

Building a Fair World Order in a Post-American Age



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ABSTRACT

Much has changed over the last three decades since George H. W. Bush's call for a so-called "New World Order". US leadership in the post-Cold War era has not only failed to provide global stability; it has also sharpened socioeconomic inequalities on a global scale. This situation has greatly facilitated the emergence of a multipolar world order. In political science, "world order" describes a system of global governance that draws its legitimacy from certain standards of fairness for global cooperation. The present article proposes to revisit the notion of world order from the lens of Rawlsian political philosophy on fairness. The aim is to assess how the American world order has addressed fundamental fairness issues and to understand how the newly emerging alternatives to this order tackle the challenge of fairness in a post-American age. The article uses process tracing to advance a threefold argument. First, US global leadership cannot maintain reciprocity and mutual trust as the driving values of global governance. Instead, developing countries are taking the lead in forging alternative values and principles for fairer cooperation. Second, US global leadership continues to rely on exploitative and coercive practices such as neoliberalism and military interventionism, which arrest international development. In contrast, contending countries in the developing world emphasize the practice of peaceful and sustainable human development. Third, and relatedly, US global leadership cannot prevent the crisis of its own institutional arrangements. This crisis is met by the initiatives of developing countries to create alternative institutions of global governance.

Keywords: fairness; global governance; international cooperation; military interventionism; neoliberalism; world order

MUCH HAS CHANGED OVER THE LAST three decades since President George H. W. Bush's call for a so-called "New World Order". During a speech in the runup of the First Gulf War, Bush had declared the birth of a US-led new world order, which would be "freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace" (Bush, 1990, par. 6). He asserted America's credibility and reliability, urging that "there is no substitute for American leadership" (Bush, 1990, par. 9). In another speech, Bush went on to designate the Gulf War as America's first successful test on the path to the New World Order (Bush, 1991). As such, he made no secret of the fact that the American dream of a new world order was to be built on belligerence and the negation of basic global justice principles, which were in fact inherited from the long history of Western colonialism and

imperialism. History shows that the vast majority of major wars since the birth of capitalism – including the two world wars – were initiated by Western powers, which wanted to establish a world order of their own making (Ray, 1999). The history of the US does not diverge from that of other Western powers. It is therefore no surprise that "the largest number of actual wars involved the US, either directly or by proxy" since the 20th century (Ray, 1999, p. 1369). Bush's belligerent rhetoric, then, was not exceptional by US standards and has been adopted into continued practice by succeeding administrations.

The term "world order" was not coined by George H. W. Bush. Nor does it necessarily convey a negative meaning. Quite the contrary; its intended meaning expresses the ways in which global prosperity and stability can be sustained through international cooperation. A widely accepted defi



notion of “world order” in political science is provided by Anne Marie Slaughter: “a system of global governance that institutionalizes cooperation and sufficiently contains conflict such that all nations and their peoples may achieve greater peace and prosperity, improve their stewardship of the earth, and reach minimum standards of human dignity” (2004, p. 26). On this view, world order is portrayed as a value-laden notion that draws its legitimacy from certain standards of fairness governing global cooperation (Slaughter, 2004). “Legitimacy” can be understood in the present context as “the degree to which institutions are valued for themselves and considered right and proper” (Lipset, 1959, p. 71).

Looking more closely, one can see that the standards of legitimacy encapsulated in Slaughter’s definition strongly resonate with the notion of peaceful and sustainable human development, the underlying principles of which are deeply rooted in modern political philosophy on fairness (Brock & Moellendorf, 2005). For example, according to philosophers working in the Rawlsian tradition (e.g. Bertoldi, 2009; Kokaz, 2005), the basis of fair international cooperation primarily lies in a state of mutual agreement on the benefits and burdens of

cooperative arrangements. John Rawls’s work draws on the traditions of political liberalism and distributive justice to argue that social justice should primarily address the basic structure of society as it relates to education, taxation, and basic liberties. In Rawls’s lexicon, the re-ordering of society’s basic institutions should aim at ensuring “fair equality of opportunity”. Socioeconomic inequalities should be relieved “to the greatest expected benefit of the least advantaged members of society” – without, however, compromising individual liberties (Rawls, 1999, pp. 63, 72). Rawls has been criticized for his overemphasis on individuals rather than collectivities as the main unit of analysis, and also for overlooking global justice issues. In his later work, he attempted to engage with global justice by proceeding from the assumption that distributive justice does not apply to the international context. Rawls reasoned that national poverty and inequalities stem from the political culture of each nation rather than such external factors as colonialism and imperialism. As will be discussed below, contemporary interpretations of Rawls’s work in the context of international relations tend to transcend his individualistic and culturalist approach by taking a more radical direction (Chatterjee, 2011).

