



# FROM LIBERAL ORDER TO RULES-BASED ORDER: DECODING GEOPOLITICS OF GLOBALIZATION

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*Abstract:* Globalization was considered as a panacea to end geopolitical rivalries by integrating economies and societies into vast networks of interdependence. The web of complex interdependence woven through global supply chains and cross-border connections, although to a large extent, has led to disappearance of geography. Nonetheless, promotion of embedded liberalism has reconstituted political and social boundaries that can be weaponized to gain asymmetric advantages. The liberal order consolidated during the post-Cold War unipolar moment and scripted the story of global governance. Post 2010, the waning United States (US) hegemony and rise of China marked a discrediting of liberal internationalism, supplanting it with the rules-based order which although reflects Western values and interests, but is under constant improvisation by other actors challenging the status quo. With several competing visions in the fray, the future global order would certainly reflect new power constellations, norms, and rules. The paper thus argues that both liberal order and its successor the rules-based order largely cater to preserve the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of dominant powers who advocate for a free and open order. Rules, however, remain an empty rhetoric as the world is in a strategic disarray characterised by growing economic inequality and socio-cultural upheavals.

*Keywords:* geopolitics, globalization, international relations, liberal order, rules-based order.

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## INTRODUCTION

Amidst growing uncertainty pertaining to the future of global order, a question that perplexes students of international relations is how to understand the relationship between globalization and geopolitics? The end of the Cold War heralded a paradigm shift in the discipline with phrases like “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989) and the “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer 1990) leading the western discourse on advocacy of a liberal world order anchored in democracy, market integration and multilateral diplomacy. There was much euphoria over building “a new world order” and ushering in the Washington consensus to spread peace, economic prosperity in what would eventually become a borderless world (Ohmae 1995). The exponential scale of technological and communication advancement brought economies closer and as Luttwak (1990) had predicted that geoeconomics would surpass military and strategic considerations as a framework of analysis of future global politics. However, the myth of peaceful economic competition got busted with a parallel growth in redefinition of identity in local, regional, and ethnic terms and rising income inequalities between and within countries. The beginning of the 1990s saw two contradictory events in Europe: one, the launch of European Union (EU) as a postmodern, supranational entity to bring greater coherence in policymaking. The European integration project had reached its zenith with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, extending jurisdiction over more issues like industrial regulation, environment and justice and home affairs. The EU in a way became an embodiment of globalization accelerating free movement of goods, services and capital. On the other hand, the breaking up of Yugoslavia was a manifestation of competitive globalization<sup>1</sup> and the resultant inequalities fomenting insecurities related to ethnicity and nationalism. The decade of 90s witnessed prolific literature on the “new security environment” with many scholars advocating the “new war thesis” (Kaldor 1999, Duffield 2001) and Robert Kaplan (1994) forecasting “the coming anarchy”.

On one hand, the world has shrunk in time and space owing to intensification of globalization creating fast-paced and



seamless channels of connectivity, trade and mobility. Every activity today has more or less a transnational dimension, thus relegating the Westphalian notion of sovereignty as a thing of the past. However, on the other hand, as witnessed through the recent events such as the Brexit, Covid-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine War and the escalating competition in the Indo-Pacific, geopolitical fault lines have resurfaced, challenging ideas like multilateralism and cosmopolitanism. The novel forms of interconnectedness and interdependence have created opportunities as well as risks and insecurities. Economic crises, market fluctuations, infectious diseases, violence create critical vulnerabilities and produce powerful forces of social fragmentation (Singh 2019). Globalization and the associated idea of time-space compression however have not significantly altered mental maps and has rather caused uncertainty and encouraged growth of localism and nationalism (Harvey 1989). The shifting spatiality has generated contradictory understanding about the idea of borders with new forms of authorities/governance, social organization and identities (Diener, Hagen 2009).

