DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 13.11.2023 | Paul Mason

A new world order: from warring states to citizens

A new multilateralism must embody the values of Asia, Africa and Latin America, alongside the West. But above all, it has to restate universalism

First came Afghanistan — the sudden collapse of the government in August 2021 and with it 20 years of Western 'nation-building'. Then came Ukraine the following February — the first large-scale conventional war in Europe since 1945, with Russia unleashing 20th-century-style barbarity amplified by a 21st-century information war.

And now comes the brutal Hamas attack of 7 October and Israel's deadly response. The risk is not only that the Israeli invasion of Gaza will trigger a regional war, with Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq co-ordinating their attacks. The strategic danger is that the power of the United States in the region will collapse. In the last analyses, each of these traumatic events is about US failure: as president, Donald Trump's peace deal with the Taliban failed, Joe Biden subsequently failed to reverse it, and he also failed to deter Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Now, the US stands at risk of failure in the Middle East — the primary region into which it had chosen to project power since its retreat from Vietnam in the 1970s. From Riyadh to Cairo, its leverage in the capitals that matter is weak, its reputation on the 'Arab street' in cinders. A Republican-led Congress cannot endorse basic spending appropriations for the conflict without offsetting cuts borne by the domestic tax agency, the Inland Revenue Service.

The massive naval force the US has assembled in the eastern Mediterranean is there to deter escalation by Iran and its supporters, to reassure allies in the region that the fundamental architecture - of US bases, listening posts and shabby agreements with autocrats - will hold. But in the dark fantasies of radical Islamists, it is now possible to imagine something that the West had made unthinkable — the defeat of Israel and the evaporation of US will to fight for it.

A struggle for understanding

This is not how it was supposed to be. Smiling teenagers were not supposed to rip down posters of kidnapped Jews while quoting Frantz Fanon. American presidents were not supposed to incite domestic insurrections. Kharkiv, Kherson and Odesa were supposed to be names associated with the horrors of the Second World War, not the present.

We are living through the disintegration of an order. With it, the power of expertise is also disintegrating.

When I sit in seminars with experts on the Middle East and observe their sudden exasperation and despair, it feels new to them but not to me. In February 2022, I attended seminars with equally famed Russia experts, as their long-held assumptions about the president, Vladimir Putin, and *Putinism* similarly evaporated.

Reaching further back, they remind me of the economists and civil servants I worked with during the global financial crisis of 2008. Suddenly, all their knowledge was relevant only to what the novelist Stefan Zweig poignantly called 'the world of yesterday'.

So, the overarching struggle is for understanding. Only once we frame what is happening accurately, grasping the totality of these interlocked crises, can we design the action needed to defend what must be defended.

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In international relations, we are, however, trapped in a fruitless debate between 'realism' and 'idealism'. It is not even a debate — only the mutual statement of incompatible premises. If one side is right, thousands of PhDs and professorships on the other side become worthless.

To move forward, Benjamin Tallis of the German Council on Foreign relations proposes 'neo-idealism'. This would reassert the humanitarian and universalist principles on which the United Nations was founded in 1945 and which underlie the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights — only this time without the compromises with dictatorships on 'our side' of the cold-war, geopolitical divide.

Tallis cites a new generation of political leaders, including Kaja Kallas, Sanna Marin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as embodying this new spirit. Meanwhile, he decries the lingering acquiescence of the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and the French president, Emmanuel Macron, to

the realities of Russian power.

If I were to situate myself in this debate, I would say I was an idealist in a realist world. I want a rules-based global order, a universal concept of human rights and a body of international law that places the individual human being at its centre. But I know the existing order is disintegrating.

Redefining universalist ideas

There is, to borrow a metaphor from Karl Marx, a legal and geopolitical superstructure that can no longer be supported by its underlying economic structure, which has broken. The world economy is deglobalising into rival spheres; the global information space is Balkanised; Russia and China have launched a systemic competition against the West and are successfully recruiting oligarchies and failing democracies to their project.

Of course, we should fight a rearguard action to uphold the global institutions - everything from the UN Relief and Works Agency under such pressure in Gaza to the International Criminal Court which could investigate war crimes there - just as our forebears did in the 1930s with the collapsing League of Nations. But we have to recognise the disintegration undermining their foundations.

Any emerging legal order must be based on a recognition that the centre of gravity of the world has shifted south.

The question we should be asking is not 'how do we maintain the old world order' but the one John Maynard Keynes at the British Treasury and his American counterpart, Harry Dexter White, asked in 1943–44: what should the world look like when we win? (Although the 'we' would now have to be the peoples of the whole world, not just 'the West'.) In the 1930s, when the British Labour leader Clement Attlee abandoned pacifism and 'non-intervention' over the Spanish Civil War and moved to active support for rearmament, he did so while insisting that the goal of any wartime coalition with his Conservative counterpart Winston Churchill would be a 'world government'.

René Cassin's achievement in drafting the universal declaration was the result of 20 years of legal scholarship, in which he and others established not just the idealism but the realism of the assertion that the 'human person' should be at the centre of international law - not the state - so that the individual subject could vindicate their rights. The post-1945

world was, in short, the product of long-nurtured visions in jurisprudence, economics and geopolitics.

I do not want a return to the unipolar world of US power, nor to a multilateralism that leaves more than half the world's population in poverty and in thrall to dictators. Any emerging legal order must be based on the recognition that the centre of gravity of the world has shifted south.

In 1948, there were 2.7 billion people in the world; today, there are eight billion. In 1948, while Asia had the biggest population, Europe came second; today, Africa, with its 1.4 billion people, is second, yet, it has minimal agency in the international system.

It took the wartime allies the best part of a decade to formulate a vision for the postwar world.

If it seems that some in the Global South are ready to rally behind dictators such as Putin and the crude anti-Semitism we are seeing across 'social media', it is because they do not like the existing global order and want a new one. So, the new multilateralism has to be co-created with the progressive and humanistic traditions of China, the Indian sub-continent, Africa and Latin America, alongside those of the West. It must draw on their scholarship and embody their values — but it has to restate universalism and it has to cohere.

It took the wartime allies the best part of a decade to formulate a vision for the postwar world. That they did so while enduring the day-to-day agonies and technical challenges of wartime is what makes that generation 'great'.

The lesson we should take from how the post-1945 order was created is that it required an intellectual effort, lasting decades and demanding critical innovations in Western legal, political and economic thought — long before it was executed in laws and institutions.

This is a joint publication by Social Europe *and* IPS Journal.



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