

The Once and Future World Order
by Amitav Acharya

Praise for
The Once and Future World Order

“*The Once and Future World Order* offers a powerful reminder that not all world orders in history have been Western, and that we now seem headed for a new multipolar order in which non-Western states are key to the future. This timely book argues that a dominant West is not a necessary condition for a rules-based international framework.”

—Odd Arne Westad, coauthor of *The Great Transformation*

“In *The Once and Future World Order*, Amitav Acharya subjects the pre-suppositions of the quintessentially colonial discipline of international relations to rigorous scrutiny from a decolonial perspective. This book should serve as a model for many other academic disciplines that were founded on similarly colonialist assumptions.”

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—Shashi Tharoor, author of *Inglorious Empire*

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—Kishore Mahbubani, author of *Living the Asian Century*

“Twenty-first century geopolitics will be a marketplace, not a monopoly. In this rich tapestry of a book bridging ancient civilizations and modern debates, Acharya reminds us that the unfolding multipolar, multicivilizational world order is the historical norm—and should be celebrated as an opportunity for knowledge to spread in all compass directions. An essential guide to the post-Western world.”

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—Ayşe Zarakol, author of *Before the West*

“A timely corrective to the blinkered arrogance about the role of the Rest which continues to infect so much Western policy analysis and history writing. *The Once and Future World Order* is prodigiously researched, lucidly written, and a compelling read.”

—Gareth Evans, former Australian foreign minister,
president of the International Crisis Group

Amitav Acharya

THE ONCE AND FUTURE WORLD ORDER

WHY GLOBAL CIVILIZATION
WILL SURVIVE THE
DECLINE OF THE WEST

AMITAV ACHARYA

BASIC BOOKS
New York

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To my family, for their loving, caring, and joyous companionship

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Introduction

The Coronavirus Pandemic Will Forever Alter the
World Order.

—Henry Kissinger¹

The End of World Order

—Robert Blackwill and Thomas Wright,
Council on Foreign Relations report²

The New World Disorder

—*Economist*³

No World Order

—Joschka Fischer, former German
foreign minister, *Project Syndicate*⁴

The headlines and laments in the West about the end of the American-led world order are louder than ever these days. They're coming from scholars, policy research institutes, journalists, and commentators, and they stem from two convictions: One is that the present world order, led by the United States and the West, has by and large been a good thing, preventing major wars and allowing for international trade, economic growth, and a remarkably stable and prosperous international system. Two is that the rise of the non-Western nations and the emergence of an alternative to the familiar American-led world order will be frightening, unpredictable, and almost surely a change for the worse. For the West

at least, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a stark warning about the dangers of the breakdown of the American-led world order and its replacement with a kind of Putinesque law of the jungle, a breakdown aided and abetted by an ever more powerful China.

These events and trends have, not surprisingly, created a deep sense of foreboding, especially in the United States and among its allies. Certainly the fall of the world order that we have known since the end of World War II would be a development of world-historical significance. This change would involve, among other things, not only the decline of the United States, its prestige, and its influence but also the rise of other powers, especially of an authoritarian, ambitious, power-hungry China. The Chinese leadership, so goes the conventional Western narrative, sees the world through a very different lens than rulers in the West do, and, moreover, China is allied with aggressive, resource-rich Russia and bitterly anti-American Iran. That, in the reigning conventional wisdom in the West, is a terrifying prospect.

Would the end of US and Western dominance really be so bad?

In this book, I argue, contrary to much elite opinion, that it need not be, especially over the long run. This is not because the West's fears about the rise of non-Western powers, including China and Russia, are always exaggerated, although sometimes they are, due to the loss of power and prestige. But it is because Western supremacy has itself contributed to plenty of instability, injustice, and disorder that might be eased by its decline. More importantly, centuries of dominance have led the West to a kind of arrogance and ignorance about the rest of the world, overlooking the ideas and contributions of other civilizations to stability and progress throughout history. We have forgotten that world order—the political architecture enabling cooperation and peace among nations—existed long before the rise of the West, and that many of the ideas we assume are Western inventions actually originated in other civilizations. Mechanisms and values that are central to world order—such as diplomacy, economic interdependence, freedom of seas, principles for the protection of people in war and peace, preservation of the environment, and cooperation among major powers, to name a few—emerged over millennia across the globe.

