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A new world order is not beckoning

We need a more realistic view of global order — one that looks beyond the clash between a fading past and an uncertain future to what really matters

This week, US President Donald Trump will host his counterpart, Chinese President Xi Jinping, at the White House, and other world leaders will gather for the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly. In both cases, the media coverage and accompanying punditry will portray what many believe to be a world hurtling from order to disorder.

But is this narrative correct? Trade wars and real wars might seem to augur a new era of disarray and international bedlam, but it is not as if the world before Trump's first presidency, Brexit and Russia's invasion of Ukraine was stable. In fact, even liberal do-gooders committed their share of thoughtless atrocities and commotion.

So, let's not get misty-eyed about the liberal international 'order' just because populists gloat over its demise. What we need is a narrative that does not draw such a sharp line between a decomposing liberal international order and its post-liberal successor, and that clears the way to address what is really at risk.

Beyond the liberal international order

An alternative narrative might start with a different account of the system we are being told is collapsing. Instead of calling it a liberal international order (despite it often being illiberal and disorderly), the post-1945 era would be better described as an age in which we pursued common goods through arrangements that had both liberal and non-liberal features. Initially, the highest-priority common good was to prevent World War III. But over time, international institutions evolved to address economic, scientific, cultural and other shared goods, too.

The common-goods system sought to absorb and diffuse the costs and hazards arising from an interdependent world, so that countries would

not quarrel over the bills. A web of treaties and monitors sought to prevent conflict, reduce harm, and distribute risk, thereby facilitating more trade, more cultural exchange, better health, and closer integration.

This system has been more effective than critics on the right like to admit. Even the powerful rely on it, because doing so is in their interest. The United States shouldered a lot of the responsibility as the system's sheriff and as the issuer of the world's reserve currency. But it also reaped the rewards and could select which bills it wanted to pay.

Hence, the US would topple elected governments while shaming others that did the same. It would refuse to sign treaties that it nonetheless wanted others to sign (the Biden administration applauded the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, but refused to recognise the Court's authority over Americans). And it would pressure other countries to keep their markets open to US exports. These prerogatives have been part of US statecraft for generations. Trump isn't an exception; he's just extreme.

The most glaring stain on the common-goods system concerns the rights of migrants. After 1945, treaties and legal commitments recognised the right of anyone to seek asylum if they could prove they were being persecuted by their government. The aim was to establish universal rights as a pillar for peace. But while the system universalised the right to move, states could still choose whom they wanted. The unwanted, starting with Palestinians after 1948, wound up in camps and surrounded by barbed wire. States that excluded refugees outsourced the cost of handling them to besieged and underfunded UN agencies.

Interdependence is not going away

Where does this alternative narrative leave us? For starters, the line that separates the past from the future is not as sharp as wistful liberal internationalists and crowing populists claim. In fact, the world has grown more interdependent despite the tensions of the last decade. Alarmists once proclaimed the end of globalisation, but with Asia leading the way, world trade reached a record-high $35 trillion in 2025, and global commerce grew by 4.6 per cent, outpacing global GDP growth.

For essentials like food, fuel and fibres, societies have never been more in need of one another. Trump's presumption that the US could glide past the closure of the Strait of Hormuz because it had oil and gas of its own may cost his party dearly in the upcoming midterm election. Economic history is rife with examples of interdependent competitors who leaned on each other while sniping like siblings. Even ties between the US and

China remain entangled despite 'decoupling' efforts. Sino-American bilateral trade peaked in 2022 after a decade of sabre-rattling, and exports from Canada to the US actually rose after Trump's March 2025 tariffs on Canadian goods.

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It is impossible to reverse interdependence without paying a price; societies inevitably suffer when they decouple from those whom they have grown to depend on. In the 1930s, when strong countries dismantled the guardrails against tariffs and competitive devaluations, they exacerbated the Great Depression. One lesson from the Brexit referendum a decade ago is that secession may win you some autonomy, but at a price that most voters will come to regret paying.

Nor is interdependence only an economic phenomenon. The menace of nuclear war and the reality of climate change remind us that we need each other for survival. Cooperation is necessary for human security. It was a global scientific network that created the mRNA vaccine that broke the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is easy to take the common-goods system for granted and pronounce it dead at the same time. Anti-globalism is in vogue because it releases the powerful from constraints while allowing them to continue reaping the benefits, whereas the more vulnerable remain all too reliant on a flawed but indispensable system.

Exhaustion, rather than a rupture, is the most immediate risk. With resources dwindling, too much is expected of the common-goods system. It has prevented the worst kinds of global disasters, but it is increasingly strained. We should be more worried about a gradual and cumulative decapitalisation than a dramatic apocalypse. Instead of heralding the dawn of 'disorder' or a new 'order', why not address the purposes and shortfalls of the interdependence we have?

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