Amid the much talk over globalization induced de-territorialization, the security landscape drastically altered after September 11, an event which reinforced stricter border controls and surveillance. The liberal order anchored in civil liberties and rights found itself challenged by the imperatives of security generated by terrorism and migration (Longo 2017). Such fears of living in a risk society (Beck 1992) have been compounded by intensified geopolitical tensions, environmental degradation and emergence of disruptive technologies and thus have raised the spectre of nationalism (Hess 2021). Global value chains, production networks and various economic activities are witnessing a complex reconfiguration owing to the growing evidence of nearshoring, decoupling and deglobalization (Gong et al. 2022). The neoliberal edifice of free trade, open markets and financial deregulation assisted by technological change, has created new networks of production and capital accumulation (Dicken 2015). As the global economy became more interconnected, it also brought forth new vulnerabilities and risks calling for protectionist measures. The rise of Asian economies particularly the gigantic leaps taken by China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project has cautioned the developed

countries who have resorted to stringent policies and regulations to keep the competition away.

Globalization thus has sparked off new expressions of conflict as manifested through trade wars, connectivity wars and struggle for control of strategic resources and technological superiority. The deepening global discord caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and China's growing assertiveness has cast a shadow on prospects of international cooperation to combat some of the most pressing challenges like climate change, energy and food security. The liberal order facing challenge from rising powers, economic retrenchment, domestic upheavals and technological change has become outmoded and rules-based order has become the new mantra to gather the like-minded partners to counter a revisionist Russia and China. However, the challenge lies in consistency of rule application and for it to be an inclusive process. A mere reformulation of nomenclature still doesn't answer the questions: whose rules and what interests and values will shape the future global order? A meaningful progress on addressing today's transnational problems cannot be made if they continue to be viewed in compartmentalized, state-centric terms.

The paper thus argues that there is no disconnect per se between globalization and geopolitics. Globalization as championed under the Pax Americana was a calculated pursuit of American geopolitical and economic interest. There has always been an underlying strategic logic dictating flows of trade, energy, finance and communications. The United States (US) and its European allies constitute the "regime makers" who structure the very process of globalization, thereby determining its consequences for the developing economies (Nayar 2007). The Indo-Pacific construct is a case in point which reinforces the relevance of American ideas in shaping regional orders around the world. However, China's phenomenal rise as a global power has led to contending visions for regional order building where economics and security have got intertwined. Using the Foucauldian idea of governmentality, the paper argues that geopolitics and globalization need a critical examination to show how states have used complex networks of trade, finance, technology, infrastructure, and knowledge to regulate geographies. This calls upon to understand the nature and relationships

among multiple spaces of power, interests, and ideologies. The paper offers a conceptual and critical reflection on how geopolitics has shaped the scope and nature of globalization and argues that the post war liberal international order's embrace of market globalization and global governance was to provide the material and ideational basis for penetration of American power across the world. The paper further argues that the terms liberal international order and rules-based order are thus used in conjunction with the global power shifts and have political rather than an analytical connotation. These orders have never been power neutral and have been strategically leveraged to pave the way for globalization. They have been invoked with inconsistencies and have given way to divergent interpretations by the states to suit their geopolitical interests and strategic calculations. In an increasingly multipolar world, a shared understanding about rules appears to be a mere rhetoric and alternative platforms offer states more room for manoeuvring while at the same time, they continue to benefit from the membership in institutions of the western liberal order.

The paper is divided into the following sections: the first section reviews the literature exploring connections on geopolitics and globalization and how the two ideas reinforce each other. It provides a conceptual understanding on how the state has devised new ways to govern in a globalized and integrated world. The second section discusses the liberal order and rules-based order, examining the distinction and similarities. It argues that the mere shift in nomenclature does not address the pressing global challenges as the rules-based order fails to provide the lowest common denominator for states to agree upon as interpretations vary. The final section summarizes the core arguments of the paper and concludes that geopolitics is a crucial element of both liberal order and rules-based order. Any meaningful headway to reform global governance and have a more balanced globalization would remain a distant dream till states continue to circumvent the rules to suit their geopolitical interest.

## STATE AS THE NORMATIVE ENABLER OF GLOBALIZATION

Sloan (2017) describes geopolitics as arrangement of the world in particular spatial configurations that shape the conduct of foreign policy and strategic history. The classic notions of geopolitics use geographical frames like “spheres of influence”, “bloc”, “backyard”, “neighbourhood”, and “near abroad” to understand struggles for power and influence over territory (Dodds 2019). The conventional geographical understanding of geopolitics however precludes attention to global interconnections in the realms of economy and environment and how decisions taken by dominant states and corporations are causing larger transformations in the biosphere, what Dalby (2020) explains as “Anthropocene geopolitics”.

