

TOWARD THE NEXT WORLD ORDER: THE US DECLINE AND ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF WORLD ORDER

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Abstract

Every nation and civilization has held a distinct view of just arrangements and the distribution of power in world politics. The post-1945 liberal international order, construed under U.S. leadership, is now in relative decline and increasingly contested by alternative models. This study examines the transition from U.S.-led unipolarity to an unbalanced multipolar world order characterized by competing civilizational and ideological visions. Grounded in a neoclassical realist framework, it analyzes the world order models articulated by China, Russia, and diverse Islamic political traditions. The findings reveal that contemporary global politics is shaped by fragmented legitimacy contestation, domestic constraints, and regional institutional experimentation rather than simple ideological confrontation. China advances a civilizational model institutionalized through the Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia articulates a revisionist multipolar vision, though domestic political constraints limit its constructive capacity. Islamic political traditions provide normative critiques of the liberal order but remain fragmented across state and non-state actors. The study concludes that the emerging world order will be negotiated among multiple competing poles, underscoring the urgent need for reconciliation across divergent visions.

Keywords: *New World Order, Alternative Models, Leaderless Europe, Chinese Resurgence, Russian Revanchism*

Introduction

In international relations theory, world order is generally understood as the structured arrangement of power, norms, and institutions that regulate interaction among global actors. Since 1945, this order has been organized around rules and institutions established by the victors of

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the Second World War, particularly the United States, which assumed a leading role in shaping the post-war system. Consequently, it is widely described as a U.S.-led or Western-dominated international order. At the same time, world order is an ideational construct, as different regions and civilizations hold distinct views on the just distribution of power and authority in global politics. The twentieth century is often described as the “American century,” although global politics during the Cold War was structured around bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 left the United States as the dominant global power, producing what many scholars described as a unipolar moment. To deal with the systemic anarchy of the international system, after 1991, many states aligned themselves with the United States and its institutions, reinforcing the consolidation of a US-led liberal international order.

However, the contemporary order faces a growing crisis of legitimacy. Its rules and institutions are increasingly perceived by rising powers such as China and Russia, as well as segments of the Muslim world, as selectively applied and disproportionately reflective of Western interests. As a result, these institutions are viewed as uneven and unjust, prompting calls for reform and greater inclusivity. The emerging system is neither unipolar nor strictly bipolar, but increasingly multipolar, with several states possessing the capability to shape global outcomes. This study focuses on the post-Cold War period (1991–2025), with particular attention to developments following the 2008 global financial crisis, which accelerated the redistribution of economic and political influence. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the transition from U.S.-led unipolarity to an unbalanced multipolar world order reshape competing civilizational and ideological visions of global order?
2. What are the implications of fragmented legitimacy contestation for systemic stability, and under what conditions might reconciliation among competing world order visions occur?

This article argues that the contemporary international system is best conceptualized as an Unbalanced Multipolar order, in which multiple major powers coexist with significant asymmetries in material capabilities¹ and without a shared normative framework capable of stabilizing the system. The relative primacy of the United States has increasingly been questioned, and the diffusion of power has generated systemic uncertainty, fragmented leadership, and competing visions of international order rather than stable patterns of alliance and restraint.²

¹ Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)

² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

The study contributes to the literature by emphasizing that global order transition is driven not only by shifts in material capabilities but also by how states interpret and respond to these shifts within their domestic and strategic contexts.

Scholars have identified multiple causes behind the decline of the current liberal order. One strain of scholarship attributes the weakening of the liberal order to economic stagnation in the United States and Europe as a whole, alongside the rise of Nationalism, a surge of populism and the return of tribalism in the west.³ Other scholars argue that the United States has become increasingly reluctant to sustain the costs of global leadership, particularly when core national interests are perceived to be at stake, giving a huge blow to its legitimacy.⁴

The evolution of the liberal order since 1991 can broadly be understood in three phases. The first phase followed the end of the Cold War and is often described as a “hyper-liberal era,” characterized by the expansion of free markets, deregulation, increased transparency, and the promotion of liberal democracy.⁵ The second phase witnessed growing tensions within this order as new powers began to rise. The current phase reflects the gradual erosion of the liberal order due to the diffusion of power beyond the Western core, the rise of revisionist states such as China and Russia, and growing domestic backlash within Western societies. Ikenberry argues that the liberal order is resilient but undergoing structural transformation rather than collapse, emphasizing that it remains contested rather than obsolete.⁶

With the perceived decline of the US-led liberal order, several powers and civilizations have begun articulating alternative visions of world order. Acharya argues that the contemporary world order is not simply unipolar or strictly multipolar. Instead, it is **Multiplex**, similar to a multiplex cinema with many screens showing different narratives simultaneously.⁷ China’s unique culture, history and booming economy have made China confident enough to bolster its version of the world

3 Kagan, Robert. The Twilight of the Liberal World Order. Brookings, January 24, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-twilight-of-the-liberal-world-order>

4 Pevehouse, Jon C. W., et al. "The Future of Global Governance and World Order." *International Organization* 79, no. 4 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818325000013>.

