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Building a Sustainable International Order

Summary of the First Workshop in the International Order Project Series

Since 1945, the United States has pursued its global interests through creating and maintaining international economic institutions, bilateral and regional security organizations, and liberal political norms; these ordering mechanisms are often collectively referred to as the international order. In recent years, rising powers have begun to challenge aspects of this order. This report is a part of Building a Sustainable International Order, a RAND Corporation project to explore U.S. strategy in a changing world; sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense’s Office of Net Assessment, this effort seeks to understand the existing international order, assess current challenges to the order, and recommend future U.S. policies with respect to the order. For more information on the project, please visit www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/international-order.

RAND hosted the first of three workshops bringing together scholars, policy analysts, and current and

former practitioners to discuss the nature of the existing international order and its likely evolution over the next 15 to 20 years; the workshop was held on January 14, 2016, at the RAND Washington Office in Arlington, Virginia. Project staff developed four broad themes for the meeting and constructed a question for each designed to elicit subject-matter expertise. The four themes and their corresponding questions (in italics) were as follows:

- What do we mean, in practical and policy-relevant terms, by international order?
What kind or form of order is most important to U.S. interests going forward?
- What parts of the order have been most important to achieving U.S. goals and interests?
Where should we invest our energy and resources to preserve the order?

- What criteria should be used to assess the effectiveness of U.S. policies toward the order?
What questions provide the sorts of insight to make necessary decisions?
- How do we see the role of international order in U.S. grand strategy going forward?
What is the range of U.S. policy options available toward the international order?

To lay the groundwork for these discussions, project staff prepared a background report on the existing international order, examining literature reviews bearing on these four themes.¹

The participants at the session included leading experts from three broad categories: scholars of international relations who have studied the problem of order and associated issues, such as international institutions; national security experts from Washington-area research institutes, including the RAND Corporation; and current U.S. government officials participating in their personal capacity (that is, offering personal, not government, opinions). Taken together, the participants have extensive experience with the challenge of international order from both a theoretical and practical standpoint. All discussions were not-for-attribution; neither this summary nor future project publications will associate any views with particular individuals.²

This conference summary outlines the discussion from the event and identifies a future research agenda on the international order and U.S. foreign policy.

Defining the International Order

Elements

The background report we wrote for the conference defined *international order* as “the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations among the key players in the international environment.”³ The report also emphasized that this study focuses on understanding the specific “liberal international order” that the United States has shaped

since 1945 and the role of this order in advancing U.S. interests.

Most workshop participants agreed that identifying the core elements of the international order and thinking about how each element works were essential first steps toward understanding the current order. Most responded positively to the background report, which outlined the following elements:

- United Nations
- European Union
- North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
- U.S. system of bilateral alliances
- global economic institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization
- regional trade agreements
- global political bodies, such as the Group of Twenty (G-20)
- arms control treaties
- norms of sovereignty, democracy, and human rights.

The discussion also suggested a few less-institutionalized elements worth considering. For example, shared liberal political values among leading democracies may be an important element of the order. In addition, U.S. economic and military power may be a critical force sustaining the order.

Goals and Purposes

During the workshop, discussions repeatedly turned to the question of the order’s purpose. There was a distinction between widely shared, global goals of the order and goals of the order from the perspective of U.S. policy objectives, although these categories clearly overlap. Participants identified three potential goals for the international order:

1. Prevent great-power war by creating predictable patterns in state behavior.
2. Promote economic prosperity in an open and stable economic system.
3. Promote human rights and democracy.

The first two goals appear to be widely shared by many countries, and the third is sought mainly by the United States and its allies.

Linkages Between Elements

Although participants agreed that examining how each element operates might help researchers gain analytical traction on “the order,” they disagreed about whether it is possible to fully understand the international order’s effects by studying its elements in isolation. Indeed, some argued that linkages between issues or regions are the essence of the current overarching international order, and it is these linkages that make the order more than the sum of its parts. To support this idea, some participants observed that the United States has often achieved greater cooperation by linking apparently unrelated issues. Others argued that linkages were less important and that policies in one issue area or region can be more easily separated from other issue areas or regions.

This debate suggested an area for further research: To what extent are the linkages between different issue areas present and important? The answer to this question has significant policy implications. If there are substantial connections between disparate issue areas, then developments in one element of the order are likely to have spillover effects on other elements of the order. If there are not significant linkages between issue areas, however, then policy on a particular issue or toward a particular element of the order could be considered more independently, without worrying about credibility costs or broader effects. Importantly, some participants noted that there may not be a single answer to this question. Elements of order may be linked to different degrees depending on the issue, the timing, the actors, and other variables.

