New Patterns of Sovereignty and Governance

by

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During the current academic year, Steven Meyer, a professor of political science at National Defense University, is serving as a Fellow at the Center for Public Justice, studying and writing on the changing patterns of international relations in our world today. Meyer and the Center’s president, James Skillen, are participating in a program sponsored by the Center for Christian Studies at Gordon College on the future of American relations with the rest of the world. That project has spawned two books in progress, one of which will feature a lead essay by Dr. Meyer. Below is an excerpt from the current draft of Meyer’s essay.

—The Editor

The examination of historical epochs is a practice that extends far back in time. But the study of the international system as a system dates back only to about the middle of the 19th century. The study of the international system and international relations began as the industrial revolution matured and European political and economic systems circled the globe, primarily as the result of imperialism and subsequent colonization. Arguably, the Marxists initiated the first modern comprehensive effort to describe the structure and dynamics of the international system in response—and violent reaction to—the European industrial state system. Marxists of different stripes pressed their case for more than a century, battling capitalists and national socialists in the process. Ultimately, the various Marxist models failed with only a small residual expression surviving in today’s paradigms of dependency theory and world-systems theory.

Two subsequent models that have come to dominate the discussion of the structure and dynamics of the international system—first as alternatives to Marxism and finally as triumphal successors to Marxism—were also born in reaction to world events. When the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson believed that the international system should—and could—function in an integrated fashion according to a set of rules based on moral principles and a positive view of
human nature. Wilson’s moralism (sometimes referred to as liberalism or idealism) had its roots in the Kantian school of “stern morality” (depicted in Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason) and in the American religious experience of the 19th century. During the post-World War I era, moralism was more important as a motivating force for American policy makers than it was for European statesmen.

The moralist school fell into disrepute and engendered serious opposition after World War I, however. The horror of the First World War, combined with the rapid growth of Fascism and Stalinism—with their own attendant horrors—convinced many that the Wilsonian view of the international system was essentially naïve and had failed miserably. Between the First and Second World Wars a reaction to Wilsonian moralism emerged, called realism. The realist paradigm focused on power and state interests and had a dim, Hobbesian view of human nature and an anarchic view of the international system. Although moralism gave way to realism after World War II, it did not disappear altogether and remained for many the preferred American paradigm for explaining the international system and has served for its adherents as the underlying rationale for American foreign policy.

Since the end of World War II, these dominant paradigms of moralism and realism have contended with one another. (Although the Soviet Union—until its demise in 1991—and China held fast to their own variants of Marxism, both countries participated in the international system largely as classic realist states.) Yet despite the obvious substantive differences between moralism and realism, what these two schools have in common is more important than what separates them in the increasingly differentiated and globalizing world of the early 21st century.

- Both are Western constructs, having been born and bred in the United States and Western Europe and extended to the rest of the world—along with the concept of state sovereignty—by the West. Neither, however, is endemic or endogenous to the non-West.
- Moralism and realism are state-centric. In both cases the state is recognized as the ultimate legitimate expression of political organization and force. Likewise, both perspectives recognize that international law has been constructed over the past 500 years to serve the interest of the state and the state system.
- They both reflect the time and place in which they were born and, therefore, carry specific historical characteristics. Often these characteristics turn into inertia or baggage as the paradigms of international structure and dynamics outlive historically driven reality.

Three Characteristics

As was true in the early years of the 15th century, developments in the early years of the 21st century do not allow us to anticipate exactly what the contours of the emerging system will be. As with the post-medieval change, new technologies underlie and help drive many of the postmodern changes we are facing now. Thus, we can begin
to identify three interrelated characteristics of a paradigm shift and begin to speculate on how they will affect us.

