



History, To Be Continued: The Utopia of a Diverse World

Oleg Barabanov, Timofei Bordachev,
Yaroslav Lissovolik, Fyodor Lukyanov,
Andrey Sushentsov, Ivan Timofeev

The views and opinions expressed in this position paper are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

ISBN 978-5-907318-16-8



© The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, 2020

42 Bolshaya Tatarskaya st., Moscow, 115184, Russia

About the Authors

Oleg Barabanov

PhD in Political Science, Programme Director at the Valdai Discussion Club,
Professor of the Russian Academy of Sciences,
Professor of the MGIMO University

Timofei Bordachev

PhD in Political Science, Programme Director at the Valdai Discussion Club,
Academic Supervisor of the Centre for Comprehensive European
and International Studies, Higher School of Economics

Yaroslav Lissovolik

PhD in Economics, Programme Director at the Valdai Discussion Club,
Member of the Bretton Woods Committee

Fyodor Lukyanov

Head of the Writing Team, Research Director of the Valdai Club Foundation,
Editor-in-Chief of the Russia in Global Affairs Journal,
Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy,
Research Professor at the Higher School of Economics

Andrey Sushentsov

PhD in Political Science, Programme Director at the Valdai Discussion Club,
Director of the Institute for International Studies, MGIMO University

Ivan Timofeev

PhD in Political Science, Programme Director at the Valdai Discussion Club,
Director of Programmes at the Russian International Affairs Council

Contents

- 3 Introduction
- 6 A hundred years on the path
towards democracy and responsibility
UN Secretary-General Ghan Twan Eng's
address at the formal UN General Assembly meeting
Nairobi, September 23, 2045
- 10 Utopia versus ideology
- 12 Revolution without revolutionaries
- 13 Everything but institutions
- 14 Individualism, rationalism
and responsibility
- 16 Corporations as common good
- 18 The mosaic of the future
- 19 From an interview with Edward Slowden,
Professor, Department of International Security
Reconstrucción Trans-American University (Caracas)
Nagens Dyheter newspaper (Stockholm), October 22, 2045

Introduction

The clever thing was to break the rules and stay alive all the same.
If you kept the small rules, you could break the big ones.

George Orwell, 1984

Certainly this in no way resembles the disorderly, unorganized election-days of the ancients, on which (it seems so funny!) they did not even know in advance the result of the election. To build a state on some non-discountable contingencies, to build blindly, – what could be more nonsensical? Yet centuries were required to pass before this was understood!

Yevgeny Zamyatin, We

Can the huge, global, diverse and interconnected world suddenly stop dead, paralysed by a collective fear? Can it slow down its movement and start hurriedly shutting doors and windows? Before the spring of 2020, the answer was negative. It seemed impossible to visualise the fading of international life, whose exuberant, perpetual humming was perceived as a constant. Yet it did happen. The planet went into lockdown, shocked by its own vulnerability, the ease of alienation and simultaneously a sensation of being a single whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not upended the universe. The erosion of international rules and institutions created in the second half of the 20th-century, which survived the Cold War, albeit in a slightly modified form, began in the 21st century. COVID-19 has only stimulated the processes that emerged before it came into being; it has accelerated the evolution but failed to add to it anything fundamentally new. However, the pandemic's scale and shocking impact on the habitual social and political relations have drawn a symbolic bottom line under the existence of one world order and ushered in another.

It is usually said of current international politics that the mechanisms of the previous system are no longer in operation and that a dangerous and chaotic world without rules is dawning. Before 2020, in fact, it was legitimate to say that anarchy was advancing,

with the world environment sliding into chaos. The Valdai Club repeatedly said as much in its 2014–2019 papers¹. The “crumbling world” that we described in our 2018 and 2020 reports² has ceased to be a metaphor and turned into a palpable reality before our own eyes.

But social systems cannot be chaotic forever. A period of chaos is only a transition to another arrangement. Every type of order is finite and its demise inevitably generates new forms of international interaction. The crumbling of a former organisation is simultaneously the emergence of a new system. The pandemic may have accelerated the developments: what otherwise would have taken years has occurred within months.

The most significant event in 2020 was the unprecedented worldwide closure of the borders, this symbolising a rush for maximum sovereignty. Being shut within national jurisdictions was a way to protect oneself against a transnational problem and simultaneously betrayed confusion in the face of a challenge that COVID-19 posed to national healthcare and security. The closing of borders and the impossibility of direct contacts has led to an unprecedented surge of information and communications technology in all areas, from state governance to science and education.

The pandemic has been a catalyst to the disintegration of groups and isolation of individuals, a phenomenon that frightens observers most of all. The dysfunction of institutions at the height of COVID-19 became obvious to the masses. This impels people and states towards greater independence in decision-making and awareness of their own responsibility for their survival.