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While Europe and the West might have led the way in areas of democracy, human rights, and rule of law, non-Western civilizations have also provided mechanisms for peace, cooperation, and morality, with many of these ideas emerging well before the rise of the West. And even when it comes to democracy and human rights, the West cannot claim to have an exclusive patent. These ideals have precursors in other societies—for example, in ancient republics and political councils allowing wider participation in governance and in prohibitions against cruel and unjust punishment. Moreover, many non-Western nations, after their liberation from Western colonial rule, have played an important part in developing the principles of human rights through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN), while others such as India and Latin American nations have championed democratic governance, despite limitations and setbacks. Similarly, a rules-based order is not as new, as American, or as Western as Western pundits claim. There have been rules and rules-based orders in the past, and the present one in many ways is a refinement of similar institutions developed across the globe. While the West might have developed them further, it did not invent them.

Since the values and foundations of world order are not the West's exclusive property, they will endure even as Western power shrinks. The role of the West in the making of the many key elements of the present world order has been more as a pupil than as a teacher. In the future world, the West may once again look to the Rest for some of these ideas and approaches to sustain its progress and leave behind the excesses of its imperial past. The lament that the decline of the West amounts to the end of world order is misguided. This is reason enough not to fear that the decline of the West will lead to global chaos.

To some degree, Western anxieties about world disorder today are the result of its overconfidence and hubris that were evident not so long ago. Indeed, in the years immediately after the West's stunning victory in the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the worldwide trend toward greater democracy seemed both inevitable and desirable. All of eastern Europe was freed from effective Soviet control; democracy was strengthened in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America. Even

Communist China, now fully engaged economically and diplomatically with the rest of the world, was predicted to eventually leap onto the democratic bandwagon, so that the dominance of Western ideas and practices would grow even stronger. The most celebrated statement of this inevitability was Francis Fukuyama's thesis of the "end of history," by which he meant that Western-style liberal democracy was happily triumphant, that ideological wars were over, that the West had won, permanently.⁵

In light of that mood of triumph, it is understandably worrisome that history has not ended and that, rather suddenly, the idea that the Western system would endure forever has been replaced with the certainty that some other system will come to dominate. My essential argument is that this is not a disaster; indeed, in the long run, it might turn out to be a good thing. Why? There are several reasons. One is that the Western-dominated order was never as benign as many in the West believed, marred as it was by economic inequality, racism, and wars of choice waged usually in the global South. From the standpoint of the rest of the world, American and Western domination was less a blessing than it was a threat, not just to their well-being and independence but to their pride. To these nations, the end of Western dominance offers an opportunity to build a better world, to find more voice, power, and prosperity—in other words, a fairer, more balanced, and more equal world. As we'll see in the following chapters, other countries besides the Western ones have traditions, values, and practices that will contribute to the world order of the near future, and this will even be of benefit to the West, relieved as it will be of the anger and resentment that its domination has often caused. New balances will emerge in what will be a genuinely more diverse global community in which no single member or group of members is able to achieve hegemony.

This does not mean paradise. No world order will be, or ever has been, free of conflict and war. Simply witness the not-very-pax elements of the so-called Pax Americana in places like Vietnam, Afghanistan, and, yes, Ukraine. My aim here is not to suggest that the emerging world order will be perfect but to make the case that as the West retreats, mayhem will not erupt, and a more humane world may even emerge.

