The Quest for Global Governance

G. John Ikenberry

One hundred years ago, the world unknowingly was months away from stumbling into the most violent era of war and political upheaval ever seen. It was a geopolitical and human disaster that lasted for decades—world wars, collapsed empires, communist revolution, economic depression, fascism, totalitarianism, genocide, atomic weapons, and the existential terror of the Cold War. As many as 200 million people lost their lives in this era to violence and deprivation. Hatred, insecurity, and despotism proliferated on a global scale.

Along the way, the world all but lost its pre-1914 belief—rooted in the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution—in the inevitable march of progress. The historian Margaret MacMillan opens her account of the summer of 1914 with a portrait of pre-war Europe when people across the Western world truly did believe in a future of harmony and peace, as the French had proclaimed in 1900 at the opening of the Universal Exhibition in Paris. Suddenly, the guns of August and the chaos of the dark decades that followed all but extinguished this progressive vision of modernity. Desolation, not progress, now seemed to define the human prospect. The world was literally out of control.

Remarkably, however, this twentieth-century era of violence and catastrophe also provided the setting for the most ambitious and enlightened efforts ever attempted by leaders to govern the world. Across the century—particularly after the world wars—governments made repeated efforts to rein in violence and build realms of international cooperation. New types of permanent intergovernmental institutions were created. The United States and other Western nations articulated agendas for economic, political, and security cooperation. The great powers found new ways to bind themselves together. Alliances built during the Cold War provided an architecture for managing insecurity. A global system of trade was slowly reestablished. The United Nations became the site and symbol of a community of nations.

In the decades after the Cold War, it was even possible to see the world as “one”—as a single system with a nascent political order. Yet this was a “one world” vision informed less by an optimistic belief in progress and modernity, and more by a growing realization that what united peoples across the globe were interconnected dangers and mutual vulnerabilities. By the end of the twentieth century, pragmatism prevailed. The planet could be governed. Indeed, the human prospect depended on it.

How did the world acquire under such extraordinary circumstances a capacity to govern itself? What does the past century of struggle over global governance tell us about the possibilities for governing the world in the next hundred years?

The American Era

Today’s system of global governance emerged after World War II as an American order-building project. In the shadow of the Cold War, the United States constructed a sprawling international order, organized around open trade, alliances, client states, multilateral institutions, and democratic partnerships. American grand strategy was driven by the view that the viability of the United States as a great power depended on a global order that was open, friendly, and stable. The order needed to be open so that the United States would have access to markets and resources in all regions of the world. The order needed to be friendly in that it required major states in various regions to
be pro-Western, or at least not threaten to dominate their neighborhoods as hostile hegemonic contenders. The order needed to be stable so as to provide institutionalized cooperation on a permanent basis. An open and liberal international order—reinforced by US economic leadership and security protection—offered the world an American-style solution to the problem of global governance.

This American-led order embodied a revolution in relationships within the democratic-capitalist world. Western Europe, the United States, Japan, and other market democracies would be tied together in new forms of institutionalized partnership. The security of each was tied to the security of all. Intergovernmental machinery—notably, the UN, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank—was created to manage growing economic and security interdependence. The founding of the European Community and the establishment of other regional institutions tied Germany and France together, putting an end to generations of war and insecurity on the continent. Japan was re-integrated into the world economy. Tied to the United States through alliance, Japan was able to pursue a “civilian great power” role, growing its way to the top ranks of the advanced industrial world.

Soon after, other countries—East Asian, Eastern European, Southern European, South American—also went through economic and political transformations and joined the ranks of this loosely organized liberal international system.

**Deep Forces**

Two grand forces of global order building have stood behind the American-era efforts. One might be called the Westphalian project, the centuries-old struggle by great powers to build rules and institutions for managing sovereignty and the state system. The founding moment of this project was the Westphalian settlement of 1648. And at postwar moments from the eighteenth through the twentieth century, the great powers hammered out the terms of international order, organized around the ideas of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and nonintervention. This order reflected an emerging consensus that states were the rightful political units for the establishment of legitimate rule. In the century after 1815, the great powers worked within Westphalian norms to build a more explicit framework for managing great power relations. It was a concert system, and contained within it were embryonic ideas about global governance.