¹ Krastev I., Lukyanov F. (eds.), *New Rules or No Rules?, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club, 2014*. Available at: https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/new_rules_or_no_rules_xi_annual_valdai_discussion_club_meeting_participants_report/

Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Suslov D., Timofeev I. *War and Peace in the 21st Century. International Stability and Balance of the New Type, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club, 2016*. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/international-stability-and-balance-of-the-new-type/>

Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik, Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Suslov D., Timofeev I. *The Importance of Being Earnest: How to Avoid Irreparable Damage, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club,* 2017. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/report-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik, Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Time to Grow Up, or the Case for Anarchy, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club, 2019*. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/annual-report-time-to-grow-up/>

Timofeev I. *A New Anarchy? Scenarios for World Order Dynamics, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club, 2019*. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/a-new-anarchy-scenarios-for-world-order-dynamics/>

² Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik, Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Living in a Crumbling World, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club, 2018*. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/living-in-a-crumbling-world/>

Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik, Y., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. *Staying Sane in a Crumbling World, Report by the Valdai Discussion Club, 2020*. Available at: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/staying-sane-in-a-crumbling-world/>

Development trajectories become individualised in social and economic behaviour. A greater diversity of choice is characteristic of different spheres, including education, forms of employment, the starting and final hours on the job, and the nature of hire. Grassroots mutual aid is emerging as a real strategy to address vital problems. This is of importance both locally (for example, joint actions by participants in civic protests, or medical and logistical collaboration during the pandemic) and globally (environmental and fair redistribution campaigns). People are looking for answers within groups of like-minded individuals and mutual interest societies rather than in formal groups (institutions), something promoted by the social media phenomenon.

Political party systems are declining. Even parties of a “new type” (the so-called populists, who were up and coming just a few years ago) are losing momentum because in essence they are akin to the former political institutions. The classical political parties are ever less effective where political representation is concerned and are being replaced by outwardly amorphous civic movements without clear-cut ideologies. Their approach is at first sight anarchic but it is really aimed at dealing with one single specific problem. It is they that are increasingly setting the political agenda.

A new generation of leaders and a new generation of individuals are entering the world arena. People who have grown up in an age that is often called “post-heroic” will increasingly play the determining role in politics. Of course, great risks and threats, including military risks, are still there, but the most important thing is that the new generation is seeking to find self-fulfilment and expand its comfort zone in every sense of the word. This cannot but affect the atmosphere of international politics.

Processes under way within social organisms predetermine the behaviour of states at the international level. The popularity of eco-activist Greta Thunberg and the public response to the pandemic highlight the sluggishness and political bias of the bureaucracy. The global society is forming a real (and therefore fearsome) alternative. Structurally, it is amorphous, anarchic and atomised, for which reason it is more in line with today’s realities and is calling forth a response.

States have faced the same problems internationally as individuals at the national level. As a result, people and countries are less orientated to institutional algorithms and more to their own interests, no matter how momentary or misguided they might be, hence the volatility and impulsiveness of international life. Uncertainty is the sign of the times and so these writers will not venture to predict what the world system will be like five or fifteen years from now. We have decided to write a utopia, describing an imagined and ideal world that may take shape if the current tendencies could be used for the benefit of humanity.

We make a point of avoiding panicky expectations that prevail today, because we believe that each major crisis affords a chance to open a new chapter in history, possibly a more productive and promising one than what we are leaving behind.

A hundred years on the path towards democracy and responsibility

UN Secretary-General Ghan Twan Eng's
address at the formal UN General Assembly meeting
Nairobi, September 23, 2045

Esteemed representatives of the UN member states,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Friends,

I am delighted to welcome all of you here at a meeting held at the African headquarters of the United Nations to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the organisation that has brought us together. It is gratifying that we have come here from all over the world for an in-person meeting so as to personally express our respect for the United Nations.

Over the past decades we have grown out of this form of communication. Technology offers a broad variety of communication forms, so that we can create the participation effect without actually leaving our homes. However, just as a hundred years ago, nothing is better than in-person human contact. It was thanks to this that the founding fathers of the UN coordinated the principles of the new world order and ways to maintain peace after World War II a hundred years ago.

The United Nations has gone through a great deal over the past 100 years. There were 40 years of the Cold War, when the bipolar confrontation closely approached a nuclear conflict several times. There were radical changes on the political map of the world and the rise of many new states, primarily on the continent where we have gathered today. A huge number of people have broken the chains of colonialism: one of the most important events in human history that released the spirit of the future era of democracy and equality.

But the euphoria of the post-Cold War period and the end of the bipolar confrontation soon gave way to concern over the future of the UN. A situation developed at the turn of the 21st century where the United Nations could have been pushed to the political wayside, for the first time in its history, and ignored by the world's strongest powers, which believed that they could never be wrong. However, those who thought that they would do very well without the UN and would be able to decide the future of other nations at will came across the challenges they were not ready to deal with. And so they had to re-join the UN and to ask for its

assistance in dealing with the problems they themselves had created.