Globalization as a process creates networks of connections among actors at intra- and multi-continental distances, mediated through a variety of flows including people, information and ideas, capital, and goods, and thus, integrates national economies, cultures, technologies and governance, and produces complex relations of mutual interdependence (Nye, Donahue 2000). It has generated novel forms of actors, techniques and practices through which state reclaims its normative space. Driven by geoeconomic rationales, the post-Cold War geopolitics is tied to an integrated network of flows of trade, transnational migrations, ethnocultural and demographic changes (Zephirin 2023). Moreover, in order to respond to non-conventional threats related to disease and environment, states adapt to international arrangements in ways that frequently enhance the power of well-connected corporations and their local suppliers (Hameiri, Jones 2015).

With the political and cultural ascendance of the middle classes in Europe during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, free trade and the supremacy of market became a reigning metaphor (Kindleberger 1975). The state thus redefined its social purpose to safeguard the self-regulating market (Ruggie 1982). However, lessons from the great depression of the 1930s compelled the allied powers to model the post 1945 international order so as to strike a balance between state and market. And thus, the idea



of “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1982) was adopted for institutional reconstruction for the international economy. Spearheaded by the US, the notion of multilateralism gained currency with emphasis on spread of liberal democracy and market economy. To accelerate the post war economic recovery, commitment to economic integration deepened and institutional linkages intensified. As a result, there was a massive surge in trade and per capita income and the developed industrialized nations of the West became a part of the tightly knit political and security community. Geopolitical imperatives also led to stepping up regional integration efforts to consolidate new markets. By 1980s, there was a perceptible shift towards market-led liberalization and eschewing the state-led model of reforms. Expansion of international trade, global finance, and supranational institutions put the liberal order beyond the reach of domestic politics (Trubowitz, Burgoon 2023: 38). The era of structural adjustment programmes brought intrusive policies based on a broader conception of economic and security issues where trade liberalization, environment, human rights democracy got linked.

Globalization has historically been geared towards favouring particular geographies and constituencies like developed states, Multinational Corporations (MNCs) etc. A strong geopolitical logic drives the search for new markets, potentially lucrative destinations of investments, cheap imports and labour. States, even though not engaging in overt confrontation, have developed new tools and techniques to manage risks and even devised means to exploit the interdependence to their advantage thus making globalization like a war (Wright 2017). The state is not in retreat due to globalization, rather in a scheme of multi-layered governance, it has transformed and invented new governmentality (Foucault [1978] 2008). Emergence of new players, and networks has not really created a power shift away from the state rather, the latter has co-opted the new actors and in some cases entwined with these power networks (Weiss 2005). Transnational actors like Multinational Corporations, or Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have become key players in the global decision-making, but the state is still the enabler of globalization (Weiss 2005) and provides a

framework that can be exploited by transnational interests (Anderson 1998). Deepening interdependence and integration of value chains and production networks has not only decentralized authority but also led to newer forms of power structures that control movement and create opportunity or advantage across political boundaries (Flint 2016). While traditional forms of authority organized around territory have been challenged, there has been a concomitant hardening of boundaries with emergence of new forms of localism. Today governance is not just about territorial control, it has taken a more managerial approach of biopolitics and political economy (Nelson 2009). The global liberal governance is carried out by a variety of practices and forms of discursive power and knowledge involving state and non-state entities. It follows a more regulatory approach and thus constitutes new categories of objects and subjects not in a territorial/national sense but as defined by markets, consumption, production, or rights (Dillon, Reid 2001). Social relations are being remoulded to suit the needs of the market based on the spirit of competition and entrepreneurship. The role of state in executing this politics of control also warrants attention as it serves as a powerful vector in this assemblage of biopower and in fact complements it.

Blouet (2001) draws a sharp contrast between geopolitics and globalization. The former refers to control of a geographic space to acquire wealth, resources, and infrastructure whereas the latter denotes openness and circulation of goods, capital and ideas through advancement of information and communication technologies and transportation. However, the nation-state is not out there watching the globalization unfold. Rather, it has played an active role in shaping the trajectory of these global flows and circulations. The dominant ideas emanating from military and economic power centres are setting the global agenda and percolating in the society.

