was not just an attack on Ukraine, but an attack on the European security order and on the liberal international order and a challenge to the legitimacy of the global rules-based order (Risse 2022). It showed beyond doubt that previously held assumptions about how states conduct themselves in the global context were no longer valid and that long established rules and practices were no longer accepted by Russia. But can the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine really be explained as a return to multipolarity? Russia certainly claimed that its actions should be seen in this context, implying that Russia is a great power within a multipolar system – but with an economy roughly the size of Italy's, Russia is strictly speaking not a 'pole' except in terms of its possession of nuclear weapons. A more persuasive explanation of the Russian invasion is that Putin's ambitions were to build a Russian-led Ruski Mir sphere of influence (Gvineria 2025). Had a multi-order perspective been applied, it would have been clear from the start that Russia was building its own international order and simultaneously rejecting the established practices of the global rules-based order (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022).

Shock 2 – Support for Russia from the Global South

That the existing order was rejected not only by Russia, but by a wider circle of states as well, subsequently became clear in several ways. Little attention had been paid to a meeting taking place between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing at the Winter Olympics just three weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The two leaders met to sign a document codifying their 'unlimited friendship' and outlining their vision for 'entering a new era'². Within the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the extensive document took on a meaning as a 'manifesto for order transformation', detailing Moscow's and Beijing's views on strategic threats, their shared (albeit rather distorted) understanding of democracy, and their grievances against

2 "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," issued on February 4, 2022. Available online on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website.

American leadership (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022). To the surprise of many in the West, it subsequently became clear that it was not only Russia and China rejecting the existing order and preferring a multipolar rather than a unipolar world. Many states, primarily in the Global South, shared Russia and China's misgivings. The extent of the rejection/contestation of the existing order became clear when the UN Assembly voted on 2 March 2022 to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Not only did 4 states apart from Russia (Belarus, Eritrea, Syria, and North Korea) vote against the resolution but a full 35 states, including China, abstained. Since then, and despite the clear illegality (and the rather obvious parallels to colonial subjugation) of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many states from the Global South adopted a position of deliberate neutrality to Russia's war in Ukraine (Götz, Gejl & Knudsen, 2023), and several important states such as India, South Africa, and Brazil pursue a deliberate geopolitical fence-sitting strategy. The voting patterns, and the subsequent behaviour of these states, demonstrated that the existing global rules-based order is contested, and that the Global South largely accepts Russia and China's order building projects and position themselves as "swing states" pursuing transactional policy objectives in the emerging space between the new order constellations. This form of behaviour is fully in line with the multi-order perspective, whereas the role of the 'swing states' in the multipolar perspective is secondary.

Shock 3 – The withdrawal of the United States from the liberal international order

Perhaps the most shocking development is the apparent withdrawal of the United States from the liberal international order and its upending of long-established security practices in NATO. Allies of the United States were already concerned about the Trump Administration's commitment to Europe and to the liberal international order when Vice President J.D. Vance delivered his controversial speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025. To the shock of the audience at the prestigious conference that traditionally celebrates the transatlantic relationship, Vance suggested that Europe's greatest threat isn't Russia or China, but an 'enemy within' which Vance identified as European democratically elected political leaders³. The concern in Europe and amongst America's allies has since deepened in reaction to the Trump Administration's handling of peace negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, which showed disregard for Ukraine and European allies but a positive attitude towards Russia. Over the summer of 2025 the extent of the crisis gradually became clear as Trump's tariff policy created upheaval in the global trading system and the Trump Administration doubled down on territorial threats against its close allies, Canada and Denmark, whilst continuing to seemingly be taking Russia's side in the question of the war in Ukraine. With the publication in November of the new US National Security Strategy⁴, there was no longer doubt that the events of the previous months constituted a voluntary retreat by the United States from its role as the leading state of the liberal international order and – even more shockingly – that the strategy rests on a peculiar buy-in of Russia's and China's visions of a multipolar world (Wieslander 2025).

There is much to say about the motivations behind the decisions of the Trump Administration, which considerations of space do not permit to engage with. However, from the perspective of this article, what is interesting is that we are witnessing substantial changes in relationships

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3 See the full transcript in Munich Security Conference 2025, Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions, Volume II of the Series "Selected Speeches held at the Munich Security Conference" edited by Benedikt Franke.

4 President of the United States. (2025). National Security Strategy. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

within the liberal international order, which might have far-reaching consequences for European security and lead to further fragmentation of the global ordering architecture as the liberal international order might split into two orders. This is a possible outcome the polarity perspective cannot contemplate. I will demonstrate later in the article how the multi-order perspective can indeed explain the events of 2025 because it can incorporate changes other than power shifts, including the important changing dynamics within the existing international orders.

