On the concept of international disorder

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Abstract
International relations today are widely considered to be experiencing deepening disorder and the topic of international disorder is gaining increased attention. Yet, despite this recent interest in international disorder, in and beyond the academy, and despite the decades-long interest in international order, there is still little agreement on the concept of international disorder, which is often used imprecisely and with an alarmist rather than analytical usage. This is a problem if international disorder is to be understood in theory, towards addressing its concomitant problems and effects in practice. As such, this article identifies and explores two ways international order studies can benefit from a clearer and more precise conception of international disorder. First, it enables a more complete picture of how orderly international orders have been. Second, a greater understanding of the problem of international order is illuminated by a clearer grasp of the relation between order and disorder in world politics. The article advances these arguments in three steps. First, an analytical concept of international disorder is developed and proposed. Second, applying it to the modern history of international order, the extent to which there is a generative relationship between order and disorder in international systems is explored. Third, it specifies the deepening international disorder in international affairs today. It concludes by indicating a research agenda for International Relations and international order studies that takes the role of international disorder more seriously.

Keywords
international disorder, international order, international relations, international systems, world order

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Introduction

International relations are widely considered to be experiencing deepening disorder today.¹ Richard N. Haass, for instance, argues they are defined by an increasing state of ‘disarray’.² Others use the word ‘chaos’.³ Consequently, international disorder is gaining increased attention and interest.⁴ Yet, despite this recent interest in international disorder, in and beyond the academy, and despite the decades-long interest in international order, there is still little agreement on the concept of international disorder, which is often used imprecisely and with an alarmist rather than analytical usage. This is a problem if international disorder is to be understood in theory, towards addressing its concomitant problems and effects in practice. Surely, what is often called ‘the problem of international order’, namely how to achieve it, is in one sense the problem of mitigating and circumventing international disorder.⁵ To what extent can international order be understood and explained, without a corresponding understanding of international disorder? It is a curiously significant conceptual oversight in international order studies and is an important topic in light of the global scope and potential severity of deepening international disorder in practice, including, for instance, the potentiality for war and economic turmoil, among other serious concerns. As such, this article aims to clarify and advance debates about deepening international disorder in international relations.

In this article, I identify and explore two ways international order studies can benefit from a clearer and more precise conception of international disorder. First, I argue it enables a more complete picture of how orderly international orders have been. That is, international order studies, by focusing on the substance of orders, have tended to neglect or obscure the amount and variety of disorder involved in international orders. Second, I argue that a greater understanding of the problem of international order is illuminated by a clearer grasp of the relation between order and disorder in world politics. Towards this second point, I suggest that the relation between international order and disorder has a generative and deeply historical character. I advance these arguments in three steps. First, I develop and propose an analytical definition of international disorder. Second, applying it to the history of modern international orders, I explore the extent to which there is a generative relationship between order and disorder in international systems. Third, I clarify and specify deepening international disorder in international affairs today and consider its reordering effects. I conclude by indicating a research agenda for International Relations and international order studies that takes the role of international disorder more seriously.

The concept of international disorder

What does international disorder mean? Whereas international order has been a subject of sustained and significant interest in International Relations, the concept of international disorder surprisingly lacks conceptual scrutiny. Available discussions about international disorder suggest examples such as war, revolution and economic turmoil, but do not provide an analysis of the concept itself.⁶ The concept is often used as an alarmist provocation, but with little reflection. Its deceptively intuitive meaning, as everything international order tries to avoid, is, when examined, conceptually vacuous and murky.
If international disorder is the absence of order, then is it nothing at all? If international disorder is instead that which is opposed or contrary to international order, then what is it exactly? If it is war and revolution, is it also international economic turmoil and ecological collapse? How do these distinct things fall under the common category of international disorder?

**The idea of international disorder**

Ngram graphing shows us that the popular use of international order and disorder began to emerge with notable spikes in use around the First and Second World Wars:

This suggests that it was the emergence of the overwhelming international disorder of the world wars that gave the concepts of international order and disorder their salience and prominence in political discourse. However, Ngram graphing also reveals the infrequent use of international *disorder* compared to the use of international *order*. This is indicative of the concept’s relative lack of conceptual attention, both in scholarly and public discourse.