The most difficult period was probably the first half of the 2020s. The UN was working under stress throughout the 2010s. The aggravation of socioeconomic problems made international politics a hostage of the domestic situation. The UN Security Council was many times stymied by conflicts between its permanent members. The majority of other member states of the General Assembly were increasingly dissatisfied with the situation where the privileged powers completely forgot about the common good amid their mutual finger-pointing.

The milestone was the *COVID-19* pandemic, which spread around the world 25 years ago and was the first of a series of planetary disasters. Today, several novel pandemics later, we have learned to control such challenges and know how to minimise economic losses and risk to human life. But back then the global pandemic was a complete shock that paralysed politics and the economy for months. This disrupted the integrity of the world. Mobility came to a standstill. National egotism flourished to the monotonous drone about the importance of joint action. Each country tried not only to protect itself but also to shift the cost of this onto others. The fragmentation of the world, which began some time before that, turned into a landslide. There was talk about the collapse of international institutions and chaos fraught with grave risks, including a big war. The mission of the UN, which had been established to prevent global conflicts, hung in the balance.

The pandemic and its consequences aggravated the feeling of uncertainty and the impossibility of making even short-term plans. Taken together, this was fuelling the general despair and fear of the future, further poisoning the already strained

international atmosphere. Some of those present in this hall, our veterans, surely remember the apprehension with which the UN celebrated its 75th anniversary.

I would like to say a few words about my personal experience. In the early 2020s, I was a relatively young head of an NGO in my home country, Malaysia, working on an important project. We were suing a large pharmaceutical company which used unfair practices and cheated those who were desperately looking for medicine to fight the disease. We did not win the lawsuit, because our opponents used their financial and lobbying resources, sometimes even using criminal methods, to get rid of their critics. My friends and I fell into a deep depression. The world seemed to be cynical, consumerist and profit-hungry. Politicians, business people and even our colleagues in civil society seemed to have forgotten about their conscience. The narrative about values was used as a demagogical cover for marauding and greed camouflaged as moral relativism and juggling half-truths...

Gratefully, pivotal periods tend to produce new leaders with energy and vision, and the will to translate it into reality. In the mid-2020s, when it looked as if the world was sliding into an abyss, a new generation of heads of state, politicians and civic leaders emerged on the international stage. Having grown up and received an education in the 21st century, they went where their predecessors feared to tread. They did not waste time and effort to revitalise institutions that were becoming ineffective in a rapidly changing world. They came to the conclusion that the revival of the UN spirit does not depend on compliance with the letter that was written in the first half of the past century. They saw that the focus must be on a clear distinction between good and evil. This gave rise to the emergence of a new kind of global politics.

The greatness of the United Nations' founding fathers is in the fact that the organisation they created reflected current realities and presaged a new era. At the same time, it also included a potential for transformation, that is, fundamental principles such as the equality of sovereign states, non-interference in their internal affairs, the right of nations to choose their future and to bear responsibility for their choice, non-use or threat of force, and a political and diplomatic settlement of disputes. Upholding these principles was the mission of the UN. But the institutional form of its activities could and needed to be changed. Institutions lose their significance when they are no longer viewed as fair and morally upright. This is why the international community saw that it was time for change.

I am delighted to see in this hall our respected colleagues, members of the UN Supreme Court of Ethical Arbitration. Diversity has always been a key feature of our organisation, but for a long time it was dominated by the idea of universalism, the concept that some values have universal application and are incontestable. The fragmentation of the world forced us to admit that value and ethical pluralism is not just a fact of life but also a good thing. Mutual understanding can only be achieved through a combination of different world outlooks and ethical systems. It took a long time, but eventually we gathered respected arbitrators from different cultures whose words were heard, calls to action heeded and opinions equal. There has always been a kind of competition in this sphere, but it is only a dialogue of cultures that can give rise to – no, not to imperative universalism but harmony based on mutual recognition.

For nearly 20 years the UN has been operating on the principles that differ from those adopted during its inception. Why

have we changed it? Because the world's main organisation had no right to disregard the main international trend: the rapidly growing demand for democratism.

Before that, all societies in the world were based on the same model: the strong set the agenda and told those who were weaker what to do. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't. At any rate, this system existed in the hierarchical world, which it always was. The 21st century saw the erosion and disappearance of hierarchies, both in societies and on the international stage. Technological, social and political changes expanded opportunities for people, societies and states, which now had more freedom to act and make decisions. Only 20 years ago, the expansion of these opportunities was feared. But today we have no fear because we know that the new has replaced the old in a natural way and is a reflection of the fundamental processes of international and social development. The global environment has become much more pluralistic and democratic.

The degeneration of international institutions in the first decades of this century encouraged people to ponder ways to ensure security in a world where the power is not held by anyone particular, where ironclad institutions have been replaced with alliances set up to deal with a particular matter, and where every individual relies on himself. Is this a dog-eat-dog world, where might is right? This is how it would have been had not the new-generation leaders seen the dangers of this path into a blind alley.