As the Westphalian project subsequently evolved, norms such as self-determination and nondiscrimination served to further reinforce the primacy of states and state authority. Under the banner of sovereignty and self-determination, political movements for decolonization and independence were set in motion in the non-Western developing world. Today, Westphalian norms of state sovereignty remain the most widely shared—and therefore legitimate—building blocks of global governance.

The other grand force behind global governance is the liberal internationalist project. Building on top of the Westphalian project, liberal internationalists, beginning in the nineteenth century, articulated a vision of an integrated, cooperative, modernizing global system—pushed forward by rising liberal democratic states. In the nineteenth century, liberal internationalism was manifest in Britain’s championing of open trade and freedom of the seas. But the liberal project was limited, and it coexisted with imperialism: Britain both offered a liberal vision of international relations and presided over an illiberal empire. In the twentieth century, the United States pushed forward liberal order building, and it went through several phases. After World War I, President Woodrow Wilson and other liberals pressed for a global order made stable and peaceful through collective security, open trade, and international law.

The failure of the Wilsonian vision led the next generation of liberal internationalists—Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman—to offer more pragmatic visions of great power cooperation and managed openness. The UN provided the setting for the articulation of new norms regarding human rights, development, and universal human dignity. As the Cold War emerged, Washington took command of organizing and running the system. In both security and economic realms, the United States found itself taking on new commitments and functional roles. Liberal order became American liberal hegemonic order. NATO and the US dollar were the backbone of order and governance.

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**China and other rising non-Western states are already in the liberal international order.**
Taken together, the Westphalian and liberal internationalist projects have unfolded over centuries and given shape to the contemporary system. The result is a sort of layer cake of ideas, norms, rules, and institutions. Some embody principles of sovereign equality and universal rights. Others are norms of great power rights and authority. Paradoxically, this order is both hierarchical and infused with norms of democracy and reciprocity. The tensions between the Westphalian and liberal internationalist visions are not that substantial, but they have become more visible in recent decades. Implicit in the postwar human rights proclamations—most clearly expressed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights—were ideas about contingent sovereignty. States remain the repository of sovereign rights, but if gross violations of human rights or crimes against humanity occur, the international community has a stake and obligations in redressing and protecting these rights.

THE NEXT CHALLENGE

Today, this American-led global governance system is in transformation. The hegemonic foundation of global governance is increasingly problematic. It is not that the liberal order has failed—indeed, the opposite is true. American-style liberal internationalism has succeeded all too well, facilitating the rise of non-Western developing states and ushering in new and complex types of economic and security interdependence. The old order has been overrun and overwhelmed. The global system is expanding and mobilizing—bringing together more countries, peoples, aspirations, and problems under one roof. But these are problems that will require more liberal internationalism—not less.

What is global governance? It is the collective effort of people to facilitate the upside of openness and exchange in the global system, while working together to manage the downside. Thus global governance is, in effect, the management of liberal internationalism. It entails a commitment to openness—openness to the flow of trade, ideas, and people—but also to multilateral rules and institutions that provide the tools for governments to protect and nurture liberal democratic societies.

The challenge over the next hundred years is to make the transition from an American hegemonic order to a more widely shared system of governance. The distribution of rights and authority within the international order is slowly shifting. But the demand for change in the system of global governance is not really a demand for new rules and principles. It is not openness and multilateral cooperation that are in dispute but the system of authority. Who makes decisions? Who sits at the table? How do we settle controversies between state sovereignty and the responsibility to protect civilian populations? The United States and Europe will need to make room for China and other rising non-Western states. But these states are already in the liberal international order—the UN, the World Trade Organization, and the other global bodies. They are stakeholders. The challenge is to build new forms of collective action, redistribute rights and authority, and share decision making.

During armistice negotiations with Germany in October 1918, Wilson explained to a worried Democratic senator what he was doing. Wilson said he sought to build a new and more durable global system of peace and security that would deliver results over the long term. In Wilson’s words, he was “playing for 100 years hence.” A century later, we can see that Wilson’s vision of the future was not matched by an ability to move the world toward it. But the ideas he embraced did not go away. Later generations of order builders—after World War II and again more recently—picked up some of Wilson’s ideas, added their own, learned lessons, and sought pragmatic ways to make the world open, stable, and loosely rule-based.

We do not know what global governance will look like in 2114. We do not know if the world will go through another catastrophic era of war and political upheaval. But if the international community is peaceful and stable a century hence, it will have found new ways to foster complex forms of cooperation, drawing the entire world into the struggle for global governance.