The territorial system of nation-states has historically co-existed with the global system of networks (Agnew 2009). Interstate conflicts, civil wars, rising disparity and uneven economic development can be attributed to both geopolitics as well as globalization. Geopolitics has become the buzzword to understand contemporary conflicts and tensions. However, the term



geopolitics does not just relate to geographies of power. As Cohen and Smith (2009) argue that the making of the modern nation state was based not just on territorial security but was also about consolidating national population, thus encompassing a “geopolitical social” including territory, economy, and social forms. Hudson (1998) uses the term “regulatory landscape” to understand spatiality of power and social relations in a globalized world where transboundary activities blur the neat distinction between inside and outside. Globalization has thus reconfigured geographies transcending the fixed category of territory and conceptualization of security seen primarily from the lens of the state and the military.

According to the Foucauldian approach, power is organized and flows through the entire maze of social systems rather than enforced by traditional conceptual categories like states. For a more nuanced understanding of global politics and the power dynamics therein, one needs to go beyond the state-centric view that dominates the discipline of International Relations. The critical theories argue that liberal internationalism is less about democratic peace but more about surveillance, intervention and technologies to discipline and control (Vrasti 2013). Post September 11, the US homeland security apparatus faced the daunting challenge to strengthen national security through surveillance and border control while maintaining a smooth movement of goods across national borders. States have controlled migratory flows to protect their domestic populations from the fluctuations and volatility of international markets, thus eschewing the principles of liberal international order (Goodman, Pepinsky 2021). While there has been overall increase in global migration, governments constrained by domestic politics have adopted strategies to regulate the cross-border movement of people in ways that are not visible in other aspects of the global economy (Money 2021).

Agnew (2009) counters the “end of geography” thesis by proposing a new framing of sovereignty which is not just about boundaries and territories. He cautions about the either or perspective on the idea of absolute sovereignty unsmirched by globalization or the latter displacing states as sovereign decision-making authorities. Rather, he argues that sovereignty in

the era of globalization has acquired multiple forms with emergence of new actors of regulation. According to Larner and Walters (2004), it is thus important to trace the genealogy of globalization and examine the various forms of knowledge exercised by international institutions, governments, scholars, and activists that made it such a popular narrative. A popular understanding of globalization is based on the idea of “de-territorialization” (Scholte 2000). Global space is being reconfigured owing to actors and networks transcending the Westphalian notion of boundary. However, scholars working on critical geopolitics argue that the world becoming more borderless has happened parallelly with reterritorialization (Cox 1997, Brenner 1999). The notion of space is redefined referring to high-speed networks, global financial centres etc. Apeldoorn (2014) calls it “capitalist geopolitics” protecting “ruling class security” in contrast to the conventional geopolitics which is driven by concerns of “national security”. The extensive integration of global economy has also caused a global restructuring, wherein different levels like international institutions, regional trading blocks, states, global financial hubs etc. are intricately intertwined with each other.

O’Tuathail (1999) uses the term “functional global apartheid” to describe the uneven scale of globalization whereby some pockets became affluent and others became more deprived and disconnected. The ardent promotion of free market and free trade accompanied by technological changes has not proved to be a win-win situation for everybody in a zero-sum world. Rather, power has concentrated in conglomerates, investment banks, credit rating agencies, hedge funds, high-tech firms who are at the helm of global economic governance (Alonso-Trabanco 2023). There has been a spatial reorganization of global capitalism with transnational actors combining with the states and the international institutions to protect their financial, investment and trade interests (Woodley 2015). Moreover, globalization is not necessarily external, putting pressure on states to adapt. Rather, global relations are firmly embedded in national spaces (Sassen 1999). The state thus retains its authority and centrality in many aspects, and in fact, provides the necessary epistemological and discursive frameworks to accommodate globalization.