5 Richard H. Steinberg, “The Rise and Decline of a Liberal International Order,” in *Is the International Legal Order Unraveling?*, ed. David L. Sloss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2022)

6 G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 2–5.

7 Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

order.⁸ Russia's vision of world order stems from its long-standing aspiration to remain a major power, rooted in its historical identity, geopolitical position, and substantial military capabilities and resources.⁹ The Islamic world is complex and heterogeneous with conflicting views on key concepts like justice, equality and jihad. The discontent that the Islam and the Muslim world have with the western system of politics and the world order is deeply rooted in history, culture, traditions and conflicts.¹⁰

The article proceeds as follows. Section I outlines the theoretical framework and defines the key concepts. Section II examines China's world order vision. Section III explores Russia's revisionist conception of multipolarity. Section IV analyzes the fragmented Islamic critiques of the liberal order through classical and contemporary political thought. Section V discusses the emergence of a leaderless Europe and its implications for the liberal international order. The article concludes with policy recommendations and reflects on the prospects for reconciliation in a plural global order.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a neoclassical realist approach to understand this shift in the international order. Neoclassical realism is an appropriate framework to examine the shift from a U.S.-centred liberal international system to an emerging Unbalanced Multipolar system because it brings together systemic power dynamics, domestic political variables and leadership perceptions. At the systemic level, the study applies power transition theory to account for the relative decline of U.S. leadership and the redistribution of material capabilities towards emerging foes, such as China and Russia. This diffuse distribution of economic and military capabilities has weakened the ability of the United States to unilaterally implement and lead the institutional and normative framework of the liberal international order. In turn, the redistribution of power has led to the emergence of multiple poles in the global system. But according to neoclassical realism, the impact of systemic pressures do not determine state behavior only, but rather it is mediated by the domestic political structure, elite decision-making processes and strategic culture. China's

⁸ Mansoor, Sheikh Inam Ul. "China's Geopolitical Strategy: Crafting a New World Order." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 09, no. 01-04 (January 1, 2023): 337-59. <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740023500161>.

⁹ Gerrits, André. "Russia in the Changing Global Order: Multipolarity, Multilateralism, and Sovereignty." In *United Nations University Series on Regionalism*, 85-107, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21603-0_5.

¹⁰ Ahmad, Mushtaq, *The Notions of Dar Al-Harb and Dar Al-Islam in Islamic Jurisprudence with Special Reference to the Hanafi School* (2008). *Islamic Studies*, 47:1 (2008), 5-37, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2238446>

political and economic reforms are driven by state control over economic activity and state building, which shapes its foreign policy and institutional behaviour. Similarly, regime type, elite fear and the preservation of great power status play a role in Russian foreign policy. Within the Muslim world, mixed political systems, ideological perspectives, and elite interests result in fragmented approaches toward the liberal international system.

This approach also permits the inclusion of ideational factors such as legitimacy, identity, and civilization narratives, not as distinct variables, but through the prism of state structures and elite views. Alternative concepts of international order, therefore represent responses to strategic realities underpinned by both material and domestic political factors as opposed to normative or ideological pursuits in and of themselves. This research describes the present configuration as unbalanced multipolarity. Multipolar world or *Multipolarity* is defined as a global power configuration in which *multiple states possess significant capabilities and influence*, resulting in several poles within the international system rather than dominance by one or two actors. A multipolar world will no longer be ruled by a single dominant political power acting as a global hegemon. Rather there are new poles of power like Russia, China and a few middle powers like Brazil, Turkey, Pakistan and India which can not be influenced by a single power to follow its bidding. Classical balance-of-power theory suggests multipolarity may promote stability under certain conditions.¹¹ The emerging configuration differs from classical multipolar systems observed in earlier historical periods. Historical examples include the European balance-of-power system following the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Unlike the relatively institutionalized balance-of-power arrangements of the nineteenth century, the contemporary system lacks clear strategic rules and shared normative foundations among major powers. Scholars are familiar with the strategic dynamics of unipolar systems i.e. Bandwagoning which is of course a strategy that is no more feasible in the Multipolar world as no state is ready to opt for it at all.¹² The world is also familiar with the rules and strategies of the bipolar system, that was witnessed throughout the Cold War i.e. the balance of power and alliance system. Unlike classical multipolar systems such as the post-Vienna order, unbalanced multipolarity lacks institutionalized strategic rules governing great power behavior.

The unbalanced world order implies that the historical role that was played by the US as a 'balancer', mediating conflicts abroad no longer holds. The primacy of the US in the global politics has declined. The decline

¹¹ Deutsch, Karl W., and J. David Singer. "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability." *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (1964): 390–406. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009578>.

¹² Darwin, John. *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire Since 1405* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2007).

of a power in international system refers to *the relative loss of a leading actor's material capabilities and institutional influence within the international system*, reducing its ability to dictate or sustain the prevailing world order. Decline does not imply absolute collapse, rather a *loss of relative power and normative authority that it once enjoyed in the past relative to other rising states*. Fareed Zakaria attributes this decline as global power diffusing away from U.S. hegemony toward rising powers (the "rise of the rest"), producing a *post-American* era. While not predicting a complete collapse, he sees the relative decline of U.S. influence.¹³ *Thus in the case of the US, it has been experiencing a relative decline in its power as now there are too many dynamics and constraints for any state to easily be compelled by a single power to follow its strategic preferences. Many states no longer accept decisions formulated in Washington without contestation, rather sharp criticism and opposition is heard from states of all tiers i.e. major, middle and minor powers. As a result, the system is characterized by heightened uncertainty, fragmented leadership, and competing visions of international order, rather than clear patterns of alliance and restraint.*

This article contributes to the existing literature by examining different versions of world order within a single analytical framework and by conceptualizing the current transition as unbalanced multipolarity rather than classical multipolarity. This study relies primarily on qualitative analysis of historical sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and official strategic statements. The data based on figures and statistics have also been included from the official websites of the concerned states and global institutions. The Quran, hadith and medieval Islamic scholars are also referred wherever it was required in the study.