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This book offers an epic history of world order itself, uncovering how it evolved and how it developed into the Western order. Going back nearly five thousand years to ancient Sumer and Egypt, I mine the past in a way that mainstream historians and analysts of the history of civilizations simply haven't done. When we think through the deep history of civilization, we open a range of possibilities that can help us reimagine what the emerging world order should look like. This book, in considering this story, advances a kind of back-to-the-future thesis. I am not saying that history will repeat itself or that it is cyclical. It isn't. But history can provide clues or possibilities for the future. I show that for most of history, China, India, and the Islamic world have been forceful actors on the world stage, that power has been dispersed among different blocs, and that cultural pluralism has been widespread. These, in other words, were the norms of centuries past. Western dominance violated these norms, and it will actually be good for everybody to restore them, bearing in mind that the core elements of the existing world order—from republican institutions to international cooperation—are not Western inventions. Rather, they were developed at multiple global locations either independently or through mutual contacts. Thus, despite the conventional wisdom on this matter, these elements won't disappear as Western dominance ends.

This should be good news for those who genuinely aspire to a world order of “the West *with* the Rest,” rather than “the West *versus* the Rest,” and for those who hope for a world order that no single nation or civilization, whether Western or non-Western, dominates. Instead of fearing the future, the West should learn from history and cooperate with the rest of the world to forge a more equitable order.

What Is World Order?

Before we go further, we need to clarify the key concepts used in this book.

The first is the term *civilization*. The most common associations are cultural and social advancement, urbanization, monuments, writing

systems, agricultural surpluses, long-distance trade, the social division of labor, and some form of domestic political organization.⁶ But this is not enough. How societies relate to each other to create peace and stability must also be counted as a crucial element of civilization. This is where civilization connects with the idea of world order.

What is world order then? The term has no precise meaning. It can simply mean the state of the world—or its main political, economic, and cultural features—during a certain era. The *Macmillan English Dictionary* defines the term as “the political, economic, or social situation in the world at a particular time.”⁷ But more often, world order means having peace and stability, something akin to the modern idea of “law and order” for the world at large. Combining both meanings, I see world order as the way the world, or a large chunk of it, is organized politically, economically, and culturally and how power structures, economic links, political ideas, and leadership work with the aim of ensuring the stability and peace of humankind.

But these definitions leave many questions unanswered. Who makes world order and how? What is the “world,” and how far does it extend? Where and when did it all begin?

To start answering these questions, and to make better sense of this book, I urge readers to keep in mind four essential points.

First, the concept of world order that I use in this book covers both empires and a system of sovereign states. In an empire, one dominant power formally annexes and controls the internal and external relations of another state or a group of states, such as Persia and Rome did for hundreds of years. Empires get lots of attention in historical writing, and rightly so. But world order can also refer to a system of independent states bound by shared beliefs, political systems, and economic links. This was the case of the “city-states” of ancient Sumer, Greece, and Mesoamerica; the “republics” of ancient India; and the “warring states” of China, all of which I discuss in this book. Many of these city-states, states, and republics were gobbled up by empires, but before that happened, they were independent entities that had considerable lifespans as creative places for political ideas and modes of governance. They therefore must be considered to have been world orders.

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But the world order as we know it today emerged in Europe at a very specific time and place: the region of Westphalia in Germany in the year 1648. It was there and then that the rulers of Europe signed an agreement ending the Thirty Years' War, which, to simplify greatly, had ravaged Europe as Protestant and Catholic states strove to impose their own beliefs and systems on each other. The Treaty of Westphalia put an end to that by asserting the absolute sovereignty of each state, thereby banning any state from interfering in the internal affairs of another, over its religion or anything else. That, nearly four hundred years later, is still the most fundamental principle of the current world order. Originally applied to states within Europe, the Westphalian model has become nearly globally accepted today.

Another form of world order—a halfway house between a formal empire and independent states—is a tributary system, where a powerful country commands obedience, receives gifts, or extracts taxes from other states without colonizing them. China offers the most important historical example of such a system. From the Han dynasty that emerged in 206 BC, China, while developing its own empire, maintained a parallel system that did not tax but exchanged gifts with its neighbors, who acknowledged China's cultural preeminence but did not surrender their independence to it.