Historically, geopolitics has been the driver of globalization and the two are not at odds with each other. In fact, EU's advantageous position today as a global economic power is very much rooted in its history of colonialism and path-dependence (Böröcz, Sarkar 2005). The colonial ambition led to exploration of new geographies and expansion of capitalism. Colonialism was thus a means to create new spatial arrangements on a global scale to ensure access to raw materials and export surplus population (Orford 2021). For the US, the post war period was an opportunity to converge geopolitics and liberal internationalism to access different regions of the world and export its model of development (Ikenberry 2014). While Monroe Doctrine was about hemispheric control and keeping the enemies at bay, today it is about "aggressive engagement" (Friedman 2003). The networks of interdependence woven through trade, investments and market reforms create what has been described by as "neoliberal geopolitics" (Roberts et al. 2003). Woodley (2015: 66) argues that globalization has turned "the anarchic geopolitical logic of international relations into the geoeconomic logic of corporate power".

Globalization and neo-liberalism were considered as a force for good and through structural adjustments, it also legitimised foreign intervention. The spurt in independent private regulatory agencies with headquarters in the global financial centres of the world reflect a benign form of geopolitics other than control through use of military power. After 1945, the US revived the Britain's open economy model as American enterprises and businesses wanted to tap the investment opportunities and consumer markets across the globe. The US with its unparalleled military might and economic and technological prowess succeeded in anchoring globalization through a wide-ranging network of firms dealing with merger and acquisitions and other global business transactions. This network created a powerful system of legal and financial norms that not only boosted trade and commerce but also benefited the American corporate firms. This diffusion of neoliberal norms not directly by a state but through a host of non-state actors (business and legal entities) speaks volumes of the American geopolitical primacy. In fact, the fast-paced logistics and supply chains were modelled on the US military's container shipping used during

the Korean and Vietnam wars to facilitate quick transportation of commodities (Cowen 2014).

Thus, for a better understanding of the contemporary crisis, one needs to juxtapose globalization and the idea of power and how the post-Cold War liberal international order facilitated a few powerful states to gain asymmetric advantage and weaponize interdependence (Farrell, Newman 2022). Globalization and the neo-liberalism helped consolidate US hegemony through a network of economic, technological and knowledge tools. The globalization anthem had a strong geopolitical undercurrent that focused on securing strategic resources and military choke points through aid conditionalities, humanitarian interventions, governmentality, and immigration control (Pieterse 2002). The human security discourse that received heightened emphasis post September 11 created a strategic narrative for civilian and military power to shape global order. Powerful economies have used globalization to favour those who can comply with liberal economic standards and thereby receive better credit ratings and investments while the ones not opening up to the model, will be trapped in low-skilled jobs and dependent on humanitarian assistance (Vrasti 2013). Whatever posed as a security risk to this endeavour was contained and the neo-liberal agenda did not pay much attention to the local contexts and inequalities. All investments were geared towards making neoliberalism a resounding success story across the globe without providing adequate safety nets to cope with the shocks.

## LIBERAL ORDER OR RULES-BASED ORDER: WHAT'S NEW?

International order refers to rules, institutions, norms, and practices that anchors interactions between actors in the global system. With deepening interdependence and economic integration, the West invested heavily in establishing the liberal international order by designing various institutions and advocating the virtues of human rights, markets, and democracy. The American leadership became akin to a liberal leviathan know-

ing the best course that would lead the world to peace and prosperity (Ikenberry 2004). The liberal international order has withstood many crises and shown resilience despite many upheavals (Adler 2013). The liberal international order in its essence is an ideational and normative project, resting on interdependence, institutionalism and democracy constituting some of its core ideas (Alcaro 2018). It is “liberal” in a political sense (as opposed to authoritarianism), in an economic sense (as opposed to economic nationalism or protectionism), or in an international relations sense (as opposed to realism) (Kundnani 2024: 128). Moreover, American hegemony for long anchored this order through its carefully crafted network of security and economic partnerships. However, this ardent promotion of internationalism has always had a geopolitical tenor which was reflected in the frequent deviation of US from the purported norms and rules for the global order. For instance, despite vociferously advocating for democracy as the most suited form of political system, it supported authoritarian regimes in Latin America and West Asia for its geopolitical interests. While maintaining the rhetoric of supporting regional orders, the US has never let them have a centre stage at the cost of undermining its own influence. Thus, in way effective multilateralism has been reduced to approaches and strategies suiting American foreign policy interests in the name of the declaratory goal of achieving a more reformed global governance. The irony however is despite heavily investing in the edifice of multilateral and rules-based governance, the West is hesitant to accommodate the new geopolitical realities demanding a proportionate influence in decision-making.