China's Economic Reassurance and Political Resurgence Setting New Rules For The Old Game

China's clearest articulation of its alternative world order vision is embedded in its Belt and Road Initiative. The 2023 State Council White Paper frames the BRI not merely as an infrastructure project but as a foundational pillar of what Beijing calls a "community of shared future for mankind"¹⁴, a normative framework built on mutual benefit, shared development, and non-interference. The White Paper presents BRI as

¹³ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

¹⁴ People's Republic of China, State Council Information Office. *The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future*. Beijing: State Council Information Office, October 2023. https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202310/11/content_WS6526994fc6d0868f4e8e024a.html.

China's practical contribution to reforming global governance from within, by building parallel institutions and connectivity networks that reduce dependence on Western-controlled financial systems like the IMF and World Bank.

With the rise of Chinese primacy in the economic sphere as compared to the stagnated economies of Europe and the Global financial crash of 2008, China experienced what's known as the 'economic Reassurance'. It led to resurgence of the Chinese values and norms in the world economy, challenging the established world order.¹⁵ The Opium Wars are often interpreted as foundational to Chinese historical grievances toward Western imperialism.¹⁶ These experiences shaped China's long-standing skepticism toward Western-dominated international institutions and contributed to its cautious engagement with the global economy during earlier periods.¹⁷ As James Carville (1993) said, 'It's economy, stupid' which is the base of the world politics.¹⁸

"Socialism with Chinese characteristics" represents China's distinct political and economic model, combining centralized political authority with market-oriented economic reforms. China doesn't endorse the Western ideals of Liberal democracy but rather Communism with Chinese attributes as its hard-core ideology. In his landmark 2017 address at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Xi Jinping delivered what many scholars regard as one of China's clearest articulations of a challenge to the US-led world order. Positioning China as a defender of globalization at a moment when the US was retreating into economic nationalism under Trump administration. He called for greater representation of emerging economies in international institutions, framing China's rise not as a threat but as an opportunity for shared prosperity. The speech marked a decisive moment in which China openly claimed the mantle of global leadership that the US appeared to be abandoning.¹⁹

The ideological foundations of China's world order vision are most authoritatively laid out in Xi Jinping's collected works spanning 2014 to 2022, Xi outlines a comprehensive philosophy of international relations

¹⁵ Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

¹⁶ Bowlby, Chris. "The Palace of Shame That Makes China Angry." BBC News, February 2, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30810596>.

¹⁷ "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States." CRS Reports, June 25, 2019. <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL33534.html>.

¹⁸ Cataneo, Julia. "It's the Economy, Stupid." American Enterprise Institute - AEI, April 22, 2024. <https://www.aei.org/economics/its-the-economy-stupid/>.

¹⁹ Xi Jinping. "Keynote Speech at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting." World Economic Forum, Davos, January 17, 2017. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum/>.

rooted in the concept of a "community of shared future for mankind. Xi repeatedly emphasizes the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and civilizational diversity as the correct basis for a reformed international system, directly challenging the liberal emphasis on human rights and democratic governance as a prerequisite for full participation in global institutions. This vision of Xi is taken from the centuries old Chinese political philosophy of *Tianxia*²⁰ which means 'All under heaven' or 'a heavenly mandate world order'. A brief summary of this world order suggests that:

1. All states under heaven shall benefit more than what they achieve independently
2. All the states that have come under this heavenly mandate order shall have interdependency, coexistence and reciprocity.
3. All will have a shared ideal based on commitments and interest and an oath to protect the same.²¹

All under heaven order is different from the western world order and puts more emphasis on economic growth, seeking to make the world free, equal and democratic. The most important thing in *Tianxia* is participation, which is not compulsory and states can choose to remain out, if they opt to do so. Thus, a Chinese world order will put more emphasis on the economic growth of China and its allies; where there will be clash of its interests, China will use its political and military power as it finds suitable. A significant indicator of China's growing institutional influence is the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2344 in March 2017, which explicitly endorsed regional economic cooperation along the lines of the Belt and Road Initiative.²² China selectively engages with liberal economic norms based on strategic national interests. Chinese industrial policy has been criticized by some economists as creating asymmetric competition.²³

The best example is Germany's automobile industry. Germany initially saw China as a vast market for its vehicles, particularly Volkswagen. But the tide has dramatically turned. According to official

²⁰ Zhao, Tingyang. *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²¹ Rui Yang, "The Concept of *Tianxia* and Its Impact on Chinese Discourses on the West," in *Asia Literate Schooling in the Asian Century*, ed. C. Halse (Routledge, 2015), 44-55

²² United Nations Security Council. *Resolution 2344 (2017)*. S/RES/2344. March 17, 2017. [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2344\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2344(2017))

²³ Welle, Deutsche. "Chinese Subsidies Endanger World Economy, Says US' Yellen." *Dw.Com*, April 5, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/en/chinese-subsidies-endanger-world-economy-says-us-yellen/a-68745960>.