More fundamentally, it is the modern imaginary of an ‘international’ realm of social life that makes possible such notions of international order and disorder. This is not an
unimportant point, because it illuminates some of the defining features of how international disorder is imagined in the modern mind. Perhaps most interestingly, for instance, the modern notion of the international as a realm ‘outside’ or ‘among’ sovereign states defines international disorder as either something among states (e.g. wars), or as something breaking down and overwhelming the existence of borders and barriers delimiting sovereigns (e.g. transnational revolutionary movements). The conventional usage of international disorder in modern discourse is to imply the negative binary to international order, its disruption or deficiency. This implies that international disorder is commonly understood to be the emergence of qualities in opposition or contrary to international order. These qualities are the concept’s conventional connotations. At least six are identifiable: international instability, meaning a state of international affairs vulnerable to violent change, typically characterized by increasing reprisals and broadening scales of military posturing, as well as revolutionary discontent; international uncertainty or unpredictability, meaning confusion as to what the rules are and what actions actors can be expected to take, a state of affairs where and when the real status of diplomatic relations are unclear among statespersons, when friends and enemies become blurred distinctions and fear and distrust abound; international criminality, meaning the open or secret disregard for international law; international political discord or controversy, as in the emergence of heated controversy and disagreement over international issues, particularly ideological disagreement over fundamental international principles; international dysfunction, meaning functionally ineffective international rules, norms and authorities; and finally, international conflict and violence, meaning opposing interests, real or imagined, precipitating open hostilities, ultimately in warfare.

The tradition of realist international thought suggests these are the normal qualities of international affairs, which, from a realist outlook, is a realm of social life virtually devoid of order. In the modern imagination, the international realm is commonly and not unreasonably characterized as an especially disorderly part of the modern world, unusually resistant to ordering and not infrequently subject to the notably severe disorder, warfare. These notions and impressions of international disorder, particularly their realist expression, are derivative of a certain conception of order as hierarchy: the vision of the international as an anarchical system of states lacking an ‘orderer’. As a nineteenth-century anarchist thinker put it, ‘The meaning ordinarily attached to the word “anarchy” is absence of principle, absence of rule; consequently, it has been regarded as synonymous with “disorder”’. What counts as ‘order’, however, is contentious, because the concept is relative to the values attributed to it. Traditions of critical thought, for instance, view international disorder in a favourable light, with positive connotations, because critical outlooks conceive international disorder as disruptions of oppressive and exploitative orders and generative of transformative change. As such, international disorder cannot be equated with international injustice. However, the values attributed to international order today are modern values, a defining feature of which is their ‘progressive’ character. For this reason, one of the major points of disagreement among modern approaches to international order concerns the extent to which progress is possible. Thus, disorder, in this discourse, often equated with the forces or obstacles are thought to be standing in the way of progress. This point, however, only clarifies the modern grounds on which the concept is essentially contested.
Towards an analytical conception

While the contention among competing conceptions of international disorder is partly normative, it is also partly theoretical, because different theories pose and implicitly hold different propositions about the sources of international disorder. Realist theory, for instance, suggests or implies that international disorder arises from failures to navigate power shifts under anarchy, whereas liberal theory suggests international disorder arises instead from a lack of international organization and transnational cooperation. Each of these theoretical views in this way tends to equate disorder with the theory of its sources. In this way, a theoretical conception of international disorder derives from a theory of international relations that explains it. A more primary and less ambitious aim, however, is instead to clarify an analytical conception of international disorder, one that is applicable for analysis of its occurrence, but does not necessarily assume theoretical explanations of it.

Towards this end, it is helpful to distinguish the different senses in which the language of international disorder is often used. First, international disorder is often used to refer to the breakdown or absence of international order, perhaps most clearly but not exclusively, in the context of great power wars, when international orders are almost entirely destroyed. Second, international disorder is often used in another sense, to refer to the action of irresponsible foreign policy that contradicts or undermines order and churns up instability and unpredictability; conduct such as reckless and illegal wars or violating of international treaties for convenience. Third, international disorder is also often used in an evaluative sense, to refer to the mismatch or gap between the aspirations of international order and its reality, between what people want international order to achieve and the realities of its limitations. From these different senses, we can distinguish three notions of international disorder. First, there is the sense of a disruption or absence of ordering rules or institutions, either because they have not yet been developed or they have broken down. Second, we can distinguish the state of a broken-down or absent order from the action of disregarding and breaking order by states. This second sense we might call disorderly international conduct – conduct against or transgressing order – disorder in an order, which may or may not be sufficient in scope to overturn the order itself. Third, there is disorder in the sense of a faulty or dysfunctional order. This is the disorder of an order, as in the failure of an order to achieve its aims and purposes. An aggressive and reckless war, for example, is an instance of disorder in international affairs, but the disorder of international affairs means rather that the established expectations of behaviour, rules, norms and authorities are themselves inadequate, even when they are abided.

