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The post-western order

The BRICS countries are creating a new global order. That's not necessarily bad news

We are witnessing a historic shift of power away from the West towards Asia, and the consequences are being felt in parliaments around the globe. Some ten years from now, China is set to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy. The West is slowly losing its capacity to set the global agenda.

Looking back further in history, however, we see that Western dominance is an exception - a blip on the timeline. For two centuries, an extreme concentration of economic power allowed the West, despite representing just a small minority of the world's population, to implement its own economic and social models across much of the globe. To most observers, non-Western actors hardly ever played a constructive role in the management of global affairs.

No wonder many in the West see a future global order – no longer under their direction – as chaotic, disorienting and dangerous. Indeed, the majority of leading international relations scholars believe the relative decline in US power will have profoundly negative global consequences.

Our Western-centric perspective

Yet our understanding of the how today's order was created and how the future will pan out, is limited. It tries to imagine a "post-Western world" from a parochial, Western-centric perspective. Harvard University's Graham Allison calls the last one thousand years a millennium in which the West was "the political centre of the world." Such views are not only historically inaccurate, but also dramatically underestimate the contributions non-Western thinkers and cultures have made, and how much the West has depended on foreign knowledge, technology, ideas, and norms.

Thanks to our Western-centric world view, we underappreciate not only the role non-Western actors have played in the past and play in

contemporary international politics, but also the constructive role they are likely to play in the future. China, for example, was the world's largest economy well into the 19th century. Today, China already assumes more international responsibility than most believe: Beijing has more peacekeepers in the field than all the other permanent UN Security Council members combined. A few days after Donald Trump's election victory in November 2016, the Chinese government called on him to respect the Paris Climate agreement. Indeed, we can expect China to take a lead in the global fight against climate change in the coming years. On the same day, China's President Xi Jinping travelled to the APEC Summit in Lima, where he assured worried Latin American policy makers that China would continue to stand up for free trade and globalisation. All this shows how quickly other states can react to a global power vacuum. There is no clear reason that post-western order will necessarily be more chaotic or unstable than the status quo.

A parallel order

Indeed, rather than directly confronting existing institutions, rising powers—led by China—are quietly crafting the initial building blocks of what we may call a "parallel order" that will initially complement, and later possibly challenge, today's international institutions. This order is already in the making; it includes, among others, institutions such as the BRICS-led New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (to complement the World Bank), Universal Credit Rating Group (to complement Moody's and S&P), China Union Pay (to complement Mastercard and Visa), CIPS (to complement SWIFT), the BRICS (to complement the G7), and many other initiatives. Still unknown to the majority, several of these institutions will play a key role in the emergence of post-western order.

These structures do not emerge because China and others have fundamentally new ideas about how to address global challenges or because they seek to change global rules and norms; rather, they create them to better project their power, just as Western actors have done before them. They partly arose because of the limited social mobility of today's order and because of existing institutions' incapacity to adequately integrate rising powers. Still today, Europe has a monopoly on the leadership position of the International Monetary Fund (currently Christine Lagarde from France) and the President of the World Bank (currently Jim Yong Kim) is still a US citizen. This may be little more than a detail to the US or French government, but from the Brazilian or Indian perspectives, the situation symbolises the West's lack of interest in democratising today's structures.
Western hegemony is so deeply rooted and ubiquitous that we think of it

as somehow natural, reducing our capacity to objectively assess the consequences of its decline. And while the transition to genuine multipolarity—not only economically but also militarily and regarding agenda-setting capacity—will be disconcerting to many, it may be, in the end, far more democratic than any previous order in global history, allowing greater levels of genuine dialogue, broader spread of knowledge, and more innovative and effective ways to address global challenges in the coming decades. In this context, it was crucial that Germany and several other European states decided to become founding members of the Chinese-led AIIB, despite US pressure against Berlin, Paris and London not to do so.

Negotiating in such a post-western system, consisting of old and new institutions, will without a doubt be more complex than ever before. But the West must not be pessimistic, but should actively face the challenges this transition involves, and seek to actively shape the emerging structures, rather than merely focussing on withdrawal battles.



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