Now is the time of balanced self-sufficiency, when everyone has less than we could have by establishing our hegemony over others, but enough for maintaining domestic social stability. The logic of rational self-imposed limitations became dominant at the time when we revised

our priorities that are inseparably tied to the world's environmental, climate and demographic problems.

Unrestrained consumption has been replaced with the philosophy of conservation at the international level and in individual societies. The fight for resources is still ongoing, but everyone knows that total control and monopoly are unattainable and unnecessary. States enjoy their freedom but they know that it is restricted by the opportunities of others and that every action must be gauged against the interests of others.

A big state does not need to subjugate small states because their behaviour is reasonable and predictable. And small states are not made dependent on any of the big states because they have access to a range of external sources of development and realisation of their interests. Twenty-five years ago the world was talking about the inevitable confrontation between China and the United States and that there must be a winner in that confrontation. But this has changed in the new international environment. China will not replace the United States, which will not destroy China as it had destroyed the Soviet Union. Even the super-powerful rivals which would have clashed for world domination in the past have to come to terms with each other. And today we have a civilised competition, the fruits of which are available to all other states as well. People are satisfied with their quality of life and have no desire for super-consumption.

The power of the United Nations is in a combination of continuity and innovation. This is why it has not only survived when other institutions declined but has become even more stable. Its continuity is ensured by the Security Council, whose main function is to prevent a clash between the seemingly invincible great powers.

The nuclear world order, about which George Orwell wrote a hundred years ago, is still protecting us from a world war. Innovation is the deep transformation of the concerned agencies we carried out in the 2030s to make them more flexible and effective, plus the decentralisation in the United Nations.

It is symbolic that we are marking the 100th anniversary of the UN in Africa, at one of the organisation's regional headquarters. You may remember that it opened 20 years ago to prevent an excessive influence of a single host country on the activities of the world's main international organisation.

I would like to add that the international civil society has acquired a new quality over the past decades. It turned out to be more effective, when it comes to many issues that are relevant for everyone, than separate states which are focused by default on guarding their own interests. It is especially gratifying for me, who hails from the so-called Third Sector, to say this.

We have not only weathered many shocks and crises. We have survived a change in the very paradigm of international development. A global cataclysm appeared all but inevitable 20 years ago. But wisdom has prevailed, and we now have a world order that is not weaker but more stable even though it is not based on the 20th century institutions. Democracy makes for responsibility. Rights are inseparable from duties. States are showing more commitment than we expected. I am sure that in another hundred years our descendants will be able to say on the 200th anniversary of the UN what we are saying today – that the United Nations is and will forever remain the bedrock of the international community.

Thank you, dear friends.

Utopia versus ideology

Now indeed they [utopias] seem to be able to be brought about far more easily than we supposed, and we are actually faced by an agonising problem of quite another kind: how can we prevent their final realisation? ... Utopias are... realisable... and towards utopias we are moving. But it is possible that a new age is already beginning, in which cultured and intelligent people will dream of ways to avoid ideal states and to get back to a society that is less 'perfect' and more free.

Nikolai Berdyaev, Democracy, Socialism and Theocracy

Utopia, the image of the desirable (or undesirable, in the case of dystopia) social order, is a genre that has been around since antiquity. Its function is not to describe the future, but rather to fix a target society should strive for.

Why do we believe that the concept of utopia is newly relevant? The international agenda is clearly exhausted, beyond the normal ebb and flow of the development cycle. It is the loss of a meaningful and universally accepted frame of reference. We could try to patch up our crumbling reality by manipulating artificial concepts, defunct ideologies, and decayed institutions. But attempting to delay the inevitable would only make the eventual collapse even more dramatic.

We continue to live in the shadow of the 20th century, when two powerful, irreconcilable doctrines were pitched in fierce battle – doctrines that evolved from utopias to ideologies only to become utopias again later. Such foundational doctrines as socialism or liberalism were never confined to national boundaries but aspired to encompass the globe. When the Cold War came to an end, the period of ideological confrontation seemed to end as well. The world paused to take a breath after the turbulence of the previous era, but it will resume imminently. The new Roaring Twenties are returning both ideology and utopia to the stage of global politics. The lull that followed the Soviet Union's collapse created the illusion of ideology's predominance in the absence of distinct utopian alternatives. But this is only surface appearance. Structural contradictions will sooner or later push through the cracks in the asphalt of even the most harmonious ideological system. Of course, nothing of the sort exists in the world today.

To use Karl Mannheim's terms, ideology is the system of beliefs of "ruling groups," while utopia is the denial of these views and even of what really exists, an imperative to destroy it³. Both "ruling groups" and "revolutionaries" perceive reality in a distorted way. Rulers are unable to see certain facts that could undermine their sense of dominance. Certain oppressed groups, on the contrary, see only those elements in the situation which tend to negate it. What sets the current moment apart is the intensifying conflict between ideology and utopia.