In Nancy Bertoldi’s (2009, p. 64) Rawlsian interpretation, “certain global circumstances and cross-border cooperative practices call for the regulation of the inequalities they generate in light of principles of global distributive justice”. According to her, such regulation requires the creation and sustenance of fair institutional arrangements based on the principle of reciprocity; that is, a mutual acknowledgement of the underlying principles of cooperation (Bertoldi, 2009). In other words, the constituents of a fair world order should come in the first place to a reciprocal understanding that the rights and duties of cooperation are fairly distributed (Principle 1, or P1) (Kokaz, 2005). Additionally,

no arbitrary distinctions should be made between the involved parties in the implementation of these rights and duties (Rawls, 1999, p. 5). In particular, a fair world order should allow no room for the international exploitation and coercion of weaker or smaller communities. On the contrary, these communities should be provided with adequate opportunities for political self-determination and social justice. In certain accounts, the scope of social justice is extended to ecological justice (Principle 2, or P2) (Dahbour, 2005; Pogge, 2005; Risse, 2005; Sterba, 2005). Finally, and relatedly, moral reciprocity encapsulated in the principles of mutual agreement and equal treatment is to be protected by a strong institutional setting that includes effective regulatory mechanisms (Principle 3, or P3) (Kokaz, 2005; Risse, 2005).

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This article resurveys the notion of world order through the lens of Rawlsian political philosophy on fairness. The aims are to assess how the American world order has addressed fundamental fairness issues and to understand how the newly emerging alternatives to this order tackle the challenge of fairness in a post-American age. This article uses process tracing to advance a threefold argument with reference to the three underlying principles of fair global governance derived from Rawlsian philosophy: mutual agreement on the terms of cooperation (P1), equal treatment of all the parties involved with a social-justice perspective (P2), and institutional regulation overseeing the previously agreed rights and duties as well as the availability of opportunities for greater social justice (P3). This article's first argument is that US global leadership cannot maintain reciprocity and mutual trust (P1) as the driving

values of global governance. Instead, developing countries are taking the lead in forging alternative values and principles for fairer cooperation. Second, US global leadership relies on exploitative and coercive practices (P2) such as neoliberalism and military interventionism, which arrest international development. In contrast, contending countries in the developing world emphasize the notion of peaceful and sustainable human development. Third, and relatedly, US global leadership cannot prevent the crisis of its own institutional arrangements (P3). This is met by the initiative of developing countries to create alternative institutions of global governance.

A few words are in order regarding process tracing as the methodological guideline of this article. This method heavily relies on logical reasoning and evidence gathering. Therefore, the research process is structured just as in detective work: piecing the clues together with reference to suspects' means, motives, preferences, perception and opportunity to have committed the crime in question (Vennesson, 2008; Bennett, 2010; Collier, 2011). The "interpretivist" mode of process tracing (Vennesson, 2008) allows for a more flexible narrative structure without compromising empirical robustness. The combination of this interpretivist mode with an actor-centered approach is very useful for international relations and strategic analysis, which both involve understanding the preferences, goals, values, and perceptions of global actors (Gürcan, 2019e).

The next section of this article will study the American world order, with special focus on economic and military issues as the mainstays of US global leadership. The focus will then shift to the emerging alternatives to America's disintegrating world order, featuring an overview of global governance mechanisms in a post-American age: the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),

the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

Eroding American Leadership in Global Governance: Economic and Military Issues

The explosion of the US subprime bubble in 2008 triggered a worldwide economic crisis that shook the American world order to its very foundations. In the United States, increasing rates of unemployment and homelessness eventually culminated in one of the worst economic crises in US history. An important consequence of this crisis was the serious erosion of the credibility of America's global economic leadership (Gürcan, 2019a; 2019b). The 2008 crisis also paved the way for the occupation movements of 2011 (the largest popular mobilization in recent US history), and brought socialism – and, later, the far right – into the mainstream of US politics (Ross, 2016). The waves from this crisis were also strongly felt in Europe, with a sudden disappearance of economic growth, accompanied by rising unemployment levels (Gürcan 2019a; 2019b). Germany, Italy, and Ireland saw the most drastic economic contraction, with respective rates of 5.62%, 5.48%, and 4.57% in 2009. In 2011, Greece's slump of over 9% shook the entire European economy. In 2013, unemployment levels reached record highs, soaring to over 26% in Greece and Spain. In the same year, youth unemployment rates were over 57% in Spain, 39% in Italy, 37% in Portugal, and no less than 58% in Greece (World Bank, 2016). In the final analysis, the Euro-American economic crisis revealed the exhaustion of US-patented neoliberal policies, and their cost to the Rawlsian principle of social justice (P2). "Neoliberalism" is understood here as a set of economic prescriptions that includes trade and financial liberalization, privatization, and