The multi-order world - order, orders, and ordering

To unpack the multi-order argument, we need to look more closely at the concept order by distinguishing between: 'order as a condition' expressing certain rules and values to guide behaviour to a specific goal; 'orders as social domains' in which the condition of order is constituted; and 'ordering' as relational practices that take place both within and between the ordering domains in the global ordering architecture. Each of these is the subject of extensive literatures, but I only briefly introduce them here.

Order as a condition

Order is difficult to define because order cannot be separated from values, which means that we must always ask – whose values? In the Global South, in Russia and China, the answer to 'whose values' is easy as the dominant idea of order is unquestioningly tied to western liberal values. Apart from asking 'whose values?' – we must also ask 'what kind of values?' Hedley Bull argues that order is constituted through rules-based patterns of behaviour to ensure a very specific purpose (Bull 1995: 7). For Bull the primary purpose is to safeguard life against violent death; ensure that promises once made will be kept; and that agreements once entered into will be respected (Bull 1995: 5). Bull saw these as the fundamental goals of social life and as universal values. But a society must also have other more positive values to ensure an appealing and fulfilling life⁵. For order to provide more than mere existence, we must invoke other, more positive values that entail a prospect of a good life – without falling into the trap that the good life equals a life based on Western/liberal values. I consider this particular purpose to be contained in a society's vision for the 'good life' – the main expression of a society's sense of purpose, cohesion, and salience.

I place the concept of the good life on centre stage within the multi-order perspective because it encompasses the values and visions that provide the glue of any society without specifying what, or whose, those values are. All societies must have a shared vision for the good life – even if the actual achievement of it might be a distant and uncertain prospect (Cooper 1985). The idea of the good life can add to our understanding of the condition of order as consisting of two kinds of values – a negative form, that without a minimum degree of security of life, truth, and property, a society cannot exist; and a positive form - that with a shared sense of the good life, a society has a moral compass for appropriate behaviour and a vision for the future. The polarity perspective primarily focuses on the negative form, which is what allows for the assumption

5 These 'other values' were implicitly western values in Bull's writing, which effectively meant that Bull's conception of the 'condition of order' was essentialist.

of sameness – once the positive aspect of the good life is included, we must accept a level of difference that goes against the essence of the polarity perspective. Most importantly, acknowledging the importance of the good life and that all societies have their own vision, means that order cannot be universally associated with western values.

Orders as social domains

When international order is invoked as a noun – as ‘the international order’ - the meaning is not very clear because an international order is what Searle (1997) refers to as a social fact: something that exists only through human agreement and is created through practices and shared ideas. It can be useful to think of an international order as an ideal-type social domain, consisting of specific constitutive elements. An ideal-type international order can be conceptualized as a social domain in which states cluster around a leading state, adhere to shared norms and practices and display a convergence around the order’s vision of the good life. An ideal-type ordering domain consists of four elements: three changeable elements (power, principles, and practice)⁶ arranged around a relatively stable element – the good life (Flockhart 2021). All ordering domains will undertake change and adaptation in their constitutive elements in response to events and influences from outside the order. The vision of the good life on the other hand, must remain stable, because change of the vision of the good life, will mean that a transition into a new ordering domain has taken place – this aspect of transformation is completely invisible to the polarity perspective, yet as we have seen in the case of Trump’s changed vision of the American vision for the good life, such changes have significant impacts.

Ordering practices of self- and difference governance

We must also consider the many relational processes of ordering through which order is constituted. Here it is necessary to distinguish between two forms of ordering: ordering within a social domain, which are ordering practices of self-governance, undertaken to maintain the domain’s resilience in accordance with its vision of the good life; and ordering between ordering domains, which are ordering practices of diversity governance between ordering domains that have different visions of the good life, but must coexist despite their differences within the global rules-based order⁷.