Where can intimations of the new utopia be felt? In the streets of American cities gripped by protest, in toppled monuments, in renamed roads and metro stations. In the ubiquitous ritual of "repentance" which does little to quell the protests of the passionate mass of "the insulted and the humiliated."

³ Mannheim K. *Ideologie und Utopie*, 1929.

In the ardent appeals of climate activists that suddenly surface as a global leitmotif. And elsewhere.

But the real drama is yet to come. Sooner or later (and probably sooner), people with a different frame of reference will come to power by democratic means, with minds preoccupied by their own utopias (dystopias). The new utopian project will question the supposed rationality of liberal political and economic systems, but it won't reproduce socialist ideas of existence either. The problem is not even some specific injustice, but a hunch that existing political models are morally inadequate. They have learned to survive and solve problems using a toolkit that contains anything from communication diktat and administrative manipulation to mobilising resources toward specific ends. But this only makes the erosion of the ethical side of politics more pronounced, as the current international situation eloquently illustrates.

The utopia of 21st century democratic international politics is based on the possibility of achieving harmonious moderation where no party can get everything it wants. This utopia should provide a framework for resolving the central problem of international relations as formulated by John Mearsheimer: "Great powers are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal."⁴ If hegemony is no longer possible (as we believe modern events have convincingly demonstrated), then seeking it ceases to be a rational pursuit. In his work *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama⁵ predicted a dystopia in international politics – the triumph of Western liberalism, evident in the exhaustion of "viable systematic alternatives" to this ideology, would represent the final evolutionary stage brought about by the universalisation and final affirmation of the liberal idea. Robert Kagan in his work *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*⁶ suggested that international politics is gearing up for the next round in the battle between liberalism and authoritarianism because Fukuyama was mistaken, liberalism had not triumphed after all (although it should have). The discourse around the "new Cold War" builds on this idea.

The utopia we are now discussing has nothing to do with the "end" or "return" of history. It is a natural continuation. Even the mightiest powers have failed to achieve the dominance of one group or the dominance of one ethical system. Such dominance or supremacy is no longer possible in principle – for anyone. The continuation of history means the next stage of global development is coming and will be characterized by diversity. Never before has international politics seen so many independent national sources of ethical precepts, interests and varied opportunities to assert them. When victory is unattainable, fighting no longer makes rational sense, and the abundance of individual choices precludes monopoly. International politics is becoming more complex, but it continues to operate according to principles that are fairer than ever.

Why do we think such a utopia is possible? Because the preconditions are being created right now by what is happening in the world.

⁴ Mearsheimer, J. J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2001.

⁵ Fukuyama Y. F. *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992.

⁶ Kagan R. *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, 2008.

Revolution without revolutionaries

They have but few laws, and such is their constitution that they need not many. They very much condemn other nations, whose laws, together with the commentaries on them, swell up to so many volumes; for they think it an unreasonable thing to oblige men to obey a body of laws that are both of such a bulk, and so dark as not to be read and understood by every one of the subjects.

Thomas More, Utopia

In the frame of reference we still inhabit, the end of the world order inherited from the 20th century is seen as something approaching catastrophe. There is an explanation for that.

The set of international institutions created after World War II was a carefully devised, harmonious system which, in a sense, marked the culmination of several centuries of efforts to create a reliable and sustainable model of global security and development. Nuclear deterrence is undoubtedly a hierarchical and hegemonic international practice, but it is also the only effective constraining factor that has long prevented the descent into anarchy that poses a threat to international security. The “global nuclear order” (or Orwellian “cold war”⁷), which emerged after the creation of nuclear weapons, made big wars irrational; it inhibits the revolutionary behavior of states that are theoretically capable of unleashing such a war to gain a decisive advantage. Everyone is a revisionist now – trying to change how the rules are enforced, rather than the rules themselves.

We have entered a political cycle in which power is diffuse in the world. Strategic competition between the leading powers is on the rise; and in pursuit of dominance, each of them is building up its military arsenal and potentially increasing the number of conflicts in the world. Taken all together, this amounts to a system of containment, which is what prevents escalation. The polycentric international system is based on the balance of power in various regions. This process is incomplete, and the crumbling of the previous structure is giving rise to greater uncertainty. However, the stress tests of recent years – the Ukrainian collision, Russian-Turkish aggravation, the US strikes on Syria and assassination of a high-ranking Iranian general, the Iran-Saudi confrontation, and finally the US-China, China-India and India-Pakistan crises – demonstrate that the world is not teetering on the brink of war after all.

This can be explained by the multidimensional interdependence of countries, but also by the fact that the existing system meets the interests of most of the leading players, and no one wants to change it fundamentally. While discontent over the many imbalances and growing injustice has been on the rise for a long time, none of the great powers would risk radically changing the rules. The world’s leading players are interested in altering but not fundamentally revising them, much less destroying or replacing them.