deregulated labor markets (Gürcan & Mete, 2017; 2019). In Europe, as with the US, the crisis of neoliberalism produced a reaction in the form of the rise of far-right movements and anti-austerity protests, as well as historic increases in the frequency of general strikes, in countries such as Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Greece. This protracted socioeconomic crisis was accompanied by another crisis, this time of a political nature, which helped to paralyze the European integration process: the Brexit (British Exit) referendum result in 2016. As a result, the EU has lost much of its attractiveness as a role model for global governance. This has undermined the Western-centric world order, at the expense of the principle of institutional regulation (P3) (Gürcan, 2019a; 2019b).

The crisis of global economic governance was particularly noticeable in the 2017–2018 NAFTA dispute, during which the United States insisted on renegotiating NAFTA and threatened to withdraw from the agreement. Regardless of the US attitude towards NAFTA, one should remember the destructive outcomes of the agreement for Mexico, where NAFTA neoliberalism led to the destruction of the industrial sector (Gürcan, 2019a). In the 20th year of NAFTA's implementation, Mexico's performance in annual real GDP growth per capita ranked 18th among 20 Latin American countries. Agricultural liberalization under the NAFTA regime caused the displacement of almost five million rural families, and Mexico became wracked by narcotrafficking, human trafficking, and arms trafficking, making it the deadliest conflict zone after Syria (Weisbrot, Lefebvre, & Sammut, 2014; Laurell, 2015; Persio, 2017). All of this gives room to international exploitation and undermines the Rawlsian principle of social justice, a key principle for the fairness of a world order (P2). Moreover, NAFTA introduced certain mechanisms that allowed foreign corporations to sue their host country if it was believed to

be imposing policies harmful to corporate interests (Gürcan, 2019a). These mechanisms have led the Mexican and Canadian governments to pay out millions of dollars in damages. By October 2010, Canada and Mexico had been subjected to 11 and 19 NAFTA disputes, respectively. Interestingly enough, although the US was subjected to 19 NAFTA disputes, it suffered no penalties at all, whereas Canada and Mexico had to pay CA\$157 million and US\$187 million, respectively. Even more striking is the fact that the US failed to comply with several of NAFTA's arbitrary decisions (Castro-Rea, 2014). US non-compliance and its avoidance of NAFTA penalties have seriously undermined the legitimacy of

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American global leadership. This situation contradicts an underlying principle of fairness in Rawlsian philosophy: that of the equal treatment of all the parties involved (P2).

Eventually, NAFTA was replaced by the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), but the new agreement remains unratified by the former NAFTA members. This dispute has undoubtedly caused irreparable damage to US hegemony in global governance as NAFTA was considered to be a worldwide symbol of American leadership in free trade. Similarly, the United States had proposed to create the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was intended to become the world's largest trade deal, as a US-led countervailing measure against China's growing influence over the Asia-Pacific region (Pham, 2017). However, in 2017 the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the agreement, leading many countries to further question

US global leadership. This situation contradicts the Rawlsian principle of institutional regulation as an underlying principle that defines the fairness of a world order (P3).

US regional military leadership is also at its lowest level. Even US strategists such as Anthony H. Cordesman and pro-US periodicals such as *Foreign Policy* magazine are now forced to admit that the United States has lost the war to the Taliban in Afghanistan after nearly 20 years since the US invasion (Cordesman, 2019; Young, 2019). Furthermore, the US invasion has turned Afghanistan into a global hub for narco-production, with opium production having increased more than fourfold since 2001 (Rowlatt, 2019). The same goes for the US invasion of Iraq. Despite a heavy US military presence, Iraq served as the geographical origin of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), which later extended to Syria and caused the gravest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. Interestingly, an influential study of the US invasion of Iraq, published by the US Army War College, admits that Iran has been the war's only victor (Rayburn & Sobchak, 2019, p. 639). According to *The Atlantic* magazine, China is another victor of the Iraq war thanks to its peaceful approach, unconditionality and increasing economic cooperation with Iraq (Schiavenza, 2013). China has already become Iraq's top trading partner, and Iraq has turned into China's third-largest source of oil imports (Calabrese, 2019). In a similar vein, the United States has failed to topple the Assad regime in Syria, losing the war to Iran and Russia. Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria and leave the Kurds unprotected has also been interpreted as a critical blow to America's reputation as a reliable ally (Page, 2019). The Brookings Institution is frank enough to admit that "the US no longer matters in Syria" (Alaaldin, 2019, par. 1).