Ordering within - An ordering domain is internally resilient when it can continuously adapt in response to changes in its external environment to remain fit for purpose in accordance with its vision of the good life. Ordering domains are constantly bombarded with different forms of stimuli from the external environment with a potential of destabilising one or more of the domain’s constitutive elements of power, principle or practice or its vision of the good life. Ordering domains undertake ordering practices of self-governance to ensure a logical coherence through all constitutive elements being in alignment with each other. For example, if developments in the external environment make established practices dysfunctional, the other elements might also need to change to maintain the internal coherence of the ordering domain. Such changes will most often be associated with changes in contested or out-dated norms such as inequality based on gender, race or religion. More rarely change can be associated with the patterns of power and/or changes in the vision of the good life – these are the forms of

6 The power element refers to how relations within a society are managed, especially if the ordering domain is managed through consent or coercion; the principles element refers to the norms, rules, and values that define appropriate behaviour in alignment with the ordering domain’s vision of the good life; and the practice element refers to practices performed through a range of formal and informal institutions to optimise the prospects of realising the vision of the good life while maintaining the society’s cohesion and functionality.

7 For a more in-depth description of the ordering within and between processes see Flockhart 2024b

changes that are currently taking place within the liberal international order under the second Trump Administration, which clearly has a major impact on the liberal international order and on long-established security practices and institutions. Such changes are all but invisible to the polarity perspective, which has very little to say about the nature or consequences of ordering within.

Ordering between - Order also has an external quality that must be achieved in relations between ordering domains. As ordering domains are different on account of their individual visions of the good life and differences in their elements of power, practice and principle, they must engage in ordering practices of diversity governance to create the conditions necessary to facilitate the provision of public goods and peaceful and sustainable coexistence. However, diversity governance is complex because each ordering domain reacts to external stimuli according to its individual conditions, its specific vision of the good life, and its patterns of power, principles, and practice, which inevitably produces divergence rather than convergence between the ordering domains. The challenge for diversity governance is therefore to find opportunities for constructive interactions between different ordering domains. This diversity is overlooked by the polarity perspective, which only focusses on the power element and assumes similarity rather than difference.

Global order and changes beyond shifting power

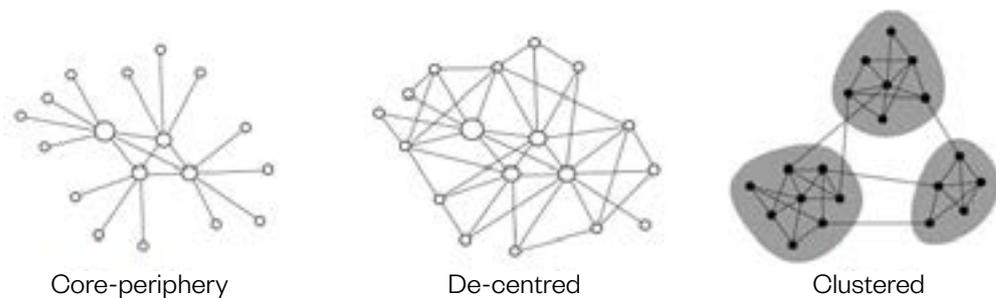
The emphasis on powershifts in the polarity literature is problematic – not because powershifts are not important – they are – but because the polarity perspective privileges powershift over all other forms of change. Yet important changes have happened in the global order beyond shifts in the patterns of power. When viewed through the prism of a relational ontology (Kurki 2020; Pugh & Chandler 2021; Qin 2018), it becomes apparent that the polarity perspective imposes a simplicity which obscures the global ordering architecture's relational complexity, compositional multiplicity, and ideational diversity. I argue that the current transformation must be viewed as more than shifting patterns of power between sovereign (pole) states and I draw attention to changes in the relational, compositional, and ideational patterns of the global ordering architecture.

Shifting relational patterns

Rather than global order being premised on a small number of atomistic sovereign states, global order from a relational perspective can be understood as a condition constituted relationally within what Milja Kurki calls 'the mesh' – the relational pluriverse that encompasses the turbulence and complexity of global life, reflecting different ways of seeing, doing, being, and relating in the world (Kurki 2020: 128). The relational perspective provides a more fine-grained picture of global life, which includes the interactive potentialities of many non-linear processes, dynamics, events, and relationships anchored in other considerations than shifting patterns of power. To be sure the relational perspective adds a level of complexity that is less elegant than the parsimonious understanding in the polarity perspective, but it is worth taking into account because casts light on forms of relationships that are invisible in the polarity perspective such as trade, migration, communication and more.