data released by the China Passenger Car Association (CPCA)²⁴, Volkswagen's joint ventures in China held a combined market share of only 10.9% in 2025, down from over 19% in 2019, having sold a million fewer cars in China in 2023 than it did in 2018, a decline of 25% in just five years²⁵. According to the recent trade data, the Chinese automobile industry in the recent years has given a strong competition to the world's most sophisticated automobile industry.²⁶ Volkswagen's own Annual Report confirms its China deliveries have forced the company to plan factory closures in Germany itself.²⁷

Another example of Chinese economic influence is Europe's pharmaceutical industry. Over recent decades, the production of active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) for generic medicines has progressively shifted outside the EU, primarily to China and India, leading to risk concentration and heightened vulnerability during global disruptions.²⁸ A 2021 European Commission study warned that 80% of imported pharmaceutical ingredients into Europe come from only five countries, with China alone accounting for 45% of the total.²⁹ In the specific case of antibiotics, China contributes to 80–90% of antibiotic API production globally. Europe's increasing reliance on Chinese suppliers has been further accelerated by the closure of European factories unable to compete with Chinese price competition, a key European supplier of APIs recently announced the closure of two factories and the reduction of production of 13 medical ingredients, with market share expected to pass to Chinese pharmaceutical companies.³⁰ This dependency is no longer a theoretical risk but a policy emergency: the European Commission's Critical

²⁴ China Passenger Car Association (CPCA). *Passenger Car Retail Sales Data, Full Year 2024*. Beijing: CPCA, January 2025. <https://www.cpcauto.com>.

²⁵ MERICS (Mercator Institute for China Studies) — Policy Research: Brown, Alexander, and Andreas Mischer. "German Carmakers Are Placing a Risky Bet on China." *MERICS*, 2024, <https://merics.org/en/comment/german-carmakers-are-placing-risky-bet-china>

²⁶ Bangkok Post, "BYD to Overtake Volkswagen Ventures as China's Top Producer," <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/motoring/2904757/byd-to-overtake-volkswagen-ventures-as-chinas-top-producer-amid-surge-in-ev-deliveries>.

²⁷ Kraftfahrt-Bundesamt (KBA), *Neuzulassungen von Personenkraftwagen nach Marken und Modellreihen: Jahr 2024* [New Registrations of Passenger Cars by Brand, 2024] Flensburg: KBA, January 2025. https://www.kba.de/DE/Statistik/Fahrzeuge/Neuzulassungen/Marken/marken_node.html.

²⁸ European Commission Official Study (2021) — *Strategic Dependencies and Capacities: A Study on Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients*. Brussels: European Commission, 2021. <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/45412>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Fleischmann, Laura. "This Is How Dependent Germany Is on Chinese Medicines." *Euronews*, October 29, 2025. <https://www.euronews.com/2025/10/29/this-is-how-dependent-germany-is-on-chinese-medicines>.

Medicines Act, proposed by President von der Leyen in 2024, was explicitly designed to tackle drug shortages and reduce dependence on medicines and ingredients sourced from outside the region.³¹

Another deviance that political scientist attribute to China is that it defies the nation state principle- a deviance from the Westphalian model of nation state. Rather China is something else, not a simple nation state. Rather some political scientists argue that China represents a civilizational state, operating within a nation-state institutional framework.³² Westphalian concept is a western concept of modern nation state that China finds to be unworkable for itself. Rather China is a hybrid state, its history makes it a civilizational state but it had to adapt itself to the current international order and become a nation state.³³ The nation state is part of its identity and not the whole and some scholars speculate that sustained Chinese economic and political influence could gradually reshape Westphalian norms of state sovereignty.

The Revanchist Russian Model: Keeping Russia Relevant in Global Politics

"Russia is never as strong as she looks; Russia is never as weak as she looks".³⁴ Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept³⁵, a 42-page document approved by Presidential Executive Order and published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explicitly frames multipolarity as the central framework for all areas of Russian foreign policy. The document declares what it calls an era of revolutionary change in the world order, and commits Russia to the elimination of what it describes as the vestiges of US dominance in world affairs as a strategic priority. Russia's vision calls for:

1. Polycentricity

³¹ Council of the European Union. *New Rules for Critical Medicines in the EU*. Brussels: Council of the EU, December 2, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/critical-medicines-act/>.

³² Xia, Guang. "China as a 'Civilization-State': A Historical and Comparative Interpretation." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 140 (August 1, 2014): 43–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.04.384>.

³³ Jacques, Martin. "To Understand China's Success, First Understand Chinese Civilization." In *The East West Dialogue*, 9–14, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8057-2_2.

³⁴ Olsen, John David. "Churchill – Supervillain of Russian Propaganda." *International Churchill Society*, February 26, 2023. <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour-extras/churchill-supervillain-of-russian-propaganda/>.

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. Approved by Presidential Executive Order No. 229, March 31, 2023. Moscow: MFA RF, 2023. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

2. Sovereign equality of states
3. The right of states to choose their own development models
4. The upholding of cultural and civilizational diversity

These principles are explicitly positioned as alternatives to the Western liberal order. Russia styles itself in this document as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power, identifying itself as a distinct civilizational pole in the multipolar world, it is striving to construct. It simultaneously advances a repudiation of the US-led Western order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been widely interpreted as violating international law and the UN Charter it claims to uphold. This contradiction suggests that Russia's alternative world order vision is better understood as a disruptive rather than constructive project, capable of undermining existing norms but unable to construct its own with any legitimate authority.