Added to this is the fact that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is currently undergo-

ing one of its deepest crises since its creation in 1949. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently stated that the United States is “fully prepared” to confront Turkey -which happens to be a key NATO member-through military means (Higgins, 2019, par. 1). Turkey is not the only concern when it comes to the psychological, if not physical disintegration of the NATO alliance and consequently the erosion of US global leadership. US President Donald Trump is known to have bullied Germany and other countries to contribute more to the NATO budget and even threatened to withdraw the United States from the organization (Stracqualursi & Acosta, 2019; Taylor, 2018). The severity of the NATO crisis has been explicitly acknowledged by President Emmanuel Macron of France, who observes: “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO” (The Guardian, 2019, par. 2). He specifically refers to the lack of coordination of strategic decision-making between the US and its allies (The Guardian, 2019). In the final analysis, one could argue that America’s excessive reliance on military interventionism and bullying of its NATO allies severely contradict the underlying Rawlsian principles of a fair world order, as described in the introductory section. Perhaps most important is the fact that the US approach values coercion over mutual agreement, with excessive emphasis on military solutions in other countries and bullying tactics within NATO (P2). The NATO case also reveals the ways in which the United States undermines the legitimacy of its own world order by propagating a widespread view of the inequitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of military cooperation (P1).

Emerging Alternatives in the Post-American Age

US leadership in the post-Cold War era has not only failed to provide global stability; it has also sharpened socioeconomic inequalities on a global scale (Ray, 1999). In the long term, the implosion

of global governance in almost every sphere of cooperation has made developing countries question the fairness of the US-led world order. A case in point is the first BRICS Summit, which was held following the 2008 crisis. This summit “signalled that the resolution of the 2008 economic crisis was too important to be left in the hands of the G8 countries, and that the Global South had to have a say in how to address this crisis” (Gürcan, 2019a, p. 51). As the locomotive of South-South cooperation, the following BRICS Summits served as a platform to voice the member countries’ claims to boost their involvement and decision-making power in global governance. Meanwhile, the BRICS also went on to institute their own instruments of global governance, which could challenge unipolar tendencies in a post-American age (P3). As such, the BRICS have not only become the strongest voice for carrying out a comprehensive reform of the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund; they have also created a BRICS development bank that rivals hegemonic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They have even started to question the US dollar’s hegemony in global trade, creating an autonomous contingency fund and credit rating agency. In the face of eroding US military leadership, the BRICS countries sided with Syria against US interests in the region (Gürcan, 2019a). As such, one could argue that the BRICS initiative lays the groundwork for the emergence of a post-American world order by providing a new institutional framework of international cooperation (P3). This framework systematically rejects the exploitation and coercion of developing countries by US-led institutions (P2).

BRICS is not the sole agent of renewal in global governance. In a similar direction, the SCO has emerged as an important actor in regional governance by addressing military, energy, education, and economic cooperation in concert. Drawing on the

failures of the US-centered world order, the SCO set its own priorities of struggle around the concept of the “three evils”: terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. In redressing global governance, it called for the implementation of the “Shanghai spirit”, which rejects the misuse of Western-promoted values such as democracy, human rights, and supranationalism for expansionist and interventionist purposes. Instead, the shared values represented by the Shanghai spirit promote mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for cultural diversity (and national sovereignty), and the pursuit of common development as the core principles of global governance (P1). As a key contributor to an emerging post-American world order, the SCO rejects the exploitation and coercion of Eurasian countries by US-led values and institutions (P2). In this context, it is also relevant to note China’s proposal to merge the SCO with the EEU in 2015, which could be seen as a strategic attempt to expand the scope of the Shanghai spirit towards a fairer world order. The EEU is a Russian initiative of economic cooperation whose normative framework strongly chimes with the Shanghai spirit (Gürcan, 2019a; 2019c; 2019d).

Introduced in 2013, the BRI is a landmark in the emergence of a post-American world order. This China-led initiative consists of infrastructure, resource, and investment development networks intended to be active over 152 countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas. The initiative prioritizes five main areas: intergovernmental policy cooperation and consensus-building, infrastructure and technological connectivity, trade connectivity, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges for cultural cooperation (P3). In these areas, the BRI also seeks to mobilize the already existing networks and resources created by alternative governance institutions such as the BRICS and the SCO.

It is possible to argue that the BRI responds to the failure of the unipolarizing framework of Amer-



The heads of state and heads of government of the five member states at the eleventh annual BRICS summit in 2019.

ica’s New World Order: it is premised on the idea of re-boosting economic globalization by respecting the world’s cultural diversity and promoting a multipolar vision of world order. The BRI expresses an unfaltering ambition to reflect the common ideals and pursuits of human societies, based on a new model of global cooperation and governance. This ambition is driven by the so-called Silk Road Spirit: peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit (P1). The Silk Road principles have since been supplemented by a strong vision of “high-quality development”, which consists of promoting low-carbon investments, sustainable development projects, local community development programs, and inclusive social development (Camdessus, 2017; China Daily, 2018; China Center for International Economic Exchanges, 2017; Calabrese, 2019; National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). The BRI’s social and community development focus brings to the fore an important principle of a fair world order, which was severely neglected by America’s New World Order: the principle of providing adequate opportunities for political self-determination and social justice (P2).

Finally, Latin America was no exception to the implosion of US-led global governance. In the late 1990s, neoliberal policies resulted in a deep-seated economic crisis experienced by major Latin Amer-

ican countries such as Brazil and Argentina. Latin America witnessed a historic resurgence of left-wing governments that rejected NAFTA-modeled free trade agreements and US-promoted neoliberal policies. Therefore, the first decade of the 21st century saw the rise to power of self-designated leftist governments in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Uruguay, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Most of these governments were also behind the development of new governance initiatives such as ALBA and UNASUR (P3). These initiatives put forth alternative mechanisms of cooperation that revolve around core principles like social justice, social developmentalism, and anti-imperialism (P1 and P2). ALBA and UNASUR's new mechanisms included development banking, fair trade, infrastructural development, public health, regional university cooperation, welfare programs and community support services, and media mobilization (Gürcan, 2010; Gürcan & Bakiner, 2015; Gürcan, 2019a; Gürcan, 2019c).

Review and Discussion

The US-centered world order has failed to maintain its legitimacy. This situation is perhaps most evident in the erosion of American leadership in global economic and military governance. First and foremost, there is no longer a strong consensus that the United States can be trusted to ensure the proper functioning of cooperative arrangements where the rights and duties of its allies are fairly allocated. In the field of military cooperation, NATO's current crisis provides a striking example of eroding reciprocity and mutual trust in US-led cooperative arrangements. The same goes for economic governance: America's sudden withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and its insistence on renegotiating NAFTA reflect a loss of faith in the fair distribution of rights and duties within its own institutions. Meanwhile, there is a growing consensus among developing countries on the need for creating alternative cooperative arrangements

independent of America's overwhelming influence. The rights and duties of international cooperation are being renegotiated along the lines of such values and principles as mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, inclusiveness, openness, consultation, respect for cultural diversity and national sovereignty, and peaceful development.

Second, the US-centered world system is cracking and disintegrating, largely due to America's arbitrary approach, which feeds off exploitative and coercive practices that arrest international development. The crisis of neoliberalism – not only in Latin America and other parts of the developing world, but also in advanced capitalist areas such as North America and Europe – is perfectly illustrative of how US-patented economic policies have backfired to undermine American leadership in global economic governance. Similarly, America's arbitrary behavior within NAFTA and that neoliberal agreement's destructive effects on the Mexican economy reveal the exploitative and coercive faces of the so-called “New World Order”. This situation is even more apparent in the US approach to military governance, as can be observed in the cases of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, to name but a few. The erosion of America's global leadership in economic and military governance finds a strong echo in the BRI and the SCO's emphasis on peaceful and sustainable human development. These developments are complemented by the BRICS' reaction to the 2008 crisis and Latin America's refusal of neoliberalism.

Third, and finally, America's unreliable, arbitrary, coercive, and exploitative attitude towards global governance has led to serious institutional decline to a degree that threatens the political cohesion and well-being of the world order. Free trade agreements such as NAFTA and Western governance organizations such as the EU have lost their appeal in the face of a growing tide of protectionism and trade wars. On the other hand, regional alternatives to US-led institutional arrangements have emerged, led by such organizations as the SCO, the

EEU, ALBA, and UNASUR. On a global scale, the BRI offers a concrete roadmap that focuses on key strategic areas, including intergovernmental policy coordination, techno-economic connectivity, and cultural cooperation. 🌍

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