This order however is currently in flux and new voices, actors, debates, and narratives creating new alignments and constellations. The Russia-Ukraine war has been hailed as revival of the great game and has made the future more uncertain with in an increasingly fragmented and variegated world. The waning traction of American power and the liberal project is evident with reassertion of nationalism in many parts of the world. The discourse around sovereignty has gained more momentum and even a global medical and humanitarian crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic could do little to blunt the edges of Westphalianism,

rather it led to exercise of vaccine nationalism with states reserving the supplies for limited usage. Over the years, the fallacy of liberal internationalism was exposed with electoral victories of populist leaders, heightening demands for protectionist policies, growing polarization in societies and the overall debacle of American overseas misadventures resulting in domestic backlash both on the political and economic front. The liberal order despite facing crisis and contestation due to democratic backsliding and rise of the conservative forces will be resilient as demonstrated by the western solidarity with Ukraine. Moreover, after a long hiatus as neutral countries, Sweden and Finland are seeking NATO membership (Flockhart 2022) which further illustrates the resilience of the liberal international order.

The rules-based order has been broadly interpreted as a shared commitment to global peace and development through agreed upon rules and frameworks that include hard laws, non-binding norms and decision-making procedures. Initially used to describe the multilateral trading system, the term gained prominence in 2008 when Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a reference to China (Scott 2021). Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and China's assertive claims on the islands of South China Sea further injected a wider enthusiasm for rules-based order. The rise of Global South catapulted the demand to make the existing international order more inclusive reflecting new realities. China and Russia of course, disagree with this understanding of rules-based order as it is a mere disguise for American hegemonic order. China in fact has always qualified it with the term so-called rules-based order implying that this order has only few followers (McGregor 2024).

Moreover, ambiguity surrounds the norm of non-interference which despite being mentioned in accords and treaties, leaves enough room for states to meddle in other countries' affairs. So powerful states usually find ways to work around norms (Walt 2023). The Europeans are more comfortable using the term "rules-based order" which does not necessarily exclude non-democratic countries and alludes to respect for the United Nations Charter and other existing set of legally binding rules. However, this implicit reference to defending the foundational norm against territorial violation is based on a selective interpretation. For the US, Russian invasion of Ukraine and

China's assertion in the Indo-Pacific is a blatant violation of rules-based order. While cases like Iraq and Afghanistan illustrate how the US has unabashedly overthrown regimes in countries in pursuit of geostrategic interests.

A lot of similarity and overlap exists between the liberal and the rules-based order as both derive their ideological underpinnings from the West. However, scholars make a distinction between the two, calling the rules-based order "universal", and the liberal international order being "bounded" to those who share its core values (Mearsheimer 2019, Flockhart, Paikin 2022). Do rules really matter? World history is replete with instances of defiance and violation of international law. Today, when Russia is facing the wrath of western sanctions for its transgression in Ukraine and China is seen as a systemic rival for its governing regime, debt-trap diplomacy and cyber-attacks, a new discourse is taking shape about need for rules set within like-minded clubs (primarily democracies). As United Kingdom's *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* states: "the defining fights of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be about who has the power to make the rules. It's currently anyone's game" (Government of United Kingdom 2021). For the US and the allies, it is an existential fight against the rule-breakers to regain lost legitimacy after the debacle in Iraq and Afghanistan. The US National Security Strategy 2022 makes repeated reference to the rules-based order as the "foundation of global peace and prosperity" (The White House 2022). The EU makes a constant rhetoric about strengthening multilateralism, about engaging like-minded partners to build a consensus for rules-based international order, however there exists differences in individual member states' approaches. While Germany prefers to engage through multilateral and regional frameworks, others are not shy to prioritize liberal values and norms and like-mindedness and shared interests.