The words, i.e, expansionism and insecurity are synonymous with Russia. Moscow has historically exhibited **a strong sense of geopolitical insecurity**. It believes that when a state stops expanding its boundaries, it starts declining and this sense of decline or fall makes Russia more insecure. Geographically, majority of the Russian landmass is in Asia, but its insecurities always originate from Europe.³⁶ Russian strategic culture has historically been shaped by security anxieties. The vast unprotected plains in the eastern Ukraine allured many invaders like Napoleon's Grande Armée and Hitler's Nazi Army into Russia throughout its history. These insecurities from Europe forced Russia multiple times to forge European security order in compliance with the Russian strategic self-interests. During the Cold War, the Russians, to a great extent remained successful in creating balance of power in Europe by taking the entire eastern Europe under their sphere of influence. But, the threat of the expansion of NATO kept lurking over, throughout the Cold War. From an offensive realist perspective, NATO expansion can be interpreted as altering regional power balance calculations.³⁷ The disintegration of the USSR did not end the hostilities between Russia and the West. The divergent visions of the post-Cold War European security order further escalated the crisis. NATO's eastward expansion after the Cold War has been interpreted by Russian policymakers as a strategic threat to their security environment.

Russia's revisionist behaviour is not only driven by its insecurities, but also its domestic constraints and political system shape its foreign

³⁶ Murphy, David. "A Short History of Russia'S Long Standing Paranoia About the West." RTE.Ie, February 27, 2022. <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2022/0226/1283182-russia-europe-paranoia-suspicion-insecurity-history/>.

³⁷ Mearsheimer, John J. "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89.

policy behaviour; centralized authority, elite driven decision making and regime survival makes its policy more assertive to gain domestic legitimacy. Some scholars argue that elements of imperial legacy continue to shape Russia's strategic culture and foreign policy behavior and it has emerged on the international politics too with what the Political scientists are calling 'Neo-Imperialism'. Russian strategic culture emphasizes security depth and sphere-of-influence stability and it is bound to appear on the international stage.³⁸

The rise of populism in the United States and Europe, including the election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, has contributed to broader uncertainty with the liberal international order and Russia also seems to be attacking the same.³⁹ Its Crimean annexation in 2014, invasion of Ukraine to claim the Donbas region back, the alleged involvement in the Project Alamo in the 2016 US election, Eurasian Economic Union and BRICS imitative suggest that Russia is either trying to create a space for itself in the Liberal world order or will entirely root it out for something more 'Russian'. The Russia president, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly criticized unipolarity, arguing that the model is both unacceptable and unworkable in contemporary international politics. The only grand strategy that Putin is trying is to undo the post-Cold War settlement to re-establish Russia as a dominant power in Eurasia.⁴⁰ It tends to interfere with what the current Liberal order is based on; it doesn't recognize the territorial sovereignty of the bordering states like Georgia, Ukraine etc. and meddle in their domestic affairs ⁴¹. Russia is exploiting the defects of liberalism and democracy, including its open-ness, information system and political plurality. The western democracy's financing of elections, its lobby system has been exploited by Russia. Russia is engaging with other autocracies and authoritarian regimes to challenge the current rule-based order like Belarus, Venezuela, Iran and Syria. Most important of all is Russia-China nexus that has emerged as a big threat to the Liberal world order today. However, domestic and international constraints limit Russia's ability to

³⁸ van Herpen, Marcel H. "Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism." *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 2015. doi:10.1080/09592318.2015.1009526.

³⁹ Götz, Elias, and Camille-Renaud Merlen. "Russia and the Question of World Order." *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (November 15, 2018): 133–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545181>.

⁴⁰ Stephen Fidler, "Putin's Endgame: Unravel the Post-Cold War Agreements That Humiliated Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putins-endgame-unravel-the-post-cold-war-agreements-that-humiliated-russia-11645482412>

⁴¹ "The Russian War's Impact on Global Order – Near East South Asia for Strategic Studies (NESA)," n.d. <https://nesa-center.org/the-russian-wars-impact-on-global-order/>.

construct an alternative institutional order, making its role largely disruptive rather than transformative.

The Desire of an Islamic World Order

This article argues that Islamic visions of world order are not unified civilizational alternatives to the liberal international order but rather fragmented political responses shaped by regime interests, ideological diversity, and geopolitical concerns. The relationship between Islamic conceptions of order and the Western-led international system is complex.⁴² It is not a simple unified civilization confrontation but a fragmented and pragmatic engagement shaped by regime interest, domestic political economy and regional power dynamics. It is due to the fact that, the Islamic world does not constitute a monolithic, homogeneous actor like the west.⁴³ Rather, distinct from European nation-state formation, Islamic civilization comprise historically governed pluralistic, multi-ethnic societies through flexible administrative and legal arrangements rather than ethnic nationalism, offering a model of political integration.⁴⁴

Thus Muslim majority states⁴⁵ and the nonstate actors or transnational organizations vary significantly in their foreign policy orientations and behaviour. Nevertheless, there is shared sense of marginalization and normative discontent with the existing international system which has created a spectrum of alternative imaginaries of order rooted in Islamic political thought. Classical Islamic political thought offers diverse and sophisticated perspectives. Al-Farabi envisioned a universal political community governed by reason and justice⁴⁶, transcending tribal and national boundaries. Al-Mawardi presents the Caliphate as a legitimate institution for governing inter-communal relations, while importantly legitimizing diplomatic engagement and treaty-making⁴⁷ with non-Muslim states. Ibn Khaldun's theory of *Asabiyyah* — the rise and decline of civilizations through cycles of social solidarity and internal decay, offers perhaps the earliest systematic theory of power transition in

46 Hanna Pfeifer, *Islamists and the Global Order*. Edinburgh University Press eBooks, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399515870>.