The Future of the Order

Visions of the Future: Preferences and Expectations for the Order

Workshop participants offered various ideas about the desirable and likely evolution of the international order. In general, participants’ views

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fell into at least four different—but not mutually exclusive—categories:

1. *A persistent but more-shared international order.* Participants who took this view argued that the core institutions of the current international order can continue, but only with diminished U.S. leadership. According to this view, potential opponents of the current order, such as China, have benefited greatly from these institutions and have an incentive to maintain them. Advocates of this view recommended that the United States give rising powers greater influence within existing institutions and bind itself to the rules of the current order, and thereby avoid encouraging rising powers to undermine the current order or develop an alternative order.
2. *Continued unipolarity.* According to this view, the United States can and will continue to lead the international order over the next 15 to 20 years. Participants who held this view observed that the combined power of the United States and its allies remains substantial. Furthermore, countries generally have recognized their dependence on public goods

that the United States provides. Advocates of this perspective therefore claim that countries will consent to continued U.S. leadership and recommend that the United States should not give rising states more influence or make compromises on liberal values; in fact, if it did, the whole order might begin to unravel.

3. *Great-power competition.* This view questions the utility of the concept of a rules-based order and emphasizes that great-power competition rather than obedience to rules is likely to characterize the future of international politics. Advocates of this view argued that the United States should promote great-power peace and economic prosperity, develop a more basic order based on bedrock principles of sovereignty and nonaggression, and scale back its commitments as the balance of power changes.
4. *Issue-specific “order.”* This view eschews the concept of an overarching order and focuses instead on creating institutions and norms focused on specific, independent issue areas. From this point of view, analysis can better serve policymakers by finding solutions to

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particular problems rather than by analyzing the nature of the international order. The United States should identify its priorities in discrete issue areas and determine the best way to promote U.S. interests using existing institutions, ad hoc agreements, and other tools.

The Possible Economic Foundation of the Current International Order

Several participants emphasized the importance of the economic order in particular. In their view, one of the lessons of the Great Depression and World War II was that economic depression engenders radical domestic politics, which can lead to the rise of expansionist authoritarian regimes and can even trigger global war. The post-1945 order, these participants suggested, was created with these lessons in mind: Through regulating international trade and monetary policy, the order would help stabilize domestic economies, prevent the resurgence of extremism, and reduce the chance of major-power conflict. By this logic, the continued expansion of the economic order should generate continued positive externalities.

A few participants also mentioned that while the U.S.-led economic and security orders were both aligned against the Soviet threat during the Cold War, the current economic and security orders are in tension. Since the end of the Cold War, the economic order has expanded to include nearly every state in the world, while the security order continues to exclude many countries. These participants implied that the disconnect between the inclusive economic order and exclusive security order casts doubt on the assumption that the expansion of the economic order necessarily leads to political liberalization and global peace.

In addition, some participants expressed concerns that the continued expansion of the economic order is in question. They wondered whether support for maintaining the order—and willingness to bear the costs for doing so—might wane if citizens around the world do not continue to receive or perceive economic benefits from their countries’ participation in the order. Several workshop

participants also expressed concerns that, in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, slowing economic growth, rising economic inequality, or increasing isolationism might influence U.S. domestic politics in ways that might compel Washington to reduce its commitment to the current order. This line of thinking raised a question: If the biggest and strongest economy is unwilling—or unable—to lead, will it be possible to maintain the order?

An Ever-Expanding Liberal Order?

Although the current international order is often described as “liberal,” participants noted that the meaning and application of this term are uncertain. Some believed that the economic institutions that have underwritten the expansion of global free trade make the order liberal. According to these participants, the economic elements of the order are the dominant and most critical ones because they cause the order to expand and reinforce itself.⁴ Others connected the term to political values associated with the Western democracies that were instrumental in creating and perpetuating the order. These values include human rights, the responsibility to protect (R2P), prohibitions on genocide, and environmental protections. These discussions raised the following question: What principles embedded in the order, if any, make the order liberal?

Finally, some participants conceded that the existing order is liberal but wondered whether that liberalism is essential to sustaining the order or to achieving U.S. interests. A few argued that liberalism is critical and claimed that if the expansion—or merely the belief in the expansion—of the liberal international order were seriously questioned, the order’s legitimacy might collapse, making it difficult or impossible to sustain the order. This disagreement, however, raises another set of questions: What costs are the United States and the broader world community willing to accept to uphold the liberal principles of the world order? Is it worth sacrificing great-power peace on the altar of liberal order?

The United States might have to pay increasing costs, bear greater risks, or give others more voice in some existing institutions.

A Key Challenge: Changes in the Distribution of Power and Representation Within the Order

Participants agreed that the United States is experiencing a modest decline in its relative power. Thus, the United States is likely to retain the dominant position in the international order over the next 15 to 20 years, but its influence will be challenged more frequently at the margins. Importantly, however, rising powers have a stake in the order. Some participants noted that China’s economic growth is largely dependent on its participation in global economic institutions. To the extent that China and Russia have attempted to alter the order’s norms, they have challenged the weak global security order and the U.S. alliance system rather than the economic order. While the United States might not face much pressure to change the global economic order, it might have to pay increasing costs, bear greater risks, or give others more voice in some existing institutions to reduce friction in certain areas (and thereby discourage other states from exiting and forming new institutions).⁵

