

# Henry Kissinger on the Assembly of a New World Order

The concept that has underpinned the modern geopolitical era is in crisis

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Libya is in civil war, fundamentalist armies are building a self-declared caliphate across Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan's young democracy is on the verge of paralysis. To these troubles are added a resurgence of tensions with Russia and a relationship with China divided between pledges of cooperation and public recrimination. The concept of order that has underpinned the modern era is in crisis.

The search for world order has long been defined almost exclusively by the concepts of Western societies. In the decades following World War II, the U.S.—strengthened in its economy and national confidence—began to take up the torch of international leadership and added a new dimension. A nation founded explicitly on an idea of free and representative governance, the U.S. identified its own rise with the spread of liberty and democracy and credited these forces with an ability to achieve just and lasting peace. The traditional European approach to order had viewed peoples and states as inherently competitive; to constrain the effects of their clashing ambitions, it relied on a balance of power and a concert of enlightened statesmen. The prevalent American view considered people inherently reasonable and inclined toward peaceful compromise and common sense; the spread of democracy was therefore the overarching goal for international order. Free markets would uplift individuals, enrich societies and substitute economic interdependence for traditional international rivalries.

This effort to establish world order has in many ways come to fruition. A plethora of independent sovereign states govern most of the world's territory. The spread of democracy and participatory governance has become a shared aspiration if not a universal reality; global communications and financial networks operate in real time.

The years from perhaps 1948 to the turn of the century marked a brief moment in human history when one could speak of an incipient global world order composed of an amalgam of American

idealism and traditional European concepts of statehood and balance of power. But vast regions of the world have never shared and only acquiesced in the Western concept of order. These reservations are now becoming explicit, for example, in the Ukraine crisis and the South China Sea. The order established and proclaimed by the West stands at a turning point.

First, the nature of the state itself—the basic formal unit of international life—has been subjected to a multitude of pressures. Europe has set out to transcend the state and craft a foreign policy based primarily on the principles of soft power. But it is doubtful that claims to legitimacy separated from a concept of strategy can sustain a world order. And Europe has not yet given itself attributes of statehood, tempting a vacuum of authority internally and an imbalance of power along its borders. At the same time, parts of the Middle East have dissolved into sectarian and ethnic components in conflict with each other; religious militias and the powers backing them violate borders and sovereignty at will, producing the phenomenon of failed states not controlling their own territory.

The challenge in Asia is the opposite of Europe's: Balance-of-power principles prevail unrelated to an agreed concept of legitimacy, driving some disagreements to the edge of confrontation.

The clash between the international economy and the political institutions that ostensibly govern it also weakens the sense of common purpose necessary for world order. The economic system has become global, while the political structure of the world remains based on the nation-state. Economic globalization, in its essence, ignores national frontiers. Foreign policy affirms them, even as it seeks to reconcile conflicting national aims or ideals of world order.

This dynamic has produced decades of sustained economic growth punctuated by periodic financial crises of seemingly escalating intensity: in Latin America in the 1980s; in Asia in 1997; in Russia in 1998; in the U.S. in 2001 and again starting in 2007; in Europe after 2010. The winners have few reservations about the system. But the losers—such as those stuck in structural misdesigns, as has been the case with the European Union's southern tier—seek their remedies by solutions that negate, or at least obstruct, the functioning of the global economic system.

The international order thus faces a paradox: Its prosperity is dependent on the success of globalization, but the process produces a political reaction that often works counter to its aspirations.

A third failing of the current world order, such as it exists, is the absence of an effective mechanism for the great powers to consult and possibly cooperate on the most consequential issues. This may seem an odd criticism in light of the many multilateral forums that exist—more by far than at any other time in history. Yet the nature and frequency of these meetings work against the elaboration of long-range strategy. This process permits little beyond, at best, a discussion of pending tactical issues and, at worst, a new form of summitry as "social media" event. A contemporary structure of

international rules and norms, if it is to prove relevant, cannot merely be affirmed by joint declarations; it must be fostered as a matter of common conviction.

The penalty for failing will be not so much a major war between states (though in some regions this remains possible) as an evolution into spheres of influence identified with particular domestic structures and forms of governance. At its edges, each sphere would be tempted to test its strength against other entities deemed illegitimate. A struggle between regions could be even more debilitating than the struggle between nations has been.

The contemporary quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order *within* the various regions and to relate these regional orders to one another. These goals are not necessarily self-reconciling: The triumph of a radical movement might bring order to one region while setting the stage for turmoil in and with all others. The domination of a region by one country militarily, even if it brings the appearance of order, could produce a crisis for the rest of the world. A world order of states affirming individual dignity and participatory governance, and cooperating internationally in accordance with agreed-upon rules, can be our hope and should be our inspiration. But progress toward it will need to be sustained through a series of intermediary stages.

To play a responsible role in the evolution of a 21st-century world order, the U.S. must be prepared to answer a number of questions for itself: What do we seek to prevent, no matter how it happens, and if necessary alone? What do we seek to achieve, even if not supported by *any* multilateral effort? What do we seek to achieve, or prevent, *only* if supported by an alliance? What should we *not* engage in, even if urged on by a multilateral group or an alliance? What is the nature of the values that we seek to advance? And how much does the application of these values depend on circumstance? For the U.S., this will require thinking on two seemingly contradictory levels. The celebration of universal principles needs to be paired with recognition of the reality of other regions' histories, cultures and views of their security. Even as the lessons of challenging decades are examined, the affirmation of America's exceptional nature must be sustained. History offers no respite to countries that set aside their sense of identity in favor of a seemingly less arduous course. But nor does it assure success for the most elevated convictions in the absence of a comprehensive geopolitical strategy.

— Dr. Kissinger served as national security adviser and secretary of state under Presidents Nixon and Ford. Adapted from his book "World Order," to be published Sept. 9 by the Penguin Press.