Some of the complexity arising from the relational perspective can be managed through invoking what Thorstein Kristinsson (2022) has termed the 'structure of global relations', which refers to the 'aggregate of meaningful relationships that exist in world politics at any given time' (Kristinsson 2022: 40). Kristinsson demonstrates how the structure of global relations has changed in the last century from a core-periphery structure, which coincides with multipolarity, to new, complex patterns of decentred relationality, which have coincided with de-colonization and the acceleration of globalization. I add to Kristinsson's argument, the relational pattern of 'clustering' (Flockhart 2024), as it seems that the de-centering of relational patterns is increasingly complemented with relational patterns of clustering around selected leading states. This development is invisible to the polarity perspective, but it is consistent with the idea of a multi-order world and seems indeed to be an emerging feature of the structure of global relations. The development is graphically illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: Structures of global relations (adapted from Kristinsson, 2022)



Shifting compositional patterns

The traditional focus on states and their material distribution of capabilities within the international system has not only led to the view that the important units in the system are states but also to assumptions about the sameness of those units. In contrast, Justin Rosenberg (Rosenberg 2016; Rosenberg & Tallis 2022), argues that the main feature of the international is the societal multiplicity of global life, thereby emphasising difference rather than sameness. In this view of global life, ordering domains can take many different forms, including clans and tribes, professional and policy networks, large social entities, such as states, cities and regions as well as composite entities, such as international orders. The many different forms of social entities (ordering domains) co-exist in a complex system of layered, connected and nested relationships ranging from the local to the global level, allowing us to distinguish between different levels of ordering such as the state level, international level and the global level. It is especially important to distinguish between the 'global rules-based order' and the different international orders existing within the global order (liberal international order, Chinese-led Belt and Road order and Russian-led Eurasian order). The global rules-based order is an 'unbounded' (nearly) universal ordering domain (Mearsheimer 2019), while the international orders are 'bounded' ordering domains – i.e. clusters of states converging around a leading state and sharing a vision of the good life. While there can be only one global order, several international orders can coexist within it. The global rules-based order and the liberal international order are often conflated, and the terms are used inter-changeably. Whilst this is not surprising as they have always been deeply intertwined, overlapping, and infused with liberal principles and practices, constituted through centuries of liberal/Western power, they are analytically distinct phenomena, and a clear distinction must be made between them in policymaking. The polarity perspective cannot envision this distinction, and it is thus often overlooked.

Shifting ideational patterns

The view that underpins multipolarity strangely emphasises sameness rather than difference. The lack of attention to ideational differences has left us ill-equipped to contemplate non-Western political priorities and non-Western perceptions of order and governance (Reus-Smit 2018). To be fair, recently more attention is afforded to cultural difference and ideational diversity, and several recent studies embrace the ideational diversity of global life, leading to conceptions of global ordering other than multipolarity such as a multiplexity (Acharya 2014; Acharya, Estevadeordal & Goodman 2023) and deep pluralism (Buzan and Acharya 2022; Buzan 2023). These conceptions deliver a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of difference in the global world. However, most inclusions of ideational difference hold a rather static view of ideational factors. The multi-order perspective has the benefit of a dynamic approach to ideational factors through paying attention to the ordering practices of self-governance. Moreover, with the knowledge that all ordering domains – in this case, different international orders – tend to respond to the same external factors yet are likely to produce different outcomes because they each have their own ordering practices of self-governance, can imbue the policy process with a degree of realism in expectations about the prospects for global cooperation. The reality is that despite the similar ordering practices taking place within ordering domains, the processes are likely to lead to increased diversity, with important implications for the potential for ‘between ordering’. Like Darwin’s finches responding to their local conditions and subsequently developing different beaks, ordering practices within ordering domains seem set to lead to a diversifying dynamics among the international orders that make up the global rules-based ordering architecture. We are therefore facing a situation in which diversification must be expected, rather than convergence around specific global challenges – this aspect is also lacking in the polarity perspective.

The geopolitical implications of the multi-order world

The question remains what the coming multi-order world will look like, and what will be the major geopolitical implications of its arrival? This is where our analysis necessarily moves into more uncertain territory because the current transformation is characterized by many unknowns and many interconnected factors that defy clarity - but certainly call for reflection.

The character of the coming multi-order world will depend on the number and character of international orders within the global ordering architecture and the relationships between them. Much will depend on whether the orders support the existing global rules-based order and its institutions, and on the orders’ attachments to the principle of sovereignty. The actions of Russia in Ukraine, Chinese rhetoric about Taiwan, and even American rhetoric about Greenland, suggest the attachment to the principle of sovereignty is contingent on perceptions of national security needs – the same can be said about alignment with the global rules-based order. The matrix below outlines four categories of international orders. Each category of order displays characteristics vis-à-vis its alignment with the global rules-based order and attachment to the principle of sovereignty.