Indeed, several participants argued that the future of the international order will depend on how the order responds to rising powers’ demands for a greater voice. These participants said that the United States should support adjustments in the

formal governance of international and regional economic institutions to reflect changes in the distribution of power, and they believed that the United States could do so with few trade-offs, given its disproportionate informal influence within these institutions. Others, however, noted the difficulty of meaningfully accommodating the goals and wishes of rising powers within the order while pursuing U.S. interests. They were concerned that rising powers would be satisfied only if existing institutions were changed in ways that run counter to U.S. interests. Given the divergent goals of rising powers, maintaining an order that reflects U.S. preferences may not be possible, and a more minimalist set of shared principles might be required in an era of multipolarity. In addition, U.S. interests might have to contract as the balance of power changes. At a minimum, this will likely mean decreasing emphasis on the most contested parts of the order, such as the responsibility to protect.

This discussion provoked several questions. First, what are China's and Russia's preferences with respect to the international order? Second, what would it cost the United States to grant China, Russia, and other rising powers more influence within international institutions? Similarly, are there elements of the order in which the benefits of giving up control outweigh the costs of doing so? And, finally, how much control over the character of the order would the United States be willing to give up to preserve great-power peace?

The Analytical Agenda

The workshop discussion generated several insights and helped project staff identify the following questions that will guide future RAND work in this study:

- What are the ways in which the current liberal international order can be conceived, and what are the resulting implications for policy toward the order? What are the defining elements of that order?
- What does the experience with international order—both before and after 1945, including the postwar U.S. record

of sponsorship and empirical evidence about its effects—suggest about the scope and character of order going forward?

- How are major social, economic, demographic, and technological trends reshaping the balance of power and the broader context for order in the future? What domestic developments in major states are most likely to have an effect on the way in which these states approach international order more generally and in specific issue areas?
- How are the perspectives of leading powers, both developed and developing, likely to manifest in actions toward the order, and what do those perspectives suggest about the way in which the United States must pursue the goal of order? Most importantly, is China's vision of future order compatible with that of the United States?
- What are the key U.S. interests that elements of order can serve in the coming decade, and in what ways can the elements serve those interests? Which of the United States' most important interests are not being served well by international regimes, and on which of those interests is considerable agreement possible? Which U.S. interests are in opposition to the strongly held interests of other consequential states, where are the trade-offs, and how could they be eased by elements of the order?
- What changes to leading global institutions or to policies toward emerging states based on their claims and perspectives would most reaffirm the strength of the international order?
- What elements of U.S. power and influence are most essential to the health of the order?

Informing Policy Options on the Order

The discussion also pointed to some areas where further research could be useful to inform policy decisions. In particular,

- It may be beneficial to develop a set of criteria to help identify and assess the potential effects of policy choices on the international order.

Without clear criteria in place, it is difficult to easily or rapidly assess the implications of a given policy decision on the overarching order. More-specific criteria could be developed for particular regional or functional areas.

- A clear understanding of the linkages between elements of the international order, if such linkages exist, could be useful for policy-makers. As discussed earlier, if there are no meaningful linkages between elements of the order, then the United States can create and carry out policies toward different economic, security, and regional elements of the order independently, without worrying about losing credibility or setting precedents that might influence other parts of the order. If there are important linkages between such elements, however, U.S. policy should identify and consider the potential effect that a policy toward one element of the order could have on another element of the order.
- Future work could consider how to adapt international institutions to respond to emerging powers and the attendant relative decline in U.S. influence. On the whole, workshop participants appeared to feel that it would be better to adjust the governance structure of existing institutions to give rising states voice and thereby discourage them from exiting and forming new institutions that might not serve U.S. interests. However, the mechanisms for achieving this goal within the constraints of U.S. policy interests are unclear.

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- Future research could examine the desirability of various approaches to building elements of order to address important issues where norms and institutions are currently lacking or weak, such as climate change, information security, and humanitarian response.

NOTES

¹Michael J. Mazarr, Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1598-OSD, 2016. As of July 15, 2016: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1598.html

²The study design has been reviewed for human subjects protection issues, and these approaches to the workshops reflect the approved human subjects design.

³Mazarr et al., 2016, p. 7.

⁴These individuals claimed that economic liberalism has driven global economic development over the past 70 years and that the resulting increase in prosperity set in motion a process of modernization and political liberalization across the world. This suggests that economic liberalism is a fundamental precursor to the liberal political values the current order seeks to instill and that maintaining current policies and views of order has a good chance of achieving U.S. goals of political liberalization. Importantly, however, this argument may be challenged if the global expansion of free trade comes to a halt in the coming years.

⁵The ideas of *voice* and *exit* cited by one of the participants come from Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

On January 14, 2016, the RAND Corporation hosted the first of three project workshops with academics, government officials, and policy experts at the RAND Washington Office in Arlington, Virginia. This conference summary reflects key insights from the workshop discussion that have informed the next stages of Building a Sustainable International Order, a RAND project to explore U.S. strategy in a changing world. For more information on the project, please visit www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/international-order.

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