Empires are no longer the primary building blocks of world order, but their legacy remains powerful. While the current world order bears the distinct stamp of the Westphalian system, many European and Asian states—especially Britain, France, and Russia in the former category and China, India, and Turkey in the latter—retain a good deal of their imperial makeup, controlling territories originally acquired through conquest. Another legacy of empires are the borders of many states in the global South—nations of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific that became independent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—which were shaped by their former imperial masters. Similarly, after colonizing and displacing the native population, the United States built a hierarchical world order, if not an outright empire, that serves its own power and purpose. The world order that came into existence after

World War II has been built around this imperial primacy of the United States.

A second point is that world order does not have to encompass the entire globe. The term *world order*, as presented in this book, applies to a single civilization or region as well as to cross-national and cross-regional structures. The term “Chinese world order,” developed by Harvard historian John K. Fairbank, referred mainly to the Chinese tributary system in East Asia.⁸ In a similar vein, one could speak of Egyptian, Sumerian, Persian, Indian, Islamic, Mesoamerican, Andean, West African, Mongol, European, and American world orders, to name a few. Henry Kissinger was right—and this may be my only major point of agreement with him—when he wrote in 2014, “No truly global ‘world order’ has ever existed.”⁹ Although my book covers a lot more of the “world”—including Africa and the pre-Columbian Americas—than Kissinger’s did, I agree that most historical world orders have been regional in scope, although some have been more expansive than others. The storied empires of Persia, Alexander, Maurya India, and Han and Tang China, as well as the Umayyads, Moghuls, and Ottomans, were in essence regional entities, albeit very large ones. Even the Mongols, who created history’s largest contiguous empire, were at most Eurasian. But they can be considered world orders because their makers believed that they were central to the world known to them and that their ideas and approaches to governance were universal. And their ideas, institutions, and practices, with all the similarities and differences among them, have influenced the power relations, economic interactions, and moral principles of nations in later periods. In short, I argue that our current world order is the contribution of multiple civilizations: ancient and modern, powerful and moralistic, Western and non-Western.

In some cases, the idea of the “world” can expand as a result of new modes of communication and outside influences. For example, when the ancient Chinese developed their notion of “middle kingdom” to describe China’s central place in the world and their rulers concocted the notion of *tianxia*, or “all under heaven,” they did not know that, beyond the barbarians to their immediate west, there was a world of advanced

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civilizations, including those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and Greece. With the arrival of Buddhism and the founding of the Silk Road during the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–9 AD), the Chinese conception of the world expanded to include India and Persia, which the Chinese accepted more or less as equal. Hence, *tianxia* was the world known to the Chinese at a given time, even though the Chinese imagined it to be universal.

To be sure, the “world” has become more global than ever before, thanks to the European voyages of discovery, colonization and then decolonization, and globalization, all of which have accelerated commerce, tourism, media, and the spread of political ideas and institutions. Never before in history have people in one part of the world been more aware of what is happening in other parts. But even the British Empire, on which the sun was never supposed to set, did not, and could not, conquer continental Europe. The United States, which replaced Britain as the world’s preeminent power, did not control the Soviet bloc or China. A future world order could again comprise a network of regional world orders, albeit more connected than in the past.