47 Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008)

44 Jurji Zaydan. *History of Islamic Civilization*. Translated by D.S. Margoliouth. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009.

45 Sohail H., ed. *Islamic Political Ethics: Civil Society, Pluralism, and Conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

46 Al-Farabi. *Al-Madina al-Fadila (The Virtuous City)*. Translated by Richard Walzer. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985 pp.(229–233) (197–201)

47 Al-Mawardi, Abu al-Hasan. *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya: The Laws of Islamic Governance*. Translated by Asadullah Yate. London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1996. pp. (1-15) (60–75)

world history⁴⁸, remarkably anticipating contemporary debates about the decline of the US-led order. Allama Muhammad Iqbal envisioned an Islamic political community not as a theocratic state but as a spiritual democracy rooted in *ijtihad*, arguing that Muslim-majority societies must reconstruct political thought on their own terms rather than simply adopting or rejecting Western liberal frameworks wholly. ⁴⁹ Maududi articulated the most systematic modern challenge to the Westphalian order, arguing that divine sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) renders all human political authority conditional and delegated.⁵⁰

The contemporary Islamic scholarship treats the concepts such as jihad, Darul Islam and Darul harb historically contingent and subject to interpretation.⁵¹ For example, the term jihad has a very complex and wide spectrum of meaning⁵² ranging from self discipline and social reform to armed struggle against an enemy under strict legal constraints.⁵³

Despite this intellectual diversity in the Islamic scholarship, many have adopted a radical interpretation of these core concepts to justify violent resistance. Radical non-state actors and transnational jihadist organizations in the Muslim world don't recognize this world order as legitimate because according to them, it is created on the western values and traditions often against what Islam believes in. The notion of the nation state itself is questioned, as they recognize the state only as a means to an end and not the end in itself.⁵⁴ The modern nation state system based on Westphalia treaty is considered an obstacle and a colonial tool used by the west to keep the Islamic states and the Muslim ummah or the Muslim nation divided between borders, ethnicities and languages.⁵⁵ According to these elements, Islamic states need to be united into a single

⁴⁸ Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967. Vol. 1, pp. (249–310) (353–390) Vol. 2, pp. (117–136)

⁴⁹ Muhammad Iqbal. *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

⁵⁰ Abul A'la Maududi. *The Islamic Law and Constitution*. Translated by Khurshid Ahmad. Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1955.

⁵¹ John L Esposito, and John Obert Voll. *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

⁵² Joel Hayward. "Justice, Jihad and Duty: The Qur'anic Concept of Armed Conflict." *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 9, no. 3 (July 2018): 267–303. <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v9i3.101>

⁵³ Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁵⁴ Muhammad Ibn Isma'il Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Government (Book 20)

⁵⁵ ICIT Digital Library. "Nation-States as Obstacles to the Total Transformation of the Ummah," n.d. <https://www.icit-digital.org/articles/nation-states-as-obstacles-to-the-total-transformation-of-the-ummah>.

political entity to assume its long-lost status in the world politics. These extremist and radical transnational militant organizations see the world in black and white i.e. Darul Harb- the war zones and Darul ul Islam- the peaceful zone.

Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, argued that secular nation-states cannot serve as the legitimate foundation of an Islamic international order.⁵⁶ The non-interference norm of the present world order is also an anomaly to these hard core scholars, as they believe it is the 'duty' of those living in the *Darul Islam* to change every Darul harb into *Darul Islam*. These radical actors like ISIS, Al-Qaeda etc. believe in this binary classification of the world where the Darul-Islam are in constant war with the Darul-harb.⁵⁷ They justify all the terrorist activities, suicide bombing and killing and targeting of civilians and innocent minorities as a jihad to establish the Darul Islam.⁵⁸

Many of these scholars also use the term "paper states"⁵⁹ for many of the Islamic states of the current time, created for the convenience of the western power to maintain their influence after they have vacated the region.⁶⁰ For Abdullah Azzam, the fragmentation of the Muslim world into Westphalian states was itself a colonial imposition⁶¹, and the restoration of a unified Islamic order required armed struggle that transcended national borders.

At the state level, most Muslim majority states operate pragmatically within the existing framework of international system even while expressing their dissatisfaction. States like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have articulated differing version of Islamic Governance and international engagement. States like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies largely support the existing international order due to their integration into global oil market and security dependence on the US even while they contest some of aspects related to culture, religion and sovereignty.⁶² Iran represents a more revisionist actor, articulating

⁵⁶ Hasan al-Banna, *Majmu'at Rasā'il al-Imām al-Shahīd Hasan al-Banna* (2002).

⁵⁷ RSIS_NTU. "CO07001 | "Revisiting Dar Al-Islam (Land of Islam) and Dar Al-Harb (Land of War)" Accessed October 7, 2025.

⁵⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵⁹ Oasis. "From 'Paper State' to 'Islamic State.'" Fondazione Internazionale Oasis, July 26, 2016. <https://www.oasiscenter.eu/en/paper-state-islamic-state>.

⁶⁰ Asim Qureshi. "Book Review of 'The Caravan: Natilah Azzam And The Rise Of Global Jihad.'" *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 506–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2020.1780768>.

⁶¹ Abdullah Azzam. *Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation After Iman*. Translated by Brothers in Ribatt. London: Azzam Publications, 2002.

⁶² F. Gregory Gause, III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* No. 11 (The Brookings Institution, July 22, 2014)

critique of the western dominance while simultaneously engaging itself in a realist power politics through regional alliances, proxy conflicts and strategic bargaining.⁶³ Turkey illustrates a hybrid pragmatic model combining participation in western institutions with selective invocation of the Islamic identity and values to advance regional influence and keep its strategic autonomy.⁶⁴ Most importantly, most majority muslim states do not reject the Westphalian nation state system. Although classical Islamic political theory prioritizes the unity of ummah, modern Islamic states have largely reconciled core Islamic principles with modern concepts of sovereignty, diplomacy and International law. The OIC, although with limited effectiveness, is manifestation of the fact that Islamic solidarity⁶⁵ at the state level operates within and not against the existing international order.⁶⁶ This divergence underscores that the Islamic challenge to the Liberal order is fragmented rather than unified, oscillating between reformist engagement and radical rejection.⁶⁷

The lack of political unity and existence of diversity of interpretation of core concepts, leaves Islamic world divided; with states pursuing a different path from the trans-national and non-state actors. The aspiration for an Islamic world order remains fragmented in practice, limiting its ability to present a unified and widely accepted alternative to the existing international system.

The Defense-less defenders of the Liberal World order: The Emergence of a Leader-less Europe

Europe currently faces a significant leadership vacuum within the liberal international order.⁶⁸ The three pillars of the European power i.e. Germany, France and the UK appear increasingly constrained in their ability to uphold their weight of the Western International order. Following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union through Brexit, the burden of European leadership has largely shifted to

⁶³ Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁴ Ziya Öniş, "Turkey's Two Elections: The AKP Comes Back," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 2 (April 2016): 141-154, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0021>

⁶⁵ Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. *Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*. Revised edition. Jeddah: OIC General Secretariat, 2008. https://www.oic-oci.org/page/?p_id=53&p_ref=27&lan=en.

⁶⁶ James Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)

⁶⁷ Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, 2008.

⁶⁸ Emma Ashford, "Leaderless Europe," Stimson Center, January 14, 2025, <https://www.stimson.org/2025/leaderless-europe/>.

France and Germany. French strategic autonomy debates under President Macron reflect broader European concerns about strategic sovereignty i.e. Europe to grow autonomous in diplomatic, economic and military spheres, reducing dependence on the United States and enhancing Europe's independent global role. But now Macron's popularity has declined to its lowest and the parliament seems to be in a stretch between three different blocs with different and opposing philosophical differences. The tripartite parliament will leave little room for Macron to make politically bold moves and lead Europe.⁶⁹

Germany faces complex domestic economic and political challenges that limit its capacity to assume broader leadership within Europe. Germany's economy, the largest in Europe, has experienced significant slowdown in recent years. Germany's economic decline further illustrates the fragility of the liberal order's leading defenders. According to official Eurostat GDP data, Germany recorded negative quarterly growth rates throughout 2023 and 2024, oscillating between -0.4% and +0.2%⁷⁰, reflecting a sustained pattern of economic contraction rather than mere stagnation. This makes Germany the worst performing major European economy in the period, a stark reversal for the continent's largest economy and the principal financier of European liberal order institutions. After sixteen years of leadership under Angela Merkel, Germany entered a new political phase under Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The coalition in the Bundestag, called 'Traffic light coalition' because of different colors of the parties flags. The coalition has broken down and Germany's chancellor has recently lost a vote of confidence leaving Germany with an uncertain and unstable political system.⁷¹

The current international environment is marked by considerable uncertainty. The Leadership in US seems to be consolidated but the same is seen weakened, fragmented and even struggling by allies of the US and more evidently Europe like France, Germany and now Trudeau in Canada.⁷² With a populist Trump in the heartland of the Liberal Democracy, Europe seems to be the first to raise the cry of the breaking world order, the order that has failed to supply with the popular demands with problems like immigration, identity based violence, extremism,

⁶⁹ Coface. "France: Hung Parliament Raises Uncertainty." September 7, 2024. <https://www.coface.com/news-economy-and-insights/france-hung-parliament-raises-uncertainty>.

⁷⁰ Eurostat. *GDP and Main Aggregates — Growth Rates, Quarterly Data: Germany*. Luxembourg: Statistical Office of the European Union, 2025. Dataset code: namq_10_gdp. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/namq_10_gdp

⁷¹ "German Chancellor Olaf Scholz Loses Confidence Vote," BBC News, December 16, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckg36pp6dpyo>.

⁷² "Europe is Leaderless," *Newsweek*, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/europe-leaderless-opinion-1924078>.

Economic recession in almost all of Europe and unemployment etc. being prevalent in every European state. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has further exposed the limitations of Western security guarantees and highlighted divisions within the liberal international order. The architects and traditional defenders of the liberal international order, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, are increasingly preoccupied with domestic political and economic challenges. As a result, their capacity to collectively provide strategic leadership for the Western alliance has diminished. This leadership gap contributes to the growing uncertainty surrounding the future of the liberal international order.