In a sense, these are ways of thinking about disorder as an absence, transgression or lack of order. Is a more substantive conception possible? Because Bull’s conception of international order is widely employed and admired for its lucidity and acuity, his discussions of disorder are particularly relevant and can also provide a helpful set of distinctions for clarifying the meaning of international disorder in world politics. Bull’s reasoning is elucidated where he says:

when we speak of order as opposed to disorder in social life we have in mind not any pattern or methodical arrangement among social phenomena, but a pattern of a particular sort. For a
pattern may be evident in the behavior of men or groups in violent conflict with one another, yet this is a situation we should characterize as disorderly. Sovereign states in circumstances of war and crisis may behave in regular and methodological ways; individual men living in Hobbes’s account of the state of nature, may conduct themselves in conformity with some recurrent pattern, indeed Hobbes himself says that they do; but these are examples not of order but of disorder.14

Bull goes on to provide his widely admired definition of international order as, ‘a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of the society of states, or international society’.15 As such, Bull’s notion of international disorder might then be defined as *patterns of activity that disrupt or deny the purposive goals of an international order, as they are held to be by participants in that order.* This is an intriguing definition, because it emphasizes the disordering patterns of activity, although we might recognize that what the purposive goals of an order are is somewhat controversial, even and perhaps especially if we define those goals according to what participants hold them to be.

Nevertheless, with Bull’s approach we can begin to derive a few further conceptual clarifications. First, scrutinizing Bull’s concept further draws forward the sociological point that international order and disorder must always be thought of as international ordering and disordering, as ongoing processes of activity. In practice, it is always an ongoing process of ordering and/or disordering. Bull’s notion of a ‘pattern of activity’ is the ordering behaviour. Second, because Bull suggests his definition of international order is ‘minimal’ (being limited to the elementary or primary purposes of international affairs), this implies a ‘maximal’ conception of international disorder, because only the disruption or denial of the most primary purposes of international society constitute a negation of international order. While it is intuitive that less severe degrees of international disorder also exist, we should agree that logically speaking something that disrupts or denies the very possibility of *any* international order counts as international disorder. Bull also distinguishes international from world order, the former meaning order among states and the latter meaning order among states and humankind in general, organized into a series of ‘domestic’ orders. As such, while it is analytically as well as intuitively impossible for there to be world order without international order, it seems that international order can be achieved, according to Bull, alongside and often at the cost of world disorder.16

However, even if Bull helps clarify important aspects of the concept, a discussion of his conceptual reasoning only takes us so far towards an analytical definition, partly because Bull’s approach is highly associated with a particular theoretical approach today, the English School. Critics, such as Shiping Tang, for instance, argue that international order is more ‘rigorously’ conceived as a state of ‘predictability (or regularity)’ among states, which suggests disorder is a state of unpredictability or irregularity.17 To distil and discern a more refined definition of international disorder, it is also helpful to attempt to derive it from analytical definitions of international order. Among analytical definitions, some emphasize patterns of behaviour, while others emphasize institutional rules and norms. Reconciling these, we can suggest, analytically speaking, that international orders are *the patterns of behaviour, rules and norms that provide international relations with a degree of stability and predictability.*18 It is important to note that this definition reconciles ways of ordering with the *quality* of order, the condition of international stability
and predictability. Order is both a state of affairs and a quality or condition. In practice, international orders tend to produce the quality of order either spontaneously or by designed institutions, but with varying degrees of success in different periods. Because of this variety of the quality of order, it is important to insist that analytically speaking ordering behaviour, rules and norms are distinct from the quality of order that they effectuate. With this definition, we can say that multiple distinct international orders exist when different expected patterns of behaviour, rules and norms apply to different sets of relations. Orders can also be nested, however, with multiple orders existing within broader orders. For instance, the international system during the Cold War was bifurcated into a Western order and a Soviet-led order, but both were within the broader system-wide order of the UN system. A change in orders is when expected patterns of behaviour, rules and norms change. A change of orders is when the major ordering expectations, rules and norms change, typically after major wars. Systems transformation, however, is more fundamental, when the units themselves change, such as the emergence of the modern system from the medieval system.

