Managing Chaos

By Michael Miklaucic

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."

(W.B. Yeats, The Second Coming, 1921)

If it seems like the world is descending into chaos the feeling is justified. Thirty-five thousand dead in Gaza. Nearing 300,000 killed in Ukraine. War in the Red Sea. Jihadist insurrectionists in the Sahel. Nuclear saber-rattling by the Kremlin. North Korea and Iran threatening their neighbors and everyone else. Escalating Chinese intimidation of Taiwan. Complete breakdown of Transatlantic relations with Russia. Partial breakdown of U.S. relations with China. The world seems to be coming unglued. The rules-based global order that set the norms and more-or-less governed behavior between states for the past nearly 80 years is frayed—possibly beyond repair. Citizens everywhere are exhausted, barraged relentlessly by the 24/7 news cycle with constant reportage so grim as to be anaesthetizing.

Global order is a universal public good, however it is neither self-executing nor auto-emergent. It emerges from the struggle—sometimes violent—of competing principles of governance, often but not exclusively manifested by states. Those principles are expressed by a specific conceptual vocabulary and constitute a paradigm.

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It is permanently in flux. Today we are experiencing a paradigm shift and global order cannot be taken for granted. We are veering toward chaos.

The defining principles of the liberal, rules-based global order originated in Europe, but while never attaining universality rapidly spread to the Western Hemisphere, to Asia and South Asia, and elsewhere. They were elegantly articulated and reached their apogee in the immediate post-World War II era with the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and a substantial body of international law. Today autocratic regimes are set on replacing the liberal, rules-based global order with an alternative more conducive to authoritarian governance based on pervasive surveillance, social and political control, and rigid regime dominance.

Geopolitical concepts such as deterrence, containment, international law, development, sovereignty, alliances, and cooperative multilateralism, among others made the post- World War II world somewhat predictable and manageable, if not always copacetic. They helped prevent great power conflict, organized international relations, promoted prosperity, and mobilized resources for the benefit of both the populations recovering from the devastation of World War II as well as those emerging from colonial legacies. That order, however, has reached entropy; each of the fundamental concepts underlying the post-World War II system has dramatically weakened and lost its ordering power.

The dissipation of the post-World War II paradigm leaves a profound vacuum in our conceptual framework and understanding of the global security environment. A new constellation of ordering principles must be discovered to replace the anachronistic principles of past order. Absent a new set of guiding principles and the collective will to implement them the current, fading order will dissolve into chaos, or worse, into a future order based merely on brute force and violence. Russia has shown us that future with its unprovoked invasion of and explicit intention of eradicating Ukraine.

In this era of entropy and disorder what are the options for preserving the principles of the liberal, rules-based global order? One ever-present option is to stick with the status quo; however, this option cedes the initiative to adversaries that are relentless and committed to overturning that order and achieving regional if not global hegemony. The status quo entails a shrinking core of liberal states consumed with destructive internal dynamics, fratricidal disputes amongst themselves about market shares, incremental erosion of global influence, and paralysis in the face of a concerted strategic assault by authoritarian adversaries. A more aggressive option is to attempt to counterattack and reclaim recently lost ground in the global competition for influence. However, absent a reversal or at least mitigation of recent geopolitical and geoeconomics trends favoring the authoritarian coalition this option will be a struggle likely to fall short in the near-term. A third option—less ambitious, but within reach—is to accept the reality of decoupling from the authoritarian coalition and consolidate the "Core" of liberal states committed to a rules-based global order by strengthening their bonds of alliance and partnership, increased burden-sharing, and, importantly, reinforcing their respective institutions of liberal, rules-based governance.

What is "the Core?" It is neither the West nor the East nor the North nor the South. "Consolidating the core" is neither containment nor imperial expansionism. The core consists of those states committed to the liberal, rules-based global order embracing human liberty, social justice, and the norms of international behavior articulated in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The core is not frozen nor exclusive. Between the core and the authoritarian coalition exists a large number of hedging states unwilling or unready to commit to one or the other visions of

global order or the coalitions advancing them. These are contested states that might continue to hedge or lean toward or join one group or the other. They are not insignificant, and the competition over their allegiance will be intense. To win the alignment of the hedging states the Core must have "a better deal" to offer in terms of the sharing of power, wealth, and prosperity. To those contested states the Core must offer incentives and real potential to reach their aspirations. The disastrous Washington Consensus must be abandoned.

Policies based on anachronistic principles can have little hope of effectively shaping desired outcomes. For example, policies based on the principle of sovereignty have over-estimated the governance capability of fragile and failing states. The prevailing understanding of development has not been successful in accomplishing the aspirations of the post-World War II architects, and the institutions built to foster development have under-performed at great cost. Deterrence, while it may have been successful at the strategic level, has proven ineffective in preventing sub-strategic violence and conflict.

To achieve relevance both policy and practice must be built upon principles that accurately reflect the evolving global environment.

Identifying and articulating the principles that will govern the trajectory of the future global order implies the creation of a new vocabulary to define the evolving global paradigm. The old vocabulary has become a limiting function undermining both policy and practice. The new vocabulary will emerge through an intellectual fusion with contributions from thought leaders and practitioners from the international security, statecraft, technology, and development communities. Insight from the private sector (finance, manufacturing, commerce, etc.) will also be critical to creating a policy-relevant vocabulary.

Today, the core states are poised in an existential struggle against a powerful coalition of authoritarian, elite-controlled, surveillance states intent on shaping the future to be conducive to rigid, autocratic domination. This struggle will determine who will set the rules of behavior and governance for the 21st century. PRISM