Figure 2: Categories of international orders

	Strong attachment to sovereignty	Moderate attachment to sovereignty
Alignment with the current rules-based order	Conservative Intergovernmentalism: Sovereign decision-making based on economic interests emphasising non-intervention. 'Chinese-led 'Belt and Road' order'	Liberal Internationalism: Multilateral decision-making based on liberal/democratic values, extending domestic politics into the international. 'American-led liberal order'
Non-alignment with the current rules-based order	Illiberal Nationalism: Transactional decision-making based on populist/traditional values emphasising strength and control. 'Russian-led Eurasian order'	Radical Transnationalism: Ideological or issue-based decision-making based on a conviction that the outcome justifies the means and emphasising the collective over the individual. 'Islamic-led sharia order/ Environmental stewardship'

Before the second Trump Administration, the emerging multi-order architecture was assumed to consist of the American-led liberal international order, the Chinese-led Belt and Road order, and the Russian-led Eurasian order, with the possibility of other orders in the making in Africa and Latin America.

It is still difficult to say which orders will characterise the emerging multi-order world and what their relationships will be, but the realisation of this alone, is an important foundation for decision-making. Before the second Trump Administration, the emerging multi-order architecture was assumed to consist of the American-led liberal international order, the Chinese-led Belt and Road order, and the Russian-led Eurasian order, with the possibility of other orders in the making in Africa and Latin America. The coming multi-order world is also likely to see different forms of transnational ordering domains composed of a range of non-state actors, including faith-based transnational orders such as the Islamic State; or issue-specific orders around environmental stewardship or global climate action (Falkner 2021). In addition, the multi-order world will almost certainly include several 'swing states' pursuing a geopolitical fence-sitting strategy, such as India, Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa (De Carvalho, Anand & Naidu 2025).

The second Trump Administration has dramatically increased uncertainty about what the multi-order world will look like, as it appears to be in the process of significantly changing – even dismantling – some of the constitutive elements of the liberal international order and to have essentially rejected the liberal vision of the good life. Astoundingly, it seems that America under Trump is pursuing policies that are more akin to the illiberal nationalism category of order than the liberal internationalism form of order, which American foreign policy has been built on since the end of the Second World War. If this is so, then the question is what happens to the liberal international order? The situation is still fluid, but we must contemplate the very real possibility that the existing liberal international order will break in two, with most European states along with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan, and perhaps others, continuing with the liberal international order, while the USA pursues its America First agenda with decreasing attachment to the global rules-based order. At this point, domestic politics (which the polarity perspective consistently brackets) becomes of great importance, as states with illiberal nationalist governments – including in Europe – are bound to reconsider their alignment with the liberal international order and thereby undermine its resilience.

The emerging more complex ordering architecture will undoubtedly present major challenges to traditional forms of governance such as multilateralism because increasing diversification will make multilateral decisions more difficult to achieve. It seems likely that in the multi-order world, most governance issues – even those which have previously been regarded as global challenges requiring globally shared solutions – will increasingly be governed within the multiple international orders, with a decreasing scope for global multilateral governance. We are therefore likely to see more order-specific governance programmes in policy fields such as climate change, AI governance, trade, migration, and global health.

Although the difference between multipolar and multi-order may be subtle, it is important. By including the within and between differentiation of ordering, the multi-order perspective is better placed to consider other factors than just power politics. The examples referred to at the beginning of this article are not easily explained from a polarity perspective, yet they are likely to define global politics going forward. From a multi-order perspective, these developments can be explained as order-building/order-dismantling processes: Putin is building a Eurasian order through force and subjugation, China is building the Belt and Road order through economic incentives and gradual establishment of dependency, Trump is withdrawing from the liberal international order whilst its remaining members (possibly) under leadership of the EU and Canada are scrambling to keep the order together without the United States.

Policymakers need to understand the multi-order dynamics to position themselves advantageously in the emerging geopolitical environment. If they continue to view current events as a return to multipolarity, they risk overlooking that order at the global level is constituted against a backdrop of diversity and distinct visions for the good life at the international level. Moreover, if all eyes are on the powerful, we risk overlooking less powerful actors that nonetheless have a big influence and can be extremely disruptive. Ultimately, global (dis)order will depend on how the diversity, complexity and fragmentation is managed. There is certainly a worrying potential for increased levels of conflict and that pressing global challenges are not met in time and with sufficient energy. But, if the situation is better understood and governance is approached in an innovative, inclusive and constructive manner, the move towards a multi-order world may present possibilities for a more inclusive form of global governance in which different cultures – including those based on non-Western foundations – can have a voice and a space to pursue policies in alignment with their vision for the good life and their order-specific patterns of power, principle, and practice.

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