On this basis, to propose an analytical conception of international disorder, we can think of international disorder as the disruption of ordering international behaviour, rules and norms, producing a condition of instability and unpredictability in international affairs. This analytical definition combines the different senses of international disorder, either as the breakdown or as the violation of international order, with their common effects, the qualities of instability and unpredictability. It is important to combine these elements with their effects, because the breakdown of ordering behaviour, rules and norms may at least conceivably be involved in a stable and predictable process of reordering, producing more stability and predictability in international affairs. As such, we can identify the emergence of international disorder when the breakdown of order is combined with the qualities of instability and unpredictability. However, an added benefit of using the term ‘disruption’ in this proposed definition, rather that ‘absence’ or ‘denial’, is that it releases the conception from a binary relation with order, where the presence of one would presume the absence of the other, since orders can be disturbed and disrupted without being entirely negated. This enables a more careful assessment for a more complete picture of the disorder present in or amid an international order. Finally, this analytical definition is still partly normative, I must concede, if we consider stability and predictability as among the primary or principal purposes or functions of international orders. I suggest it is reasonable to consider them as such, however, because among other ends and ambitions, international orders do seem to tend to strive to produce a condition of international stability and predictability. As such, the proposed analytical definition should be distinguished from a purely evaluative and normative definition of the concept.

**Ordering yesterday’s international disorder: 1919, 1945 and 1989–1991**

What light can this analytical definition shed on disorder in international relations? I want to suggest, first, it gives us a more complete picture of how orderly international orders have been. That is, international order studies, by focusing on the substance of orders and ordering processes, have neglected the amount and variety of disorder that
orders have involved and even generated. Second, beyond this and perhaps more interestingly, I also want to suggest that greater attention to international disorder reveals its deeply historical character, where ordering institutions are shaped by the experience of disorder. This suggests, furthermore, that the study of international order has focused perhaps too narrowly on the role of hegemons and ordering powers, and can benefit from a closer study of the way the experience of disorder transforms the kinds of orders that people believe are valid and those that they strive to develop. In more refined language, I am suggesting that international disorder has a generative relation with international orders in world history, each affecting the other, in a generative process.

Let me attempt to explain this suggestion in some more detail and provide examples. It is an old saying that wars are often fought with the weapons and tactics designed to fight the last war. Applying the proposed conception of international disorder, I suggest, reveals that a similar tendency applies to international orders; they tend to be built to prevent the last disorder. There is obviously a kind of trial and error process at work in the history of modern international orders, but my suggestion is that the relation between order and disorder is deeper than this, that the very notion of what disorders need to be prevented and what institutions are needed is shaped by the historical experience of historically specific disorders. For example, a notable feature of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe was its combination of a congress system of diplomacy with a deliberate balancing of power designed to avoid both competitive balancing and to prevent the rise of another revolutionary hegemon. By contrast, the Japanese East Asian order (emerging after the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905) was based on regional Japanese hegemony. This regional order was constructed not only to promote modern Japanese imperial power, but its regional hegemony was also built in response to and towards the prevention of further disruptive Western imperialism. The point these examples suggest is that, to coin a term, international orders have a tendency to be ‘disorder contingent’. Practices and events that undermine and disrupt international orders generate new practices and institutions intended to prevent those disruptions.

To demonstrate this suggestion, it is helpful to make a distinction between different types of ordering institutions. International orders tend to develop institutions for ‘managing’ or ‘governing’ international relations, but we can also note that they tend to do so through two analytically distinct types of institutions: platforms for cooperation and pursuit of common interests, as well as institutional bulwarks designed to prevent the recurrence of prior international disorders. In the case studies below, I find that disorder-preventive bulwark institutions were created to prevent the disorder as perceived by the ascendant powers, but I argue that the explanation of this tendency is not solely found in the distribution of power or character of ascendant powers; it is also found in the change in beliefs and outlook of participants, in their new inability to believe any longer in the premises and assumptions of the old order, given their new understanding of the sources of international disorder and what disorders need preventing. The victory and defeat of hegemons in major wars is undoubtedly and immensely consequential for what orders rise and fall, but a focus on this important fact I want to argue should not completely overshadow the other important fact that there were major wars, wars manifesting disorder of such magnitude that they affected the very character of the era and the deeper rationale of any order that might follow. Furthermore, attention to this pattern reveals
that this backward facing character of bulwark institutions tends to generate new unforeseen disorders.

Reviewing the interwar order, the Cold War order, and the post-Cold War order sheds light on this role of international disorder in international orders and provides a necessary background for clarifying deepening international disorder in international relations today. Selecting these cases has the additional benefit of providing a sequence of three successive cases for a diachronic analysis of the generative dynamics of international order and disorder that I aim to explore here.

1919 and the interwar order

What impact did the disorder of the First World War have on the shape of the interwar order that followed? The immensity of disorder manifest in the First World War generated the construction of new international institutions of unprecedented scope. Perhaps most significant was the turn to collective security and open diplomacy through the League of Nations, which was designed to foreclose the miscalculation and balance of power system that had come to be seen as key sources of the war. Woodrow Wilson’s agency in this period was undoubtedly important for how these institutions were envisioned and established, but he also worked within an historical context that generated the ideas he championed. Wilson’s reasoning is evident in his famous claim, September 1919, ‘I can predict with absolute certainty that within another generation there will be another world war if the nations of the world do not concert the method by which to prevent it’.26 Yet, the idea for the League was not originally or exclusively his own. It was first proposed in 1915 at a meeting of professors at the Century Club, New York.27 It was also a proposal commonly shared by British wartime committees and working groups on the postwar order question. The committee of David Lloyd George’s government took the position that the League should be tasked with preventing another world war, but not governing the world.28 Their reasoning was that the Great War was caused by miscalculation, avoidable in future through new inquiry and delay mechanisms. George Clemenceau and the French delegation of 1919 in principle supported the League proposal, but proposed that it should include an international army to enforce peace, because they saw ‘covenants without swords’ as insufficient. The proposal was ultimately rejected by the other great powers,29 however, while France was satisfied instead with punitive reparations imposed on Germany, insisted upon by Clemenceau.30 This is not to suggest that it does not matter that Germany lost the war. If the punitive terms of the Soviet German Treaty of Brest-Litovsk are an indicator of Germany’s postwar intentions, which the allies thought they were, the German leadership aimed to expand German imperial territory, punish defeated powers and establish itself as a European hegemon. Germany too did not relish the war, and also felt they had been thrown into it, so likely would have sought to build bulwarks against the sources of the war. Yet, while it is unclear what German leadership perceived those sources to be, certainly war would seem to be foreclosed by diminishing the territories and capacities of France and Italy and making a series of vassal states unable to mobilize a serious threat in future. As such, it surely matters which powers prevail after major wars, but the point is that ideas for preventive institutions and practices were generated from the experience of the war.
After 1919, the interwar order was cemented in two further treaties, the Pacific Treaties of the Washington Naval Conference, 1921–1922, and the European Peace Pact devised at Locarno, 1925. However, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, 1928, stands out as a remarkable reordering, in its attempt to outlaw the use of war. Perhaps even more so than the League, its radical legal reordering of the system was highly problematic and ineffective as an institution to prevent war, because while it proscribed war, it had no mechanisms to suppress it or quell its sources, except for the promises and commitments made to the treaty itself. This had the unintended consequence of paralysing the League’s ability to keep and enforce the peace, since signatories had proscribed the use of war to themselves. The League mechanisms such as mediation and arbitration were ineffective at preventing war if a belligerent power wished war.

In addition to the League organization and outlawry of war, a further notable if nonetheless limited reordering was the development of a new rationale and order of minority rights. The Treaty of Berlin, 1878, had established standards for national minorities and new states, but their rationale had become one of a practical problem in the course of the war, due to the role that minority troubles played both as one of the war’s perceived triggers and as one of its consequences following the breakup of the defeated empires. Former director of the Minorities Question Section of the League of Nations, Pablo Azcarate, explained:

The object of the protection of minorities which those treaties committed to the League of Nations was to avoid the many inter-state frictions and conflicts which had occurred in the past, as a result of the frequent ill-treatment or oppression of national minorities.

It became an embarrassment for the victor powers, however, that there was no universal order for minority rights. It also became a widespread disappointment in the interwar order itself. While the victors established mandates from colonies of defeated powers and intervened in ‘new states’ of Eastern Europe, they had no equivalent rules or norms of minority rights applied to their own empires or internal affairs.

1945 and the cold war order

The demise of the interwar order – inevitable or not – again generated new notions about the sources of disorder and means of preventing it. Allied planning of the postwar order began with the Atlantic Charter, 1941, followed by a string of allied conferences that prepared the bases for the UN Charter and postwar international order. The UN Security Council, designed to prevent deviations from the peace by use of a permanent council of great power management, was a significant institutional adaptation. The need for such an adaptation was a widely shared view early on. In 1940, the US State Department outline for postwar order suggested that an executive committee of great powers with armed forces should replace the League unanimity mechanism of collective security. In his first meeting with Churchill, in 1941, Roosevelt suggested their respective countries should ‘police’ international order towards the establishment of a functioning international organization. In 1942, the UK Foreign Office, in consultation with the State Department, produced the Four Power Plan, expanding the proposal to a ‘Four Policemen’ model,
with the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, and also China, jointly managing security. In the Tehran Conference 1943, Roosevelt pressed for this proposal and Stalin in principle supported it, but suggested, as Churchill had separately, that it would require management through respective regional committees, rather than global cooperation. The Soviet view of the matter came from a different outlook. The lesson of the League’s demise from the Soviet outlook was a confirmation that imperial powers inevitably descend into war. Stalin’s postwar aims were security from the next inevitable conflict. His support for and inclusion in the UN Security Council supported that aim, by providing an institutional bulwark, but also to maintain a semblance of unity with Western powers.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) was another institution of the post-1945 order notable for being designed to prevent a perceived prior disorder. The experience of the Great Depression generated the view that the international monetary and financial order was dysfunctional. To correct it, the celebrated British Economist John Maynard Keynes produced a plan for a new international currency and set of international commitments. Henry Dexter White produced an alternative less ambitious American plan. Their common ambition was to preserve open markets through mechanisms designed to prevent situations wherein states needed to protect their markets. The two plans were reconciled at the Bretton Woods Conference, which set out the bases of the IMF, designed to preserve open markets by managing currency exchange rates by member states and by providing financial support to them when needed. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development as well as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade complemented the IMF in the postwar international economic order but were institutions more of a platform type, used for rehabilitating and opening markets. The IMF’s capacities contained the major bulwark mechanisms for preventing markets from falling out and closing up again. As this economic order developed, it encountered new challenges and fundamental changes, particularly in the Nixon Administration’s abandonment of the gold standard, but its initial depth and character was nonetheless shaped in direct response to the perceived sources of the economic disorder of the interwar years. The Soviet view on the interwar economic disorder was rather different than those in the West. The Soviets perceived capitalism itself, not its mismanagement, as causing the economic boom and bust of the interwar years. This did not foreclose Soviet participation in the Bretton Woods Conference, which its delegates attended, nor did it necessarily foreclose the Soviet Union’s participation in the new economic order, but the Soviet Union nevertheless declined to ratify the agreements reached at the conference.

In its early conception, Franklin D. Roosevelt wished to make the post-1945 order more refined but also more ‘sellable’ to the American public, because he wished to avoid Wilson’s mistake of making commitments beyond what the public would support, so to prevent the disorders many have attributed to US interwar isolationism. The emergence of the Cold War, however, kept US interests in Europe and elsewhere beyond the Western hemisphere to a greater degree than Roosevelt had envisioned. The relations between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies conflicted to the extent that two orders emerged, limiting the scope and range of shared institutions to a minimum. For instance, what about the Cold War’s nuclear order? In one view, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought prominent intellectuals like Albert Einstein among others to conclude that a world government was necessary to prevent a two-way nuclear war. However,
once the spread of nuclear weapons made a two-way nuclear war a possible reality, statespersons sought to prevent its possibility, perhaps not so much from its past experience as an awareness of its consequences in future. The nuclear order that did arise in the 1960s and 1970s contained two preventive measures: non-proliferation and deterrence.46 The Non-Proliferation Treaty proscribed the sharing of nuclear weapons, committed nuclear states to pursue disarmament and affirmed the right of states to peaceful nuclear energy. The logic of deterrence, however, did not lend itself to disarmament, because it required nuclear powers to maintain arsenals with devastating second-strike capabilities. The origins of the deterrence system can be traced to the ‘massive retaliation’ doctrine of the US, meant to balance Soviet conventional forces with the threat of a nuclear response. Yet, after the emergence of Soviet nuclear forces the deterrence order eventually found its basis in the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, whose logic aimed at preventing nuclear war by mutual maintenance of assured massive second-strike capabilities. This path to order required arms control, however, and as such has always been limited and uncertain, being persistently vulnerable to the emergence of new technologies, new actors and periodic arms races.

Finally, not entirely resulting from the experience of the war, but not entirely discon- nected from it either, was the emergence of decolonization. While the Second World War diminished European power on a global scale, it was the experience of the disorder of colonialism by the majority of humankind that generated the construction of institutions to prevent its continuation and return. It is important to acknowledge that the experience of the disorder of colonialism has deeply impacted the character of subsequent international orders, chiefly in the globalization of sovereignty, meant to prevent further colonialism.47 Of course, the process of decolonization did not entirely prevent neo-imperialism, but the point is that the disorder of modern colonialism has had a lasting post-colonial impact on the character and institutional makeup of the modern international system. For instance, it also shaped the character of the global Cold War, as both superpowers sought to legitimize their cause and attract support in the global south by portraying themselves as anti-imperial and their rival as imperialist.48

1989–1991 and the post-Cold War order

When the Soviet Union suddenly collapsed and the Cold War finally ended, there emerged an attempt to build a ‘new world order’ and lasting peace.49 The UN was given renewed hope and ambition, a fully globalized market was pursued through an expanded World Trade Organization (WTO), Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation and North American Free Trade Agreement, and democracy and human rights promotion also became reaffirmed global agendas. These goals had a unifying ambition, to prevent the perceived disorders of bipolarity. The pursuit of cementing US primacy in this period was, as such, designed to prevent the return of the instabilities and divisions of great power competition. If there had been different US Presidents, different policies of course would have been pursued, but it is unlikely the United States would have pursued a fundamentally different set of policies. Leadership through security and economic club benefits was a consistent pattern of US leadership among the advanced democracies and in
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a post-Cold War moment, this pattern of hegemonic leadership, if globalized offered a
recipe of unity to prevent the ills of a divided system. North Atlantic Treaty Organization
(NATO), for instance, was not dissolved, but expanded. If the Soviet Union had instead
been victorious, conceivably only if a calamity or revolution toppled the United States,
Soviet leadership likely would have sought a similar post-Cold War order, only inverted
in its character: Soviet hegemony, global communism promotion and global economic
planning. The experience of the burdens and anxieties of the Cold War would likely have
brought them to also strive to prevent the disorders of the Cold War order.

The post-Cold War order, perhaps in its search for unity, unintentionally failed to
prevent the new disorders that quickly emerged.50 The first Gulf War was the first test of
the new order and the rise of nationalism, and ethnic conflict posed further challenges to
the post-Cold War order.51 Perhaps most consequential were the successful attacks of 11
September 2001. The subsequent unilateralism of the United States in the Iraq War 2003
damaged the post-Cold War order, undermining the predictability of US leadership and
increasing international instability.52

The new international disorder

Growing interest in international disorder today is mainly but not exclusively a response
to the emergence of the Trump Presidency and its deliberate disruption of the post-Cold
War order. What clarity can a refined conception of international disorder bring to this?

First, an analytical definition of international disorder helps specify and clarify the
scope of disorder arising in international affairs today. The Trump administration’s with-
drawal from international treaties, combined with the diplomatic alienation of US allies
by President Trump’s remarks has created a condition of uncertainty and unpredictability
in international affairs, not least because it is unclear to many how these actions are
within the United States’ interests and that it is alarming to many observers that the
United States is unmaking many of the institutions it had been a principal supporter of.53
There has also been a rise in instability, particularly with the Trump administration’s
withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Iran nuclear agree-
ment. This disorder is not caused by the centrality of the United States in the post-Cold
War order, but the outsized relative power of the United States and its central role in
ordering institutions makes its disordering conduct simultaneously undermining both of
the order’s principal support and virtually impossible for other powers to constrain.
Crucially, however, while the Trump administration has threatened to, it has not with-
drawn the United States from some of the more significant institutions such as NATO
and the WTO, thus the degree of disorder has not as yet been sufficient to overturn the
post-Cold War order. Nevertheless, the disordering conduct of the Trump administration
has undermined and challenged the assumption of the United States’ support for the post-
Cold War order, questioning its viability.54

Second, closer attention to the concept of disorder and its relation to order raises
interesting and important questions about what reordering impulses that the experience
of contemporary disorder may be generating. Interestingly, the response of many mid-
dle powers such as Canada, Australia and Germany has been an attempt to preserve the
post-Cold War ‘rules-based-order’, albeit with admissions of a need for some modifications.\textsuperscript{55} These powers are seemingly hoping to preserve the order until the United States returns to a more predictable and cooperative foreign policy, although it is unclear if the United States will.\textsuperscript{56} In this respect, there is also a sense that if this disorder continues and worsens (thereby increasing instability and deepening unpredictability in international affairs), this may generate a move towards greater reordering initiatives to minimize vulnerability (at least as much as possible) to this kind of disorderly US conduct. These new insulating institutions could take on three broad forms: (a) the abandonment of current US-centric institutions in favour of new regional and global security and economic institutions to eliminate reliance upon US hegemony or (b) the duplication of current US-centric institutions in new regional and global security and economic institutions as institutional insurance that may be turned to and relied on in times of errant hegemony or (c) a combination of (a) and (b). Due to the virtual unavoidability of the outsized United States in international affairs and because many of the major institutions of the contemporary order are long-standing and not being dismantled by the United States, it is more likely that states will duplicate economic and security institutions to insulate their vital interests from vulnerability to the ill effects of errant hegemony. Small and middle powers cannot ignore or effectively resist hegemonic states, but they can build new additional institutions to limit and prevent complete vulnerability to them. This means institutions like NATO and the WTO will likely endure but, depending on the depth and persistence of US unilateralism, they will likely become increasingly nested in webs of additional overlapping regional and global security and economic institutions.

Third, however, it is at least worth noting that the endurance of existing institutions depends on the international system avoiding more severe manifestations of international disorder, chiefly great power war. Such a war is improbable but therefore not impossible.\textsuperscript{57} If such a war were to occur, and if humankind survived at all, it would generate radically broader and deeper international institutional reform. Such a war would manifest disorder of sufficient magnitude to erase and permanently invalidate the prevailing international order. As such, the kind of institutions that such disorder would generate is hard to anticipate because they would essentially be constructed to establish an entirely new international order. If, instead, such conflict is avoided, as is more likely, several world order observers suggest the current period of disorder is generating a reordering of the international system in a potentially more diffuse or equitable distribution of power and authority over rule-making, a decentred globalist or ‘multiplex’ world order of multiple nested regional orders.\textsuperscript{58} There is some plausibility to this because order-negligent US foreign policy is making US allies increasingly wary of overreliance on US power, while rising powers advance alternative visions of multipolar and polycentric order. China’s aims and interests, for instance, are increasingly to limit its reliance on the United States and to limit the ill effects of errant US hegemony on China by building up a network of alternative institutions, while not dismantling the institutions that already exist.\textsuperscript{59} As such, the institutions comprising the post-Cold War order will survive, but depending on the depth and persistence of contemporary disorder, they will also likely become increasingly nested in further regional and global institutions, as hedges generated in response disordered US policy.\textsuperscript{60}
Conclusion

This study of international disorder in world politics suggests a research agenda for International Relations and international order studies that takes the role of international disorder more seriously. Studying international disorder opens up an interesting and significant research agenda to complement international order studies. This agenda should consider not only the extent of disorder amid orders past, and the relation between ordering and disordering patterns in world politics, but also broader questions about the extent to which comparative world order models mitigate or precipitate disorder. For instance, in his classic study of the Concert of Europe that followed the disorder of Napoleonic France, Henry Kissinger argued that while Metternich ‘may have been right in asserting that those who have never had a past cannot own the future, those who have had a past may doom themselves by seeking it in the future’.61 We can say this is an incisive point in regard to the Concert, but with an eye to the role of disorder, we can also suggest that international orders since 1919 have not been doomed so much by clinging to orders past as by the way they have been shaped by the hopes of forestalling disorders past in future. The interwar attempt to prevent a second world war through collective security and the outlawry of war made itself vulnerable to multiple simultaneous pursuits of individual security through war. Similarly, the post-1945 attempt to prevent such disorder with a revised great power management mechanism in the UN Security Council made itself susceptible to great power rivalry. Finally, the post-Cold War attempt to prevent the recurrence of Cold War divisions through globalized US-backed institutions has accentuated vulnerability to order-negligent US foreign policy. While no international order can be prepared for unforeseen historical forces and events, it also seems to be the case that orders produce their own peculiar forms of disorder, even by their very attempt to prevent it.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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23. This is to say that it is the socio-cultural experience of disorder and the learning that that affords which generates the pursuit of new international bulwarks against disorder. This implies that the maturation of international systems is not only a growth in the quantity, depth and scope of ordering behaviour and institutions; international systems also mature qualitatively in their ordering competencies, in the proficiency of their design, as generated in response to encounters with disorder.

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25. In this discussion, I define international institutions broadly, meaning collections of rules and norms governing realms of international life, both in the sense of the fundamental or primary constitutive rules and norms, as well as the authorities and bodies charged with upholding them. The distinction between platform and bulwark-type institutions is analytical. Empirically, in historical practice, they overlap.

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