Also, this rules-based order is firmly embedded in the Western liberal traditions and principles such as sovereignty, rule of law, democratic governance, human rights, free and open trade. The western liberal democracy component sits on top of those more basic fundamental institutions of global multilateralism and there is indeed a hierarchical positioning of

those who are its chief patrons curators and thus enjoy privileges over others (Ikenberry 2023). For instance, the EU connectivity agenda also seeks to primarily defend the key elements of the liberal economic order and defend the European interests pertaining to openness, sustainability, and investment screening. At the same time since, the idea of connectivity in the contemporary world entails intersection of policy fields such as trade, foreign policy, energy, cyberspace, there is a greater need to think past the traditional liberal order and devise new conceptualizations to adapt it to the current landscape (Okano-Heijmans 2024). The central tenet of rules-based order is that there is a consensus and acceptance by all members of the international system (states). Moreover, multilateral institutions anchor this rules-based order and create an enabling environment for peaceful interactions among states and a system that binds them together, thus minimising the possibility of conflicts. Thus, rules-based order includes international law and other general principles, norms and values as enshrined in the UN Charter, international treaties, and conventions. Another view on rules-based order looks at it as the powerful states' interpretation of international law to suit their national interests, without paying heed to the substance and content of these rules or the mechanisms for their enforcement. The US itself is not a signatory of many international treaties like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and conventions related to international humanitarian law. The increasing use of term like "freedom of navigation" and "rules-based order" becomes a ploy for great powers to expand the geographical scope of their strategic interests. The changing strategic landscape brought Indo-Pacific into limelight and hitherto, intensified the discourse for maintaining strategic stability in the region. The term gained prominence as it in wake of the growing Chinese assertion in South China, the western powers came together to promote their respective far-reaching naval interests (Pan 2014). The Indo-Pacific tilt is an attempt by the US to regain its declining influence by rebalancing China through a coalition of like-minded partners. Freedom of navigation became a useful metaphor, though ambiguous and abstract, for a geopolitically defined order (Wirth 2019). This does give leeway to the US to selectively invoke international law like right to self-defence to



justify its arbitrary use of force and violence (Dugard 2023). To make a case for universal adherence to rules-based order, it must rest on legitimacy and equity. However, the post-war international architecture did not create a level-playing field for all and the benefits of the liberal institutional model were subjective. In the name of opening of markets to goods, services, investment and technology, the economies of the developing world became dominated by the corporates of the developed world.

Preservation of rules-based border has become a catchphrase of every international summit, bilateral memoranda of understanding, and cooperation agreements. While these rules propagated as universally applicable, are not bereft of contention, raising a question about their normative agency. Russia's war with Ukraine has once again triggered the contest of narratives and alternate visions of the global order. The sharp dividing lines over different civilizational worldviews and historical contexts reflect the deepening crisis of liberal modernity. The vociferous pitching for building a liberal order in Iraq, Afghanistan resulted in the failed enterprise of nation-building and once again underscored the fact that a top-down approach at homogenization cannot obscure the plurality of political organization. Unfettered globalization has had a counterproductive outcome in western countries, creating greater polarization, heightened ethnic tensions and rise of conservative forces. Today the global order has become more like an arena for ideological competition to get the like-minded players on board while those holding divergent values are treated as rule-breakers.

Globalization has fostered interdependence but has also been contested. It has sparked resistance as can be seen in the rise of religious extremism and the alternative visions of the global order as advocated by China and Russia. The resilience of the Asian economies post-economic recession of 2008-09, turned global governance into a power competition with each actor seeking to weaponize interconnectedness to secure its interests and influence (Alcaro 2018). The American and Chinese approach to international order stand in sharp contrast. The US advocates a multilateral system based on core liberal ideas but with disproportionate influence. China on the other hand, supports a UN centred multilateral order giving primacy to state sovereignty. These competing conceptions of the international

order and the future rule-setting will eventually be determined by who scores better in military and economic capabilities (Walt 2021). The structural shifts in the global landscape will put the existing set of amorphous and inconsistent rules to greater challenges. Risks posed by climate change, emergence of artificial intelligence will generate new forms of competition and reformulation of rules (Byrne 2020).

## CONCLUSION

The terms liberal international order and rules-based order have often been used interchangeably. The post-1945 architecture served the purpose of sustaining the long peace through a system of alliances and security partnerships and promoting free trade and economic openness. With subsequent shifts in the international geopolitical landscape, there was a growing disillusionment with the liberal order as states became more fractious leading to a greater contestation of the dominant norms and values. The beneficiaries or the rule-shapers also became aware of the new geopolitical faultiness and therefore called for evolution and adaption in a fast-changing world. A new term entered the foreign policy circles called the rules-based order which despite the ambiguity surrounding it, sought to provide a reference point to ensure international security and stability amidst increasing polarization of international politics. Countries are turning protectionist and there is a growing anxiety after the Russia's war with Ukraine on how to secure global supply chains and mitigate geopolitical risks. Rise of China has given a greater push to advocacy of rules-based order.