⁷ Orwell G. *You and the Atomic Bomb* in *Tribune*, London, 1945. Available at: https://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/ABomb/english/e_abomb

But a revolution without revolutionaries is taking place in international affairs. It was not initiated by anyone specific, whether a state or a group of states. Its drivers are structural in nature. No power or bloc can achieve global leadership; there is no universal system of values; and the degradation of institutions and governance proceeds apace. The resulting environment lacks any stable pillars of physical or ethical power. And these changes are far more revolutionary than the passing of the mantle of leadership from one state to another, which has happened many times throughout history.

Everything but institutions

Victories after all are never so complete that the victor must not show some regard, especially to justice.

Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince

If we get away from the viewpoint that has taken root over the past decades, the dismantling and replacement of the usual model and the crisis of institutions is not a tragedy, but an opportunity to rid ourselves of the piled up encumbrances that resulted in the institutions not working any more. Moreover, we should break the inertia of thinking and ponder the fact that, in a fundamentally changed international setting, the institutions themselves (many of them) have become an obstacle to building a system of relations corresponding to the new era rather than a guarantee of global stability and manageability. As the American political scientist, Robert Keohane, wrote in his classic work on different approaches to institutions, “the analysis of international cooperation should not be confused with its celebration.”⁸

The atomisation is getting worse at the international level. States are finding themselves face to face with the outside world and are forced to build their strategy independently relying solely on their own understanding of the processes and their political intuition. This means reinventing medium- and long-term strategies. Naturally, a time of trial and error is lying ahead. However, continuing to act in the same vein and taking cue from someone else carries an even greater risk. After all, institutions, as mentioned above, tend to falter, and leaders tend to adopt the most selfish behaviour and to stop taking into account the interests of their partners, even to the extent that was typical of the time of domination.

Institutions are the most significant and iconic product of 20th century politics, but they have run their course. At all levels, they have long moved towards

⁸ Keohane R. O., *International Institutions: Two Approaches in International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 1988. Pp. 379-396. Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The International Studies Association. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2600589>

diminishing their own responsibility to their participants, while striving to maintain control over their behaviour. This applies to specific states and societies (for example, in social security or education, where the “streamlining” of obligations has become a rule of thumb in the past 40 years), but equally in international politics. Safeguarding the interests of their participants has long stopped being the main goal of many international organisations. It is increasingly being replaced by the strengthening of their own bureaucratic positions and the attempts to create an environment in which the behaviour of the member countries would be predictable and manageable regardless of their actual interests.

However, failure to fulfil the group’s obligations to its participants leads to the fact that the latter, in turn, refuse to fulfil their collective obligations. All the more so when a diversified international environment combined with technological advances creates new opportunities. The state today has several alternative sources from which one can draw resources for development and achievement of foreign policy goals. The growing variety of choices calls into question the wisdom of strong allies or the need for subordination. This exacerbates the sense of chaos.

Individualism, rationalism and responsibility

The previous three centuries happily known as the Age of Plunder were not bad at all since stealing is an act that most fully expresses a man’s freedom; and freedom had, throughout their entire history, always been the highest ideal of the Cat People. (*Note: “freedom” in the Feline language does not mean the same as in Chinese. For Cat People freedom means “taking advantage of others, being uncooperative, creating disturbance”*).

Lao She, Cat Country

But is it really as dangerous as the adherents to the old rules are saying?

In 200 years, international politics has gone from the hard rule exercised by a number of great powers, whose power was based on brutal suppression of others (European empires) and through a combined world order following World War II (a combination of hegemony and democratic institutions). The new order could be a democracy of responsible states. The fragmentation we are seeing now is a boon, not a bane. The fact that everyone is playing for themselves gives hope for more rational behaviour based on properly understood self-interests. Avoiding monopoly has become a common goal. Since hegemony is out of the question and institutions are not functioning as they should, it is impossible to set common goals. But there’s room for resolving particular problems.

Traditional approaches provide for establishing order through relative uniformity. However, individuality and freedom of choice are at the centre of the emerging international situation. Individualism and rationalism – the foundations of European political philosophy – are embodied at the level of international relations. Individual choice is rational. The choice by the state of foreign policy decisions is free from accumulated obligations or constraints that have nothing to do with the specific issue at hand. It would be rational to realise one's own interests regardless of the given institutional framework, but without crossing the line that is fraught with a conflict and threatens survival. The Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr noted, "achieving a concurrence between its own interests and "the general welfare" must be regarded as the highest form of virtue in man's collective life."⁹

The devastating wars of the first half of the 20th century forced the people and states to seek salvation in groups, i.e. institutions, outside of which chaos reigned. Institutions were a step towards a fairer world order. However, the category of power remained the key in any institution, be it the United States' dominance within the liberal world order or the system of privileges that the superpowers enjoyed during the Cold War. The international community is taking its first steps towards democracy and diversity. The impossibility of individual or collective leadership in the new world nullifies the institutions in their classical form. Humankind is gradually getting rid of the dictate of collective interest (which inevitably means certain forms of imposing common ideas) in favour of individual intelligence. The collective interest can be explained differently, but it is always based on achieving the maximum benefit by each of the participants and at the same time being impersonal. It is to the least extent influenced by morality categories.