1. First, the contemporary world is experiencing profound, technologically driven change in economic patterns. Kenichi Ohmae writes “that a fundamental paradigm shift has occurred that is changing the way business is being done . . . nothing is ‘overseas’ any more . . . . [T]his ILE (interlinked economy) has become so powerful that it has swallowed most consumers and corporations and made traditional borders so faint as to be almost invisible.” (Ohmae, The Borderless World, emphasis added.) Thomas Friedman echoes Ohmae by arguing that the “world is flat.”
   
   It is my contention that the opening of the Berlin Wall, Netscape, workflow, outsourcing, off-shoring, open-sourcing, in-sourcing, supply-chaining, in-forming, and the steroids of amplifying them all reinforced one another, like complementary goods. They just needed time to converge and start to work together in a complementary, mutually enhancing fashion. That tipping point arrived somewhere around the year 2000. The net result of this convergence was the creation of a global, Web-enabled playing field that allows for multiple forms of collaboration—the sharing of knowledge and work—in real time, without regard to geography, distance, or, in the near future, even language. No, not everyone has access to this platform, this playing field, but it is open today to more people in more places on more days than anything like it before in the history of the world. (Friedman, The World is Flat.)

   Certainly globalization as such is not new—the world has interacted globally for centuries. But, today’s globalization, as Ohmae and Friedman assess it, is qualitatively different from what we have seen in the past, primarily because of modern technology. It is now “quicker” and “thicker.” In the contemporary world, economic activity is not constrained nearly as much by national affiliation or loyalty as it once was. We are seeing the rise of many more companies that do not have a stake in one sovereign country—or in any country.

   Friedman does point out that “not everyone has access to this platform.” But he minimizes this point, which is misleading because there is a dark side to globalization. Despite the evolution of an economically and technologically flattening and borderless world, there are enormous anomalies in the type, level, and benefits of the emerging economic (and technological) activities. Broad stretches of the world remain mired in grinding poverty and many traditional economies are basically untouched by the economic and technological revolution taking place in much of the globalizing world. Also, between the most integrated and least integrated societies there is a plethora of societies that fall at various levels in between. In short, the “rising tide” of globalization is not “lifting all ships” to the benefits of the emerging order. Moreover, the patterns of ideological and material affiliation, interest, and loyalty are based increasingly in new cross-country communities that have more in common with each other than they do with non-globalizing communities within the same country. In the context of the U.S., for example, Samuel Huntington, argues that “American foreign policy is becoming a foreign policy of particularism increasingly devoted to the promotion abroad of highly
specific commercial and ethnic interests,” at the expense of broader, truly national interests. (Huntington, “The Erosion of American National Interests,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct., 1997.) Consequently, the evolving international economic and technological system is more multilayered, matrixed, and complex than it is flat.

2. The nature of warfare—also technologically driven—is the second characteristic that underlies—and helps drive—the emerging nature of the postmodern international system. As has been true with respect to economics and technology, warfare has evolved as the international system has evolved. Prior to the triumph of the modern state system, other polities—city states, leagues, and even the church—vied with the emerging state as legitimate European sources of armed conflict. However, as the state took center stage and made Europe the “power house of the universe,” specific rules and techniques of modern war were spread around the world by Europe and later the United States as the West came to dominate the globe. For example, wars were supposed to be fought in a certain way: in the period immediately after the collapse of the feudal system, European armies considered it wrong to attack each other at night. As “war became more intense and destructive” it also became more encompassing, ultimately engaging entire populations. (Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 900-1992.*) Pressure grew to broaden, deepen, and further codify the body of international law that governs the conduct of warfare between and among states. Warfare in the 20th century capped a long-term trend both in terms of intensity, destructiveness, and scope and in terms of the drive to harness the all-encompassing nature of modern war through mutually accepted rules encased in international law.