The paper thus concludes that both these terms – liberal order and rules-based order – serve to defend the geopolitical interests and realpolitik calculations. Of course, variations exist with respect to understanding and interpreting the rules in this fracturing international order. While there is an acknowledgment of the fallacy of liberal internationalism and call for reforms and update of the existing architecture have intensified, states at the same time want to preserve the privileges and legitimize their selective actions behind the rules-based order, a

term which evades consensus. The rules were invoked in defence of Ukraine to uphold the very norms of rule of law and human rights and punish the violator (Russia) through sanctions. However, the long standing Israel-Palestine conflict highlights the inadequacy of the rules-based order to make the world work.

The enduring US hegemony helped to defend, sustain, and consolidate the liberal international order. Liberalism as the underlying normative framework held together the various geopolitical configurations of power. Now, as the crisis of this order deepens and it give way to the rules-based order, one needs to carefully examine the geopolitical and security imperatives driving this narrative for a coordinated global action. The US wants to retain its driver seat amid power shifts and ideational contests. In an increasingly multipolar world, states are preferring multialignment as a pragmatic strategy to secure their interests. Rundell and Gfoeller (2023) argue that “globalization can function only if most participants believe it advances their interests” otherwise resistance will mount against the rules-based international order and new alternatives will emerge.

The rules-based order has no legal definition and is ever evolving. It is not a consensus-based or rules-based global order given the discrepancies in rule making and application. The universalist appeal of liberal internationalism obscures the competitive and hierarchical workings of global politics. A striking example is Global South where globalization triumphed by displacing local and indigenous forms of knowledge. The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the fact that the Global North still rules when it comes to geopolitics of power and knowledge. The initiatives taken by University of Oxford and pharma giants like Pfizer, to a great extent, obscured the creativity of Southern intellectuals and scientists (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). A key point for discussion is that unrestrained and unreformed globalization has intensified geopolitical rivalries as illustrated by the pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Amidst the rising wave of populism and pressures to deglobalize, strategies like decoupling, nearshoring will be detrimental to the goal of humane global governance. A defining task for the world leadership is to steer global integration with appropriate economic and social policies and better manage the risks of globalization.

Events like Brexit, global pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war have brought a shift in the global trading system with Multinational Corporations adapting their trade networks to accommodate the new economic and geopolitical challenges (Baschuk 2022). A fresh perspective is needed to look at geopolitics and globalization that reflect contemporary realities of global politics and goes beyond a state-centric ontology. Probing the connection between geopolitics and globalization requires to get past the competitive aspect of territoriality and focus on the more benign and benevolent ways in which geopolitical power is exercised. While the project of liberalism was pitched to have universal application, but in reality it has adopted varied standards of reference and thereby created geographies of uneven development (Brenner, Theodore 2002). Geopolitics has been the larger systemic driver of globalization and the power today flows in the through the national, regional, transnational, and global circuits of finance capital. The globalization project has not been all embracing. To gauge a more critical understanding of the process, one needs to examine its substance and content and how variable its success has been. The West needs to harmonize its relations with the developing world in its quest for lucrative markets and skilled labour and create more meaningful engagement with reliable partners (Paul 2021). Tackling the present and future global challenges will require a reformative agenda anchored in new ideas and actors, focusing on sustainable growth and resilience. While strategic narratives may secure geopolitical objectives, to avert future crisis, the world needs a more representative and inclusive framework for meaningful cooperation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Yugoslavia under Tito's leadership had strived to achieve a balance between economic openness and state-led welfare. However, after his demise in the 1980, this mixed economy model collapsed under pressure from the exogenous forces and a spate of neo-liberal reforms were introduced. Thus, the intense pressure to modernize coupled with the federal and ethno-national character of the polity and the local elites' resentment, played a role in Yugoslavia's fragmentation.



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