The increasing freedom of an individual and the state, when it comes to making decisions that affect their future, is also about overcoming the 20th century legacy. In search of an optimal result, the emancipation from the herd instinct and collective selfishness occurs and the states begin to behave more responsibly, since they have to base their actions on their capabilities and constraints rather than their desires. Diplomat George F. Kennan referred to this in his work on morality in foreign policy written at the end of the Cold War, pointing out "the duty of bringing one's commitments and undertakings into a reasonable relationship with one's real possibilities for acting upon the international environment."¹⁰

New international environment is about to replace almost the entire order that emerged after World War II, except for nuclear deterrence. Its main features

⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr *on Politics: His Political Philosophy and Its Application to Our Age as Expressed in His Writings*, Wipf and Stock, 2007.

¹⁰ Kennan, G. F. *Morality and Foreign Policy in Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No 2, 1985.

already include competition between the development models rather than monopoly, the struggle between the centres of power rather than dominance of one power, and flexible structure rather than bipolarity, which is a form of monopoly in and of itself. It allows the coalitions of interests, but not as part of the bloc discipline. Institutions based on the participants' balance of power (and, as a rule, assuming the presence of one who is the strongest) are giving way to multilateral cooperation, where the aggregate capabilities are less important than the ability to exert an influence on a particular issue.

There have been concerns over the multilateralism crisis in recent years. Multilateralism used to mean activities within the framework of universal international institutions at the global level. However, this understanding of multilateral cooperation is very specific and is a product of the outgoing international order. A real multilateral approach to specific problems implies the participation of those who are directly interested in resolving a particular issue and are able to influence this process. But it does not provide for "piggybacking" by those who are participating only based on their status, or because they believe they must make their power felt by others. Switching to this system will make it possible to more effectively address common problems.

Corporations as common good

Merchants became administrators and the administration turned into a company of shareholders. All big enterprises which were of no immediate profit, or the purpose of which was not clear to the limited, selfish view of the merchants, vanished. Political insight, wise foresight, attempts to improve manners and customs, everything that was not immediately directed to commercial aims – in a word, whatever could not bring in any profit – was called dreams.

Vladimir Odoevsky, A City Without a Name

Is the individualised world falling apart? This is highly unlikely due to the economic, technical and communication connectivity. Transnational companies have become the conductors of the global approach, and it is being cemented by various types of social media. Already in the latter half of the 20th century, a point of view emerged that transnational players will eventually exert a corrective influence on the states' actions. Initially, the role of TNCs was seen in a simplistic manner, and in all large countries the governments were able to effectively put them under control and at the service of their interests. But in the utopia we are describing, TNCs and technologies will balance out the states' focus on isolation, which is the result of reluctance to take up new challenges.

Earlier, "transnationalisation" was understood as "Westernisation", not least because TNCs were run from Western-located offices. In the new polycentric world,

where Asia is clearly playing a greater part, one can expect the transnationalisation to lose its Western nature. The new paradigm of the global economic architecture is about the growing role of major multinational companies and their ecosystems. Amid weakening multilateral global institutions, weak coordination and growing competition between regional integration projects, the vacuum in global governance is most likely to be filled by the micro-level of the world's largest companies.

Major transnational companies will gain an advantage in developing their ecosystems through “regulatory arbitration” in various national jurisdictions. On the other hand, major companies are facing mounting risks of competition from new platform companies, which know how to more quickly and flexibly use the ever increasing shifts in the structure of consumer demand. Given these circumstances, the role of changing strategic alliances between leading TNCs and new dynamic platform companies is becoming more important.

“New alliances” which will be joined by major transnational companies, may put more pressure on the “old alliances” at the state level. Moreover, the old platforms built on a territorial basis will be replaced by “new platforms” based on alliances of corporate ecosystems.

Corporate platforms can, over time, morph into universal economic systems that provide services which were previously available at the national/state level. In particular, the issuance of their own cryptocurrencies by companies such as Facebook could undermine the central banks' monopoly in issuing means of exchange and saving. In these circumstances, the regulators' focus will shift towards analysis and control over the formation of ecosystems.

The “industrial policy” aimed at creating national champions to compete on a global scale will give way to creating a proper environment for attracting corporate platforms and their ecosystems, creating regional and trans-regional platforms that compete on a global scale.

In turn, the proliferation of corporate platforms fosters increased interdependence among states, but is likely to weaken multilateral regulation in organisations such as the WTO or the IMF. Just like the others, these institutions are losing their importance.