Recommendations

Historically, great power competition has shaped global order transitions, and the current multipolar moment is no exception. The winner-takes-all approach that characterized both the Cold War and the unipolar era is no longer viable. What follows are policy recommendations directed at the principal actors in this transition:

The United States must recognize and formally accommodate the multipolarity of the contemporary world. US primacy and unipolarity defined global politics for nearly three decades following the Cold War. However, the diffusion of power across multiple regional and global actors has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape. A recalibrated US grand strategy, one that leads through coalition-building and institutional reform rather than unilateral assertion, would better serve the long-term sustainability of a rules-based international system.

Russia must recognize that imperial overstretch is not a viable path to great power status. Russia's military adventurism, while temporarily disruptive, has deepened its economic isolation and undermined its credibility as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. A sustainable Russian return to great power relevance requires prioritizing economic modernization and domestic institutional development over territorial revisionism.

Europe must urgently address its leadership vacuum and emerge as an autonomous pole of power. Years of strategic dependence on American security guarantees have left Europe ill-equipped to lead independently at precisely the moment when collective Western resolve is most needed. The strategic autonomy agenda, articulated most clearly by President Macron, remains the correct diagnosis, but it requires the political will and institutional coherence.

China needs to recalibrate its Tianxia model with transparent rules, enforceable norms, and multilateral accountability mechanisms if it wishes its vision to achieve genuine global legitimacy. The Belt and Road Initiative and associated institutions offer real development benefits, but their long-term credibility requires China to address legitimate concerns

about debt sustainability, conditionality, and asymmetric dependency. A Chinese world order vision that incorporates genuine reciprocity and institutional transparency would find considerably broader acceptance among the Global South and middle powers alike. Otherwise, it would be difficult for other states to follow the course.

The Islamic world has to offer more than ideology. Translating its principles into concrete political and institutional form requires greater unity, organization, and pragmatic engagement at both regional and global levels, whether independently or through a reformed and more effective Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Middle powers, including Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan, should take on a more proactive role in bridging the gap between competing world order visions. The concept of middle power diplomacy is not new, but it finds its most natural expression in a multipolar world. These states are not powerful enough to redirect global politics unilaterally, but they are influential enough to mediate, convene, and construct the institutional foundations of a more inclusive order. Their geographic, cultural, and civilizational diversity uniquely positions them to serve as interlocutors between the major poles of power.

Ultimately, the transition to a stable multipolar order will not be achieved through the dominance of any single vision but through the difficult, incremental work of building shared foundations across divergent civilizational and political traditions. Reconciliation is not only possible, it is a necessity.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and qualitative historical analysis, which precludes quantitative testing of causal claims and limits empirical generalizability. The broad comparative scope across multiple civilizational and geopolitical models also limits deeper case-specific analysis.

The study's temporal scope, covering the post-Cold War period from 1991 to 2025, means that findings reflect a specific transitional moment and may require revision as the multipolar configuration continues to evolve. Additionally, interpretations of Islamic political thought are based on selected scholarly works, and alternative interpretations may exist. Future research could strengthen the study by incorporating primary data, mixed-method approaches, and more focused country-level case studies.

Conclusion

The world order is only effective and stable when it is based on the premises of balance of power. The current configuration is an unbalanced multipolar order that lacks both hegemonic leadership and a shared normative framework capable of stabilizing the system. In the past, the alliance system and buck-passing worked for most of the Cold War until

1991, when the world lost the other pole of world politics, the USSR. From there on, the world witnessed more identity-based violence, particularly in the Muslim world, with Iraq's Kuwait invasion, the US invasion of Iraq, the Afghan war, the War on Terror, the Syrian war, and recurring conflict in the Middle East.

This study has demonstrated that the transition to unbalanced multipolarity has not produced convergence around a single alternative vision but rather intensified legitimacy contestation among competing civilizational models, each insufficiently cohesive to replace the declining liberal order.

China has emerged as one of the leading economic powers, and economic power usually translates into political and military influence. But China operates by its own rules. It will not protect the Western liberal order in whose creation it had no part.

Rather, through the Belt and Road Initiative, the Tianxia framework, and its Global Initiatives, China is actively reshaping the rules of international engagement to reflect its own civilizational values and strategic interests. Russia, as always, remains caught between two impulses, to revise the world order entirely or to secure a central place within it.

Russian leaders do not consider a weak Russia to be an acceptable outcome. Due to its history, geography, culture, and deep-seated insecurities, Russia has to remain at the center of world politics. However, its invasion of Ukraine has exposed a fundamental contradiction: Russia claims to champion sovereignty and multipolarity while simultaneously violating the very norms it invokes.

The brutal violence in Gaza and the Western world's inconsistent application of the very values it claims to defend, human rights, international law, and equality has deepened the Muslim world's normative discontent with the existing order.

Yet the Islamic challenge remains fragmented, divided between pragmatic state-level actors and radical non-state organizations, making a unified Islamic world order vision unlikely in the near term. Europe is no longer a potent defender of the Western order but rather the manifestation of the first serious crack within it.

France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are preoccupied with domestic political and economic challenges, leaving a leadership vacuum at a moment when collective Western resolve is most needed.

The new world order will not be ruled by a single state or civilization. Rather, it will reflect arrangements that are mutually acceptable to the major poles of power. Reconciliation is not only possible but a dire necessity for a stable and peaceful world. Middle powers like Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan will play a vital role in bridging the gap between competing visions.

Until that reconciliation is achieved, clashes remain inevitable, as witnessed in the Indo-Pakistani tensions, the Israel-Iran confrontation, the Ukraine-Russia war, and recurring violence across the Middle East.