Despite many economic and technological changes that are forcing a paradigm shift, the United States and most other Western powers continue to adhere to older (i.e. modern) traditions of warfare. Most important, these powers continue to see the state as the only authority that may legitimately use force in accord with western-inspired laws of warfare. Combat that does not conform to internationally recognized rules is seen as asymmetric and almost certainly illegitimate (usually described as terrorism or insurrection). Established states, on the other hand, conduct symmetric warfare, which is, ipso facto, legitimate. It is symmetric because traditional state authorities say it is, because it conforms to the rules and customs that have been established as part of the evolution of the modern state system (even though Western states have routinely violated those same rules throughout history).

As time passes and the structure and dynamics of the international system change, the nature of “legitimate” warfare is also changing. There is nothing automatic about this. But, as we move from the modern to a postmodern system, the nexus between legitimacy and warfare is likely to shift in order to recognize as legitimate some forms of combat and violence that are now believed to be illegitimate. It is possible, for example, that organizations such as Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, which cross state boundaries and do not abide by the rules of symmetric warfare, may in the future be seen as legitimate actors on the larger international stage as they are now seen to be legitimate by the communities that support them. Moreover, as the customs and laws of
war changed in the shift from the premodern to modern international system, they will change too in the shift from the modern to the postmodern system.

3. Third, every age is, in part, the product of dominant beliefs and ideas. The role of religions, philosophies, and ideologies has had a powerful impact not only on how the political community is imagined, but on how it is actually constructed. In every age, the ideas that swirl around politics are built on the broader foundations of worldviews that dominate the age. The reality of political community in ancient Greece, for example, was carried forward in significant ways by Plato’s and Aristotle’s contending philosophies of ideal forms and striving for the good. Later, as Europe changed from the ancient to the premodern and then to the modern world, the attraction and demands of Christianity played an important role in the shaping of Christendom, the rise of absolute monarchy, and the alternating challenges of democracy and non-Christian forms of absolutism.

Samuel Huntington and others have argued that throughout much of the world democracy is the intellectual underpinning of the current age. Huntington contends that in 1974 the third wave of democratization began with the revolution against autocracy in Portugal and, although the advance of democracy was not inevitable and was likely to suffer from occasional reverses, the long term prospects for democratic government were encouraging. (Huntington, “After Twenty Years: The Future of the Third Wave,” Journal of Democracy, 1997.) The Hoover Institute even talks about the “globalization of democracy” and Francis Fukuyama has presented a Hegelian argument that history has reached the “end point of man’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government.” (Fukuyama, “The End of History,” The National Interest, Summer, 1989.) Although this “end of history” argument has been extremely controversial, the long process of Western secularization and the strong reaction against arbitrary government and toward egalitarianism has led to the argument of the inevitability of democracy.

If one assumes little fundamental change in the structure of the international system, continuing democratization might portend a certain political imperative. But the relativism, decentralization, and dispersion in postmodern politics suggest a considerably more complicated picture. In the postmodern world democracy almost certainly will remain a potent force, but it is likely to represent just one of several ideological and intellectual trends in the years ahead. Autocracy already has reemerged as a challenge to democracy, and the rise of two other pairs of countervailing forces—secularism and religiosity on the one hand, and ethnicity and multiculturalism on the other—have emerged at the start of the 21st century not only to challenge the “end of history” argument but also to blend a variety of ideological dispositions in the same location.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the end-of-history argument has been badly damaged by the rise of theocratically inspired autocratic movements and violence associated with the growth of Islam. This brand of Islam, in turn, has little tolerance for
the kind of secular democracy practiced in the West. For example, the violence that ensued in 2005 after cartoons appeared in the Danish press supposedly insulting the Prophet Mohammed, demonstrated a conflict of underlying values, pitting the secular experience of European democracies against some Muslim views of a legitimate political order. The secularized West has little understanding of, or appreciation for, religiously based societies, and Muslim societies have little understanding of, or appreciation for, secular democratic societies. Even in the West, there is a growing chasm between the United States, on the one hand, which is characterized by an officially secular democratic political order and a highly religious society, and most of Europe, on the other hand, where both society and political order are secular and often overtly anti-clerical.