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Why the West needs the UN

With hopes for a liberal peace fading, the West's best option is to return to the UN's collective security system

Western politicians and political analysts don't consider the United Nations a useful instrument for preserving world peace. This view goes back to the end of the Cold War, when it was believed that liberal democracy and not collective security would guide global politics. The UN, in which non-Western and illiberal states have great influence, was no longer needed.

But times have changed. Today, the West is only one player in an increasingly multipolar and politically diverse world in which peace depends on norms shared by Western and non-Western countries alike. This can only be achieved through the UN. Its Charter banning the use of military force and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights upholding human dignity are epochal achievements that are as valid today as they have ever been. Building on them may offer the only way out of the quagmire of an increasingly chaotic world.

Losing the liberal peace

When, in 1989, the Berlin Wall came down, the hope was that this would bring worldwide peace. When, two years later, the entire Communist world collapsed, the conviction was that this could only be a liberal peace. Democratic and liberal values and a free market economy would now conquer the world; the US would provide leadership in this transition.

Instead, the West got lost in expensive and unwinnable military interventions, often with questionable justifications. Most were illegal by international law and, in their wake, left the UN Charter unhitched. They did not advance the cause of democracy. Worse, they led to chaos and widespread human rights abuses, undermining our own values.

In the meantime, the West lost much of its economic dominance. In 10 years, according to Standard Chartered's economic forecasting, both

China's and India's economies, measured in purchasing power, will outperform that of the US. By then, seven of the top 10 economies will be non-Western. Western technical superiority, once the guarantor of supremacy, is fading too. China's successes in developing artificial intelligence, 5G technologies and landing a spacecraft on the far side of the moon are signs. In shooting down a satellite from space, India has proved its technological advancement – and this is only the beginning.

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Demographics will further limit Western dominance. Nato's share in the world population is declining from about 12 per cent today to 10 per cent in 2030. By contrast, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization represents almost 40 per cent of the world's population. Europe is even more affected. At the height of its power in 1914, 27 per cent of the world's population was European; by 2030 this will drop to about 5 per cent. By then, Africa's population will be three times and by 2100 eight times that of Europe.

The West has failed to bring about a liberal peace through a mix of hubris, an overreliance on military force and its obsession with preventing the emergence of any competing world superpower. Barely 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is now the West that builds walls. An era is ending.

Sleepwalking into hostilities

Having won the Cold War, the West now feels threatened. Russia, and increasingly China, are now accused of wanting to destroy the liberal world order. Accompanied by much media hype, the answer, as during the Cold War, is to increase military spending and develop ever more devastating weapons.

But this is not a Cold War. There are no longer irreconcilable ideologies and power blocs competing for global dominance. Neither Russia nor China have a network of political parties ready to organise revolutions and topple governments. Nato is now the world's only military alliance. The Warsaw Pact no longer exists, and Russia's military spending is just 6 per cent of Nato's. China's military spending has increased but, at 14 per cent, its global share is still small compared to the 68 per cent of Western allies, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

China is accused of state capitalism and industrial espionage, but haven't Western countries gone through a similar development? Trade deficits and foreign investments cannot explain today's hostilities either. Neither Russia nor China follow our ideals for liberal democracies, but nor do most other countries with which we have close relations. There will be conflicting interests, but a Cold War?

If historical comparisons make any sense, today's great-power hostilities have more in common with the time leading up to World War One. Then, European powers' mutual mistrust and military build-up led to war. Like China today, then it was Germany that, with its rapid economic and technological progress, threatened established powers. Now, as then, Russia, with its huge geographical expanse between Europe and Asia, is a misunderstood and feared outsider. And today, as then, it may be a local conflict that could ignite a global catastrophe.

Like in 1914, the West may not even know what it wants to achieve. Do we want the rest of the world to play by our rules? Do we want to reduce Russia to a regional power, as President Obama suggested at the 2014 Nuclear Security Summit, or do we hope to curtail China's economic and technological advancements? How would we keep other emerging powers in check? After enjoying decades of peace, are we once again sleepwalking into unnecessary military posturing we may not be able to control?

Real security threats

It is not great power rivalries but weak states that may pose our greatest security threats. Weakening state authorities, expanding powers of belligerent non-state actors and an increase in intrastate armed conflicts may lead to a spiral of violence that could make large parts of the world ungovernable.

The Fragile States Index classifies 119 of the 178 countries it surveyed as fragile; 51 of them as alarmingly fragile. Today, more than 80 per cent of the world's population live in countries considered fragile; that could increase. By 2100, the world's population may increase by a further 3.5 billion, equal to the combined populations of China, India, the US and the European Union. These population increases will be in the poorest and most unstable countries, a recipe for trouble ahead.

The West's greatest security challenge isn't Russian re-assertiveness or

The decline in state authority plays into the hands of belligerent non-state actors. They are diverse and include ideologically, ethnically or religiously motivated groups, secessionist and

China's economic growth, but mass migration, attacks by non-state actors and instability in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa.

independence movements, warlords, rebel groups, militia, paramilitary and private armies, as well as crime syndicates, drug and human traffickers, clans and gangs – and a mix of them all. There is no comprehensive research into the extent to which these actors control territories and lives – but the reality could be shocking, even in Western countries.

Since the end of the Cold War, intrastate armed conflicts have replaced interstate wars. Nowadays, practically all battle-related deaths, internal displacements, refugee crises, destruction of livelihoods and infrastructures are caused by such intrastate conflicts. What happens today may be only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, we may face a future in which millions of destitute people around the world, disillusioned by failing states and incited by radical leaders, may overrun states and borders, creating a chaos that no military force could control. This, and not great-power rivalries, will threaten the global order.

Return to a UN rules-based order

At the 2014 G20, after meeting with Vladimir Putin, President Obama made the West's position about Ukraine clear: 'We were also very firm [towards Russia] on the need to uphold core international principles and one of those principles is you don't invade other countries or finance proxies and support them in ways that break up a country that has mechanisms for democratic elections.' Who could disagree? Only, shouldn't the same principle have applied to Western interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and even Ukraine? Is Obama insisting, rather than on international law, on uniquely Western stances?

Obama's statement raises another problem: for intrastate conflicts with foreign interventions, as in the case of Ukraine, such an international principle does not really exist. The UN Charter deals uniquely with interstate wars; intrastate conflicts are explicitly excluded. International Humanitarian Law was developed for wars between states; its application to intrastate armed conflicts remains questionable. The urgent challenge for maintaining peace must therefore be to rescue functioning nation-states and with it global order by agree on a normative and legal framework specific for dealing with intrastate conflicts.

This will require great-power cooperation within the UN. Despite today's tensions, such cooperation should be possible. The West's greatest security challenge isn't Russian re-assertiveness or China's economic growth, but mass migration, attacks by non-state actors and

instability in the Middle East, Latin America and Africa. Russia's and China's prime concerns might not be military attacks but outside support to secessionist and Islamist movements within their own countries. Also, it is not only emerging powers such as India that must worry that internal conflicts could attract foreign interventions, but also the many smaller countries that are potentially on the receiving end of unilateral interventions. Nobody should wish for another Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya or Yemen.

A return to the UN would help preserve Western values. Norms that were born out of Europe's liberal and socialist traditions such as accountable government, rule of law, human rights, individual freedoms and gender equality, as well as social responsibility and social justice, have found their way into the UN Charter and UN conventions. Ironically, these norms would gain more traction if they are no longer mixed up with Western ambitions for global hegemony.



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