We will have to think about how to reformat the global governance architecture to reflect the factors related to developing the corporate platform and ecosystem mechanism. Digital sovereignty will become an important aspect of competition between them. In addition to trade and investment alliances between countries and regions, digital alliances will begin to spread and increase their clout. In many ways, they will be ones to create proper environment for cultivating ecosystem champions that can successfully compete on the global market.

The mosaic of the future

For particulars, as every one knows, make for virtue and happiness; generalities are intellectually necessary evils. Not philosophers but fret-sawyers and stamp collectors compose the backbone of society.

Aldous Huxley, Brave New World

A new reality of international politics and the global economy is being assembled from pieces. Indeed, the situation in the world is tense, but some collisions already show features of the future, namely, a different globalisation infrastructure, a variety of rising centres of power, regrouping political interests and spheres of influence, greater independence and responsibility of the states for their own future, and competition among technological solutions instead of a single platform-monopoly. The environmental degradation and climate change are major and dangerous problems that are both destructive and constructive. So far, they have been provoking differences between states; however, humanity will by all means need to find common solutions to them, as well as to pandemics, for that matter. By the same token, the humanity will need to harmonise value concepts, which is a necessary thing to do, but is a poor match to adopting some kind of a universal base for outlook on the world.

Ethical diversity is coming to replace both the rivalry between two or three dominant ideologies and universalist homogeneity. Of course, such a revaluation causes resistance of those who are used to seeing their values as universal. More importantly, the question is whether this diversity can be harmonised so that it could contribute to the international system's stability rather than rock it. The request for more moral politics requires finding a common denominator to different ethical systems.

The chaos that everyone is talking about and which we mentioned in several previous Valdai Club reports is giving way to the outlines of the future which is closer to an imaginary utopia than what would have come out of editing the old world order. The line between utopia and dystopia is about "good" or "evil" governance. However, technological advances of our time and individual freedom they offer make it more difficult – almost impossible – to exercise governance in the traditional sense of the word.

International governance, as we know it, remains outside the new utopia. It will simply never materialise since it's impossible to subjugate anyone and individualism is rampant. But it will resurface in some other form based on new rationality, which will be determined precisely by the impossibility of subjugating anyone and individualism. We are entering an entirely new era.

From an interview with **Edward Slowden,**

Professor,
Department of International Security
Reconstrucción Trans-American
University (Caracas)

<...>

– At the end of the last century and the beginning of the next, there was a popular concept known as the “end of history” that implied the final triumph of Western liberalism as the model for society and, ultimately, for the world. That theory never actually panned out, but it now seems we are witnessing a different end of evolution: humanity has achieved the harmony of rational egoism. What next?

– No, of course, there can be no end of history – whether communist, liberal, or rational-egoistic. Yes, after some tense decades, we finally realised that we already live in too dangerous and fragile a world; it is irrational, if not insane, to increase the risks further by behaving recklessly. That was a huge achievement for humanity.

Honestly, 25 years ago, when I was still in exile and could not move freely around

the world, I could not have imagined such a leap forward in consciousness, not in my wildest fantasies. But it is not a steady state or status quo. It is an endless and time-consuming process. If we stop making the effort, even briefly, to maintain balance in all spheres – political, economic, social, and technological – it will all collapse much faster than people can imagine.

Another important point. We have successfully tempered politics, so to speak. But the problems of the Earth, our common home, not only haven't been solved, they are getting worse. The climate continues to change. The persistence of extreme income inequality is a potential time bomb under the beautiful picture you have painted. People are still dying from diseases that can certainly be defeated. As soon as we learn how to treat diseases, new ones appear. So we can only dream about peace. It's a cliché but a good one: peace on earth is like a bicycle, you either keep pedalling or fall down.

– As you have mentioned your exile, could I ask a personal question? Your life has had lots of twists and turns. For many years, you lived under terrible strain, primarily because you did not know what would happen to you next. Tell me, Professor, was there a moment when you settled down, so to speak? Reconciled yourself to the reality?

– Oddly enough, yes, there was. Exactly 25 years ago. Before that, I had been in forced isolation for a long time; I could not travel freely and had to come to terms with the fact that I was severely limited in what I could do. That was certainly hard.

But then came the spring of 2020, when the pandemic paralysed the normal course of life for billions of people. And suddenly everyone was in about the same situation that I had been in for several years.

Isolation, seclusion, the inability to lead your regular life, and fear of what is to come. Suddenly the whole world was living like that. For most people, it came as a shock. But for me, it was like rejoining the world, if you will. Only I did not return to the world – the world came back to me. There were a lot of different changes happening, and my life also changed. But I clearly remember that feeling of belonging.

 ValdaiClubRu

 ValdaiClubRu

 valdaiclub

 ValdaiClub

 valdaiclubcom

valdai@valdaiclub.com



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



Russian International
Affairs Council



MGIMO
UNIVERSITY



NATIONAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY