Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction in an Age of Global Contestation

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Chapter 16

Conclusions

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Comparing Visions, Fathoming Orders

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Introduction: Similarities, Differences, and Shifting Imaginations

A key aim of this book was to ask, in a systematic manner, whether a shared direction for international order could be traced in the key powers' visions for the future. Besides the wars and conflicts raging in the world right now, the coming decades will be decisive for solving the existential challenges created by the "polycrisis" that encompasses climate change, food security, energy, and migration, along with the uncertain and possibly disruptive evolution of technologies such as artificial intelligence (Lawrence et al. 2024; Tooze 2022). Is the global community equipped to find a common understanding on desired characteristics of international order, or have the imaginations of key powers regarding those parameters already grown too far apart?

To answer the question, we unpacked the ordering visions into four interlinked and sometimes overlapping dimensions: the envisioned global distribution of power, but also, by implication, status, and even responsibility; the normative dimension, that is, the values, ideas, and concepts applied in the vision; trusted, legitimate and illegitimate institutions of global governance, as presented in the vision; and the temporal dimensions of the vision, referring both to how the vision has evolved over time and to the anticipated future realisation of the vision: Is the realisation of the desired order a matter of years and decades, or perhaps even centuries?

The visions – or more precisely how they are produced in the official political rhetoric in respective countries – vary with respect to how seamlessly they fit the fourfold framework. Some political leaders stress domestic issues and ponder less about the ideal order on the international level. In some political cultures it is more commonplace to discuss the core assumptions on global politics and how they affect the given state than in others. Moreover, some visions (e.g. in Brazil, the United States or South Africa) are subject to much harsher domestic contestation than others. Also, the extent of elaboration of the visions varies: sometimes, for example, the ideal model of international power distribution is explicitly pronounced, other times it is assumed. Taken together, however, the framework allows us to draw conclusions on the politics of ordering in the not-too-distant future.

In Table 16.1, the visions are projected against each other in line with the four-dimensional framework. Even in this simplified form, the comparison shows

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Table 16.1 Four dimensions of the order(ing) visions

State	*Distribution*	*Institutions*	*Norms*	*Temporal orientation*
United States	Unipolarity (US-led)	UN, selective multilateralism (e.g. G7, Quad, AUKUS) vs. transactionalism (bilateral)	Liberal-democratic vs. conservative/ civilisational	Present/past
China	Multipolarity	UN, Bretton Woods + Chinese initiatives, BRI, G20, BRICS+	Sovereignty, harmony, cultural diversity, *tianxia*	Future
EU	Multipolarity (as accepted description)	UN, G7, increased informal/ ad-hoc (e.g. COVAX) and bilateral cooperation	Liberal-democratic, European strategic autonomy/sovereignty	Present
France	Multipolarity	UN, EU, NATO	Liberal international order, strategic autonomy	Present
Germany	Multipolarity (as accepted description)	UN, EU, NATO	International law, liberal international order	Present
United Kingdom	Unipolarity (US-led)	UN, Bretton Woods, NATO, G7, Commonwealth, AUKUS	Liberalism, national sovereignty, economic pragmatism	Present
Japan	Unipolarity (US-led)	UN, G7, CPTPP, Indo-Pacific	Liberal democracy, liberal economic order	Present
India	Multipolarity (polycentrism)	UN, BRICS+, G20, NAM	Hinduism, state-civilisation	Future
Brazil	Multipolarity (a fairer global order)	UN, BRICS+, G20, NAM	*Grandeza* (a belief in Brazil's destined greatness); pragmatism	Present/ future
South Africa	Multipolarity (a fairer global order)	UN, ICC, AU, AfDB, BRICS+, NAM, G77, G20	International law, *ubuntu* (interconnectedness)	Future
Turkey	Multipolarity (pluralism)	UN, NATO, G20	Islamic civilisationism, state sovereignty	Present/past
Saudi Arabia	Multipolarity	GCC	Conservative values, Sunni Islamism	Future
Iran	Multipolarity ("post-polarity")	SCO, BRICS+	(Islamist) revolutionary, anti-West, anti-imperialist	Present
Russia	Multipolarity (counter-hegemonic)	UN, BRICS+, SCO, EAEU, CSTO, G20	Sovereignty, traditional-conservative values, state-civilisation	Present/past

Notes: AfDB: African Development Bank; AU: African Union; AUKUS: Australia–UK–US Trilateral Security Partnership; BRI: Belt and Road Initiative; BRICS+: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Indonesia (grouping); COVAX: COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access; CPTPP: Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership; CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organisation; EAEU: Eurasian Economic Union; EU: European Union; G7: Group of Seven; G20: Group of 20; G77: Group of 77; ICC: International Criminal Court; NAM: Non-Aligned Movement; NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Quad: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

rough sources of overlap and difference across the visions. For example, the visions of states challenging the status quo are in general more future-oriented than those aiming to preserve the liberal international order. Similarly, most powers either accept (like the European powers) or embrace and envision further the international order as multipolar instead of unipolar, each with their own contextual emphases. From the perspective of institutional ordering, all powers give certain legitimacy to the United Nations (UN), while other common denominators are more difficult to find. As these findings will be discussed later, it should be noted, however, that none of the dimensions is unambiguous but rather allows several possible approaches, which means that there would be several alternative ways to compile the table.

The Distributional Dimension: The Measures and Meanings of Greatness

The first dimension of our analysis focuses on the desired distribution of capabilities in the international system that the state or actor envisions. How can international power, and by implication influence, be achieved and enhanced, and what is it ultimately based upon? And what is it, exactly, that makes great powers great?

As Benjamin Zala (2021, 197) points out in his analysis on polarity, international relations (IR) scholars often discuss the distribution of capabilities, whereas politicians focus on distribution of status when describing the hierarchy in the international system. The visions analysed in this book seem to confirm the notion. Yet status cannot be dissociated from the material moorings of power: the two are mediated by interpretations of distributional matters. As Manjari Miller (2021, 13) points out, the status dissatisfaction of rising powers hinges on their "beliefs . . . about the distribution of goods in the international system rather than the distribution of goods itself" – there is no objective criteria or measure of power. At the same time, status is intersubjective, namely, regardless of how much of some valued capabilities a state accumulates, those endowments only become relevant from the vantage point of status hierarchies when significant others recognise them as such (Mukherjee 2022, 55; see also Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Forsberg, Heller, and Wolf 2014).

The debate on distribution of power often follows structural realist traits, where material attributes of power such as economic performance, military might, size of territory and population, and possession of or access to natural resources determine a state's place in the global power hierarchy (Waltz 1979). It is according to this reading that we have treated the United States and China as the main superpower contenders in the current international setting, yet this is not the only interpretation arising from the visions studied. While material, measurable attributes of power do not alone translate into direct influence in the politics of international ordering, the states themselves oftentimes explicitly refer to them as guarantees of great-power status in the international make-up.

It should be noted that this book has studied the visions of international order that have been produced during the (roughly) past decade, during which it has

become evident that the material resources in the world are shifting away from the so-called Global North. The most rapidly growing economies as well as populations are in the Global South and East, and while the change is long-term, it is fundamental and will be reflected in the forthcoming forms of politics of ordering. As in the past, economic and technological capabilities will be decisive material attributes of power, and there is hardly a vision in this book that does not make reference to these foundations. For the United States – whether Obama, Trump or Biden – maintaining American ingenuity and retooling the economic model for the twenty-first century are the keys to continued American ascendancy, even if there is divergence over how these should be achieved. On the Chinese side, economic (and by implication technological) development is central for security and social stability. In the "Global Britain" vision, the rejiggering of the global economic landscape is seen to present opportunities for economic gain. Emerging technologies, unsurprisingly, are seen as both threats and opportunities in many of the visions mapped by our contributors – "no great power . . . without . . . technological sovereignty" as Emanuel Macron puts it (Chapter 5), something with which, on the other side of the ordering contest, the Russian leadership would agree.

Military might, and the possession of nuclear weapons in particular, is a key attribute for those states that can rely on such military resources. The United States has remained focused on modernising its nuclear triad across administrations, while Russian political leadership justifies the country's status in the world with its past and present nuclear capabilities. So does France, for which its independent nuclear deterrent is a key foundation of great power status, while the United Kingdom has also decided to revert from its 2010 pledge and instead increase the nuclear stockpile ceiling. Nuclear weapons may also function as means to enhance "strategic autonomy", like for post-Cold War India, even if this aspect would not be prevalent in the ordering vision. The nuclear file, with the current risk of accelerating proliferation and dim prospects for arms control or disarmament, remains a true challenge for aspiring powers that do not possess nuclear weapons but perceive them as a decisive element of national power. This is a realisation that has hit home after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when cast against the decision by the latter to voluntarily hand over its nuclear weapons in the 1990s. Consequently, as US commitment to Europe has become more uncertain in the first months of the second Trump term, joint European nuclear capabilities have become a point of discussion unheard of for decades.

Immaterial attributes of power, such as "attractiveness" of the state abroad or its "soft power", do play a significant role in gaining influence over others. A great power is great only if it enjoys recognition by others, and states invest significant resources to maintain this recognition. In practice, the means to enhance international attractiveness or influence vary from truly "soft" means such as promoting culinary delights or sports abroad to the more strategic efforts such as establishing language and culture centres or media outlets, yet the success that these can convey depends on the receiving environment. This aspect should not be overlooked as a source of legitimacy and credibility for ordering powers – after all, cultural attractiveness of the Western bloc, and the United States in particular, did play a

significant role in the outcome of the Cold War. It is noteworthy that soft power, like all power, is dynamic and relational. For example, France relies on soft power abroad and regards *la Francophonie* as a central element in preserving French values. Russia has for long theorised on *Russkii mir*, a value-based, "mental" Russian world that extends beyond the borders of Russia proper. While the French political presence in West Africa has diminished, Russia and China have swiftly aimed to increase their ideological and economic influence in the region.

Moreover, based on the evidence of this book, certain immaterial forms of power have become an increasingly tangible argument for the ideal hierarchy within the international order. Ideas, values, national culture, and past greatness may serve as *justification* for the distribution of power: some states are or should be more influential than others because of their national, cultural, or religious distinctiveness. While exceptionalism has defined nation states' self-perception since the early nineteenth century, it is noteworthy that the upsurge of the concept of "civilisation" in foreign policy emerges as a striking feature of the visions presented in this book, too (see, e.g. Katzenstein 2010; Coker 2019; Hale and Laruelle 2021). Civilisational discourses are produced not only by the challengers of the status quo but also across the world.

The lure of civilisational rhetoric is intrinsically connected to the idea of declining and rising civilisations, which enables the visionaries of today to portray the current transformation of the international order in civilisational terms and suggest their own role in what follows. For China, the civilisational approach is essential: the ruling regime presents China as a culturally distinct civilisational state, but it also frames its ordering vision through a rhetoric of equal and sovereign civilisations, which should not clash, but prosper together harmoniously. Similarly, civilisational rhetoric is essential for regional powers that draw their legitimacy primarily from religion, such as Erdoğan's Turkey, Modi's India, or Iran. For these countries, as well as for Russia and Bolsonaro's Brazil, civilisational discourses provide means to address critique towards the Other, most often "the decaying West" that has abandoned its moral and religious values, which these states and nations, as civilisations, cherish and preserve. In Europe, French president Emmanuel Macron has not been shy in using civilisational rhetoric when explaining Europe's distinct culture. During his first term in office, Donald Trump combined Christian-conservative ideas and the discourse of "Western civilisation" in challenging components of the liberal international order, specifically European integration and "globalist" ideas. Like in the United States, or in Brazil, the national, cultural, and/or religious distinctiveness has been a vital rhetorical element of one administration but not necessarily of another. This is not to say, however, that civilisational rhetoric would be merely instrumental for those powers applying it. In authoritarian systems that guarantee a certain continuum – like in China or Russia – civilisational discourses span across the political sphere and are being built upon constantly. When civilisational ideas are widely embraced by the general public to the extent that they become a naturalised, intuitively accepted world view, they function subtly in justifying a certain sense of entitlement: civilisations, undoubtedly, deserve their share of power in the international system.

The visions that would *not* utilise exceptional or civilisational rhetoric are actually few in our collection. However, despite the ambiguity of the concept as well as the tendency of Western analysts to treat civilisation as a "toxic" concept (Ehrhardt 2025, 210), civilisational ideas should not be regarded as anti-democratic by definition. Like Toni Alaranta points out in Chapter 12, Turkey may offer an illustration of this: its ruling Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) party did convey a more pluralist, even potentially democratising civilisationism in the government's earlier agenda in the 2000s, before resorting to a more authoritarian stance. And while, indeed, most examples point to authoritarian civilisationism that denotes hierarchy, the philosophical and practical uses of the concept should be seriously studied. In particular, further comparative research would be needed to understand the two burning questions that still remain: first, whether the state-civilisations, each resorting to their distinctive values and legacies and rejecting the very idea of any universal value basis, are able to reach agreement on global issues; and second, whether "civilisational powers" can abandon their often firm understanding of regionally defined spheres of influence.

Even if the concept of civilisation would not be applied, many powers resort to their capabilities or status in the near or distant past in legitimising their desired international standing today. In fact, all those states that perceive themselves as possessing great-power characteristics convey visions where the ideal distribution of power in the present would, at least partly, stem from the distribution of power in the past. This seems especially palpable for those states that used to enjoy greater status before but have lost some of it. For example, Russian president Putin has explicitly portrayed the winners of World War II as those who should be steering world politics today: it is, in his words, their responsibility. Past greatness that translates into future visions can also be found in French *grandeur* and in the references to the British Empire in the United Kingdom's Brexit debates, not to mention in President Trump's slogans – America should be "first" and "great". As Pekka Korhonen writes in Chapter 8: "Japanese international cosmology can be understood as aristocratic, in the analytically simple sense that aristocracy becomes a political estate in a situation when a certain entity has possessed power and wealth for so long that the situation begins to appear normal". This type of "aristocracy" is recognised also in several other status quo powers, for which the "naturalised" status among the leading powers of the international concert has been achieved through the years and is, perhaps, declining, but with a delay.

The global distribution of power can hardly be addressed without referring to polarity. The scholarly debate has arrived at no consensus of "the existence or otherwise of a multipolar order" or what states would be constituting the poles of it (Zala 2021, 196), but the visions produced by policymakers do make suggestions of exactly that: nearly all powers of this volume describe their ideal envisioned international order using the concept of multipolarity, and their own role in the constellation (with the notable exceptions of the United States, as hegemonic ideas die hard, and Iran, where theories of "post-polarity" have been developed to argue against major powers' polar dominance). Like Niklas Helwig, Marco Siddi, and Ville Sinkkonen point out in Chapter 4, even if the EU does not envision

multipolarity as the desired future international order, it has come to accept it as a description of the current order. There is no scholarly consensus on what ideas exactly are referred to as multipolarity, but a distinction could be made between the strategic and normative uses of the concept (see Chapter 4 in this volume; Acharya 2004). In light of this book, both readings of multipolarity seem to appear in the visions of key powers. Some of the ascending powers such as South Africa seem to stress rule-setting and equality, that is, normative multipolarity, whereas some others, such as India, the EU, or Turkey, seem to view multipolarity in a more strategic manner. In this interpretation, surviving in the multipolar world entails becoming one of the poles. Interestingly, as Nuppu Pelevina notes in Chapter 10, the eagerness to refer to multipolarity in Brazilian foreign policy discourse has diminished after it appeared too distant a goal because of shortcomings in the domestic and economic sphere – again underlining the strategic connotation of the concept.

The Normative Dimension: Ordering Values and Ideas

When it comes to normative aspects of the visions, we were interested in the values, ideas, and practices that the key powers suggest as a basis for future international order. Here, it makes sense to distinguish between "meta-values" that the states view as core principles undergirding the ideal international order and the "domestic" environment of values and ideas in respective countries. The categories are interlinked insofar as the interpretation of these meta-values, or organising principles, such as respect of state sovereignty or multipolarity (in its normative connotation), is affected by domestic values. For example, it seems that states that embrace conservative values domestically tend to advocate state sovereignty as a principle against external interference, and focus on negative aspects of freedom instead of positive ones, when envisioning the desired future (cf. Sinkkonen and Vogt 2019).

There is also considerable variation in how "domestic" the remit of values, norms, and ideas of a respective country is within their visions. Not all powers envision projecting their ideological underpinnings globally, whereas for some, it is a crucial ingredient of the vision of international order. It certainly has been for the "core" West, especially the United States, the EU, France, and the United Kingdom. Russia has for long portrayed itself as a global defender of traditional, conservative values that it contrasts with Western liberal, individualistic, and secular cultural values (embracing, however, neoliberal values in the realm of economics). Russia's vision of international order provides conservative-authoritarian ideological tools and leadership to other powers that likewise reject the universalism of liberal democracy – while stressing that each state-civilisation should follow their own path. Rejecting (Western) universal values is an important element for China, too, but it is less focused on advocating any specific set of ideas worldwide.

A related, recurring view that challenges the status quo portrays the world as a "family" of culturally distinctive states that, ideally, coexist peacefully despite possessing different values domestically – a kind of pluralism that can accommodate civilisational differences. In China, both Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have described

the ideal international order through the concept of "harmony", in which civilisations would adhere to China's five principles of peaceful coexistence. Indian political culture has for long referred to the world in a similar vein as one family, but recently, as Bart Gaens explains in Chapter 9, Hindu nationalist tradition has affected the vision so that the ideal of "unity in diversity" is now projected upon the rest of the world as a model. (As examples of India, Turkey, and Russia show, hegemonic nationalist discourses may well swallow cultural, religious, and ethnic heterogeneity and project those as sub-characteristics of the "one nation".) The idea of the "peaceful coexistence" of distinct civilisations in place of universalism is no longer the domain of only non-Western countries: an equivalent view was voiced in the Warsaw speech by Donald Trump in July 2017, when he portrayed a "beautiful vision" of a world where "strong, sovereign, and independent nations, each with its own cultures and dreams" would thrive "side-by-side in prosperity, freedom, and peace" (see Chapter 2).

Religious values are often portrayed as distinctive features of a nation but also as an internally unifying force. For contemporary Turkey and Iran, Islam is an intrinsic part of the self-perception of the state and its positioning in the international order – while the two approach the implications of that self-perception very differently when it comes to, for example, alignment with the West or their approaches to the institutions of global governance. Multiconfessional India, and to some extent Russia, have extended majority religion – Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity – to a culturally unifying marker and a symbol of belonging. In culturally and confessionally heterogeneous South Africa, the Bantu concept of *ubuntu* is applied to emphasise interconnectedness of individuals with their environment, both societal and physical. The philosophical concept reinforces practical policies in the country by stressing the interdependence between, for instance, human rights, international law, and transitional justice, but it also stresses agency in solving inequalities in the future. In the United States, both Democratic and Republican administrations stress faith in God and justify their politics with religious rhetoric, while in many European countries, as well as in the EU, visions appear seemingly secular and remain, in this way, a global minority.

If we assume that domestic values together with the internal mode of governance affect a state's vision of the desired international order (Kupchan 2014), it should be noted that "democracy" and "autocracy" as key value sets cannot be treated as distinct categories but rather as two ends of a continuum. Established liberal democracies have undergone serious tests during the past decade – not all of them passing that test – which inevitably shapes the value environment internally and therefore also the vision they put forward on preserving or challenging the current status quo (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Holm 2025). Populist, illiberal, and far-right movements challenging and directly attacking democratic structures have been emboldened across the globe: in the Brexit-torn United Kingdom, within the EU (member states such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia have all posed this challenge, while radical right-wing parties AfD and Front National in Germany and France, respectively, continue to uphold domestic tension), as well as in Modi's India, Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Trump's United States. The turn in American politics

since Trump's return to power has shocked democratic leaders across the world, even if warning signs had been posted at an accelerating pace. And yet the effect these harbingers have had on visions of the future order seemed limited – at least until very recently (e.g. Tocci 2025).

A not entirely separate phenomenon from the transnational illiberal challenge is the widely shared readiness of Western liberal democracies to renounce democratic values, at least temporarily, in order to secure economic gains. The economic opportunism of many status quo powers functions, in the eyes of the challengers, as an argument against that status quo order itself. However, it should be noted that the rhetoric of values rarely aligns entirely with the actual politics pursued: a politics of hypocrisy often prevails (Finnemore 2009). Indeed, examples of great powers acting against their pronounced values and turning a blind eye to their core principles can be found everywhere. Russia constantly stresses state and national sovereignty as its core principle while refusing to acknowledge sovereignty of its own neighbouring countries, waging genocidal wars against them. Similarly, the Chinese principle of "peaceful coexistence" does not extend to Taiwan. Thus, while hypocrisy is to be expected when great powers are studied, the future analyses of ordering visions could focus on the seriousness of efforts that key powers make in order to fulfil their values in practice.

Finally, and partly following from this discussion, justice can be seen as a central value that steers the politics of ordering. A more just and fair international order is a key element in the visions of South Africa, India, and Brazil – countries that, each in their own way, stand for the so-called Global South in the international arena. In the visions of these countries, voiced perhaps most explicitly by South Africa, justice would be realised through more equal representation of the Global South countries in the international institutions, both economic and political; a more just green transition, where the rich countries would sufficiently compensate for the poor countries' losses caused by the climate crisis; and respect for international law. For example, Brazil, South Africa, and India have all advocated for greater global inclusiveness as well as concrete policies such as debt relief for poor countries.

Of course, it could be argued that all visions produced implicitly aim for a "just" world where justice is defined in *their* terms, as visions are ultimately utopian narratives of the desired state of affairs. The concept is applied by China, Russia, and Iran alike. Since Xi's second term in the presidential office in particular, China aims to lead the way towards a "just and rational" international order, drawing on Chinese wisdom. Russia claims to fight for a just order, that is, against "neocolonialism" by defending the "global majority" – a message that resonates among its partners in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, but is rejected in Europe, where the colonial nature of Russia's war against Ukraine is well understood. For Iran, rhetoric on just order is a way to convey its views of "post-polarity", reinforced with anti-imperialist and anti-Western arguments. It is perhaps no wonder that all these states are challengers of the status quo order. The quest for a just and fair international order should not, however, be read only as a critique aimed at the architects of the current (or perhaps currently crumbling) order. Such aspirations

are also genuine attempts to arrive at a qualitatively new distribution of power. Therefore, it reflects a certain normative understanding of multipolarity, which is seen as a guarantee for a more "balanced" international order. The aspiration concerns the distribution of both political and economic attributes of power. In practice, a fairer world would be realised through enhanced access to and influence within the key political and economic institutions (such as the UN and its security council [UNSC], International Monetary Fund [IMF], World Trade Organization [WTO], and G-groupings) where the global majority, depending on the method of measuring it, is currently not represented. For many key powers, the formation and enlargement of the BRICS+ as well as various regional organisations serves as a way to put this vision forward and will be discussed further later.

The Institutional Dimension: Building Blocks of an Ideal Order

The third analytical dimension of our framework examines the role of institutions in the ordering visions of the great powers. By institutions, we primarily mean "secondary institutions" in the categorisation of the English school, that is, concrete organisations, multilateral fora, and networks of treaties that shape the conduct of states and other international actors (Buzan 2004). In any ordering vision, institutions serve as the stabilising backbone; without them, an order would degenerate into anarchic interaction and lose its societal characteristics.

While the focus of the book has been on international order, institutions and institutional visions discussed in the chapters range from strictly regionally limited institutions to institutions with a global outlook – or at least aspirations of global prominence. In their chapter on Russia, Mikhail Komin and Veera Laine describe Russia's engagement with international institutions through three concentric circles. The innermost circle consists of organisations within Russia's immediate neighbourhood, such as the EAEU and the CSTO. The second circle includes institutions established with Russia's great power partners, such as BRICS+ and the SCO, while the outermost circle encompasses broader cooperative arrangements, including partnerships with African nations.

Although other chapters do not explicitly frame their corresponding states' institutional engagements in similar terms, the concept of layered concentric circles is an apt way to describe how great powers envision the role of institutions, both in their rhetoric and in practice. This pattern is evident among European status quo powers (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), which give most prominence to NATO and EU, but attempt to expand their influence towards the global level via, for example, France's set of *Francafrique* policies on the African continent, or "Global Britain's" newfound interest in globe-spanning multilateralism. It can also be seen in India's multi-layered "institutional promiscuity", in which concentric institutional circles expand from subregional forums (such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation [BIMSTEC]) towards Indo-Pacific (Quad) and global (BRICS+) engagements, and in Japan, whose first circle consists of regional economic organisations (e.g. the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council) and expands through its Indo-Pacific

(Quad, CPTPP) ring towards Japan's staunch engagement with global multilateral organisations.

The importance of the first and second circle of institutions in the visions should not be underestimated, since they are often seen by their proponents as providing inspiration for more globally oriented institutional arrangements: the EU, for example, has long envisioned itself as a prototype of multilateral governance for the whole world, and many Chinese scholars envision the SCO as a possible layout for a more globally oriented institution, perhaps for China's "Community for a Shared Future for Mankind".

When comparing institutions of global reach, practically all visions converge on the importance of the UN, whose central role (especially that of the UNSC) is endorsed by all the great powers from the defenders of the liberal order to post-Westernisers and revisionists. European powers emphasise the UN's continuing role as the "bedrock" of the international order, while emerging powers of the Global South (Brazil, India, and South Africa) also hail it as a central institution. Even for China, the most serious challenger of the prevailing status quo (although the claim is becoming increasingly contested as Trump's second term advances), the UN remains a crucial component of its envisioned "Community of Shared Future" and its security leg, the Global Security Initiative (GSI). China also rhetorically upholds the UN charter almost as a sacred document, which sets the fundamental normative guidelines for all states to follow. Beyond the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the UNSC, most visions also endorse other UN-affiliated organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), and to a lesser degree the "Bretton Woods" economic and monetary institutions (especially IMF and WTO), albeit in a more "democratised" form.

Thus, in the UN, a clear common denominator for all the visions can be identified, an institutional nucleus that no major power – at least so far – is interested in completely dismantling or abandoning. Even Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, despite its rhetorical threats of leaving the "communist United Nations", continued to support the UN framework in its entirety. At the same time, no vision appears to be completely content with its current function either, and the UN is presented as being in need of comprehensive reforms in almost all the visions. The dissatisfaction ranges from the Trumpian United States' hostility to the UN system and its withdrawals from the WHO and the UN Human Rights Council to the status quo-oriented powers, such as Germany and Japan, calling for reform of the UNSC, attempting to gain a permanent seat in the council. In addition, Germany has called for a "revitalisation" of the UN, and proposed a renewed role for the UNGA as a forum for peace talks.

A more thorough reform and "democratisation" of the UN lies at the core of the post-Western and revisionist visions. Russia has called for the "restoration" of the UN, and though not necessarily implying organisational reform, it does call for a stronger commitment of the UNSC to its basic principles (in the way Russia interprets them). India, Brazil (part of G4 with Japan and Germany), and South Africa, meanwhile, lead the effort to restructure the UNSC, primarily aiming for their own seat, but in the case of South Africa, meaning a seat for the African continent as a

whole. China also gives the reform and democratisation of the UN a central place in its rhetoric, although it has remained hesitant in practice. Nevertheless, the UN remains central for China's GSI, and in the most ambitious, yet unofficial Chinese visions the UNSC is projected to evolve into a practical "world government" by mid-century.

Perhaps the most ambitious and concrete reform plan is proposed by Turkey: President Erdoğan has suggested reforming the UNGA into a *de facto* parliamentary institution, which would elect 20 member states to the UNSC. These UNSC members, meanwhile, would be stripped of their veto rights against majority decisions, thus rendering the UNSC an effective world government under the surveillance of its legislative branch in the UNGA. Turkey is leading a group of states, "united for consensus" (that includes, e.g. Mexico and Poland) in its ambitious reform plan.

While all the visions converge on the central role of the UN, recent years have witnessed establishment and expansion of smaller multilateral institutions. The United States, at least until the Biden era, has constructed its "latticework" of treaties and minilateral forums ranging from military alliances (such as AUKUS) to more informal cooperative groupings (such as Quad and the Partners in the Blue Pacific), in an attempt to entangle potentially hedging states into its camp of democratic states. With the Trumpian non-vision, such an approach is withering, but the weaving of small-scale minilateral forays could continue in a more limited and transactional form, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU is constructing its own latticework of informal constellations, such as the COVAX framework for vaccine donations or initiatives to regulate artificial intelligence.

In the visions of post-Westernisers and revisionists, new institutions also hold a central place. Most prominent among them is the BRICS (or BRICS+, following expansion rounds of 2024), a key institution for its members, though for differing reasons. In line with the organisation's founding motivation, for most members, BRICS+ means first and foremost economic potential. The visions, however, emphasise the "balancing" nature of the institution. For Russia, BRICS+ holds instrumental value for gaining influence to strike a "grand bargain" with the West. For other states, such as Iran, BRICS+ membership offers economic gains as well as a way to challenge existing unipolar arrangements. Finally, for emerging states of the Global South, such as Brazil, South Africa, and India, BRICS+ is seen as a means for amplifying the voice and influence of the Global South – thereby contributing to a fairer international order.

Another new or "challenger" institution is the SCO. Initially focused on Central Asian security issues, the organisation has since significantly expanded its area of operation with the full memberships of India and Pakistan, among others, and Iran joining as its latest full member in 2022. Although the core mission of the SCO centres on regional stability, the institution occupies a crucial place in both Russian and Chinese visions, as an important tool for constructing a multipolar order, even though its charter explicitly claims that it is "not directed against other States and international organizations" (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2002). China, in particular, places ambitious value on the SCO as a possible prototype organisation for more global appeal.

Neither BRICS+ nor SCO are designed to challenge the established UN framework, but they are seen by their member states as promoting multipolarity and establishing a balancing coalition of emerging powers against Western dominance.

The Temporal Dimension: Towards a Perpetual Peace?

Time represents an important yet often neglected aspect of IR – also crucial for making sense of the ordering visions of great powers (see, e.g. Hom 2018; Drezner 2021). No ordering vision is frozen in time, nor can there be a vision of a stable and prosperous international order without at least a rough timeline for its realisation. In the chapters of the volume, the temporal analytical dimension has, first of all, considered the historical evolution of each ordering vision. Although the book is primarily interested in the changes after Russia's annexation of Crimea, the year 2014 does not ultimately represent a meaningful temporal juncture for many of the powers discussed. Indeed, domestic changes have been more important harbingers of visionary change in, for example, Brazil, whose ordering visions have fluctuated considerably between the regimes of Lula da Silva (2003–2010, 2023–) and Jair Bolsonaro (2018–2023). In India, 2014 does mark an important turning point due to the rise in power of Narendra Modi and the ensuing "Modian consensus" in Indian domestic and foreign policies. Similar dynamics can be observed in China, where Xi Jinping's presidency (2012–) has followed ambitious calls for China to "lead in the reform of the international order", or in Saudi Arabia, where Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's "Vision 2030" outlines a transformative agenda for the state's role in the region.

In the status quo countries, meanwhile, temporal evolution of the ordering visions has reflected shifts in material balances of power, the rise of Chinese and Russian revisionism, and the broader "rise of the rest" to challenge the liberal-democratic vision. For the United States, the change has manifested as a gradual drift away from the endorsement of the liberal international order towards a competition-driven "non-vision", sowing the seeds for a potential overhaul in Trump's second term. In the EU, the original, post-Cold War euphoric vision of the EU as a prototype for global governance is being replaced with a more geopolitically grounded vision and calls for the EU to emerge as a strategic actor.

A similar shift is reflected in France's "Gaullo-Mitterrandian" aspirations for strategic autonomy, the United Kingdom's yearning for renewed global prominence, and especially in Germany's *Zeitenwende* (or the more recent "Epochenbruch"), in which dreams of a Kantian world are transforming into demands for strength to deter aggression. For Japan, changes in the ordering vision have followed the resurgence of China, although for Japan, the year 2010 (when China surpassed it as the second-largest economy) represents a more significant "mental turning point" than the Crimean annexation.

Even though ordering visions evolve over time, they tend to return to certain well-established policies or practices, to culturally and historically grounded ideas, and to idealised versions of the past. Status quo powers' visions look back to the

heydays of the liberal order, while the Chinese GSI builds on the decades-old "five principles of peaceful cooperation" and draws rhetorical eminence from China's ancient *tianxia* conception. Russia, meanwhile, has seen a complete "conservative turn", with its vision embracing traditional Russian and the so-called "authentic European" ideas.

Finally, in addition to historical evolution and uses of the past, the temporal analytical dimension has allowed us to place the visions along a spectrum of future orientation, ranging from more status quo-oriented visions to those envisioning substantial change and reform. Within this spectrum, a rough divide can be drawn between the wealthy status quo powers, whose relative power is in decline, and emerging post-Western powers yearning for change.

As Pekka Korhonen argues in his chapter, Japan, Europe, and the United States share key similarities: their economies are growing slowly and their demographic conditions are marked by ageing populations. These old and established powers, Korhonen suggests, can be seen as aristocrats of the international order, rhetorically grounding their importance in past competence, and showing little interest in transforming the order. Along with Japan, the EU has lost its initial zeal to reshape the international order according to its Kantian vision. Although European powers envision themselves as future geopolitical power – a pole – their imagination seems to end at the level of global competition instead of global transformation.

Rising powers with younger populations and rapidly developing economies, meanwhile, are hungry for change. Their future-oriented order visions foresee an inevitable and irreversible multipolarisation of the international system. India, for example, foresees a Golden Era ("Amrit Kaal") in 2047, as it celebrates the 100th anniversary of its independence. Some Indian scholars even expand the scope to "a physical and philosophical human unity" to be reached by the year 3000.

China also provides a distinctly future-oriented vision of the international order thoroughly reformed. Although by many standards (slowing economy, shrinking population) its rise is eclipsing, China's forward-looking visioning has increased considerably during Xi's decade in power, most recently with the introduction of the three initiatives (GSI, Global Development Initiative [GDI], and Global Civilisation Initiative [GCI]). China envisions a teleological path towards a prosperous and peaceful international order, the Community of Shared Future, which is set to be realised in 2049 – around the same time with China's domestic main objective of rejuvenation.

Finally, there are the revisionists, Russia and Iran, neither of which could be considered ascending powers by most metrics. Nevertheless, both have demonstrated growing ambitions to regain their lost prominence and to shape the international order to better align with their interests. Iran, notwithstanding its economic and social woes, aims to emerge as the Umm Al-Quran ("Mother of All Cities") of the Islamic world, while promoting a future "post-polar" international order based on equal cooperation among states. Similarly, Russia, while drawing primarily on its civilisational and past-oriented rhetoric of a "thousand-year-long" historical tradition, envisions a "more just" and multipolar future international order to come.

Conclusion: An Age of Intensifying Global Contestation – and Envisioning

Criticism of the currently fraying liberal international order has been voiced both by scholars and by politicians, also in the chapters of this book. As Toni Alaranta reminds, Turkey's leading party AKP regards the post-Cold War liberal international order as a "pseudo-order" lacking legitimacy, arguing that it was "neither an order, new, or about the whole world, but was instead based on Western paradigm and designed to serve the interests of the winners of the Cold War" (Chapter 12, p. 156). The volume presents several visions that are projected against the liberal international order. However, a closer look reveals the "counter-visions" seem to address an ideal that no longer exists even in the imaginations of its supporters. Germany, France, the EU, or the United Kingdom might be considered as powers that most benefited from the liberal international order, and yet they have accepted that this order – if it ever was reality – has now given way to something new. The tragedy, in the eyes of supporters of the status quo, is clear: liberal-democratic values as the basis for rules-based international order might need to be abandoned.

However, as was pointed out earlier, there is always a certain distance between the words and deeds of a political actor, which enables criticism of their utterances as hypocritical. In a similar vein, the visions of international order as well as the state's desired position within that order may appear detached from "reality". Visions reflect the political machinery's ability to imagine utopian futures. Therefore, seemingly inaccessible visions may in fact prove politically useful: future-oriented aspiration, even ambition, signals the desired direction of politics and quest for agency. The cases presented in this book confirm, not surprisingly but tellingly, that the status quo powers produce less ambitious visions than the contenders – which should, perhaps, be read as a challenge for the policymakers of countries wedded to the vestiges of the old order.

At the time of finalising this volume, the change in US politics during Donald Trump's second term in office has raised questions whether rules-based international order has any prospects of survival if the global centres of power turn to reciprocal strongman deals and short-sighted transactionalism instead of long-term strategic visions. In a world where military power, and nuclear weapons in particular, stand for the ultimate attribute of status, and common understandings can be found only in the realm of national economic interests, the prospects of any rules-based order seem grim. Moreover, great and regional powers that envisage their power extending over certain spheres of influence become even harder to bound if they find inspiration in each other and breaches against international law remain unpunished. In this international setting, the rights and role of small states would seem increasingly narrow. Multipolar order, in its strategic reading as a balance between great powers, might be realised over time, but to turn it into a multipolarity of equality and common rules escapes the horizon.

Finally, this volume was ambitiously set up to ask how, in times of intensifying global contestation, the world could avoid a tragic race to the bottom. Analysis on the ordering visions of key powers has illustrated evident challenges: common

denominators are few and far between. Yet one important characteristic can be found in all visions, produced by both the defenders and challengers of the status quo order. They, namely, seem to accept the legitimacy of the UN as a key institution of global governance. This should not be interpreted as support for the current UN – indeed, the need for reform is a cross-cutting view, whereas the level of radicalism in reforming the organisation varies across the globe. Similarly, those seeking greater status in the international order often refer to more influential and permanent representation at the UN tables, most importantly in the UNSC. Again, the notion translates into a broader understanding of the politics of ordering in which the UN stands for an arena where global governance could and should take place, and where states and nations still wish to be represented. This understanding, as long as it remains widely shared, may prove helpful in future efforts of international ordering.

At the time of writing this concluding chapter, the future shape of the international order and the processes of ordering look very unclear – at a moment when global, transnational challenges seem unprecedented. Historians often warn against "presentism", interpreting our time as exceptional, but it is hard to find analogies in the past for the trials humanity faces today. The climate crisis causes an existential threat to our species as well as the planet, if rapid and decisive actions are not taken. The pace of developing new technologies is faster and more unpredictable than ever before in history – technological capabilities, in addition to the economic, military, and other resources, will become increasingly decisive for the future great powers in acquiring leverage in the politics of ordering. Yet, amidst all the uncertainty, it has become clear that a "return" to anything experienced previously is not on the cards. The parameters of a new international order may already be visible, but, like during earlier moments of ordering, putting the blocks together will require agency. Politicians, practitioners, and scholars alike will thus encounter an ordering moment in the coming years. The ability to imagine and envision is not a utopian escapade reserved for the ivory tower – it is sorely needed.

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