My third point is that world orders, whether large or small, do not emerge or exist in isolation. All are influenced and shaped by outside forces and develop by learning from others. But this book is not just about connections, but also about creations, including independent and parallel origins of the core ideas and institutions of world order. In fact, too much stress on connectivity among civilizations, as seems to be fashionable these days, has its pitfalls. Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwò, the Nigerian-born professor of African political thought at Cornell University, reminds us that “similar ideas found in different parts of our world do not have to be explained in terms of influences or common origins.”¹⁰ This is important to keep in mind; otherwise, one might falsely argue that everything developed by civilizations in relatively isolated parts of the world—such as in the pre-Columbian Americas or sub-Saharan Africa—was due to foreign contact, including colonization. In reality, many civilizations have developed ideas of world order that are similar to each other, but did so on their own steam. Often enough, these separately created ideas were touched by those of others, creating similarities and overlaps, if not

outright convergence. Like a civilization interacting with another civilization, a world order often interacts with other world orders, including those they have conquered or mastered, and is influenced by them. It is a key argument of this book. Although Eurasian and cross-regional cultural and economic connections contributing to the rise of the West have been admirably narrated by Western writers such as John Hobson, Peter Frankopan, and Josephin Quinn, this book focuses on creations and connections on a wider global scale and pays specific attention to political ideas and institutions.¹¹ It shows how the West and the Rest *made each other* in laying the foundation of a global civilization and world order.

Fourth, world order is closely associated with stability. A dualism of chaos versus order has underpinned the idea of world order throughout the ages. To be sure, world order is not only about stability. There are also the goals of economic well-being, justice, and human dignity (a far more universal term than human rights). All civilizations or world orders pursue such goals, sometimes vigorously. Often, when rulers see the goals of justice and rights undermining stability, they choose stability. Indeed, from ancient Sumer to today's America, it is very rare to see justice and rights pursued for their own sake or given priority over order. But in many cases, societies and rulers have seen these goals not as mutually exclusive but as complementary, and economic development and human freedom are regarded as necessary to realize stability and order.

One notion common to individual states and world orders over the centuries is summed up in the phrase "chaos versus order." This narrative has provided the chief justification for the creation of political authority, which itself arises from the need for a strong state and ruler and from the desire of one state to conquer or otherwise control others. Narratives to this effect can be found in ancient Egypt, Sumer, Persia, Greece, and India (Hindu and Buddhist doctrines), as well as among the Mongols, the Aztecs, modern Europe, and post-World War II America.¹²

Thus, the Egyptian pharaohs legitimized their authority by representing themselves as the force of *ma'at* (order or harmony) overcoming *isfet* (chaos or violence). In ancient Sumerian stories, the gods themselves restored cosmic order by punishing "noisy" and violent earthlings by

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Image 1. The Narmer Palette. King Narmer, representing order and harmony (*ma'at*), smiting an enemy, representing chaos (*isfet*). Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

sending in floods, disease, and death. The ideology of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia founded by Cyrus the Great was based on the Zoroastrian duality of *asha*, cosmic order, versus the *druj*, chaos and disorder. A central narrative of Hindu civilization pits the *Devas* (divine forces of order) against *Asuras* (demonic forces of chaos and darkness) in an eternal struggle for light and tranquility. Though it evolved separately from the Indo-European belief system, China's civilization, guided by Confucian and Daoist ideals, took the need for social harmony, balance, and stability against disorder to perhaps its greatest extreme, the impact of which persists to this day.

Though not strictly a chaos-versus-stability dualism, Islam makes a distinction between *Dar al-Islam* (house or territory of Islam), organized around Islamic principles and modes of governance, and *Dar*

al-Harb (house or territory of war), whose absence of Islamic principles and safety for Muslims legitimizes it as a target of attack and absorption. Genghis Khan and his successors invoked the “eternal blue sky” (*tenggeri*), the Mongol conception of heaven, to justify their authority to rule, which meant imposing order over chaos.

In a faraway and isolated continent, rulers of the Inca Empire justified their expansion by telling their neighbors that submitting would bring them not only stability but also prosperity and justice. Further north, the Aztec rulers used the fear of chaos and need for order, provided by their own sun god Huitzilopochtli, to justify domestic rule and foreign conquests.

Across the Atlantic, in early modern Europe, the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679 AD) imagined a “state of nature” where life was “nasty, poor, brutish, solitary and short” to justify a “Leviathan,” a mythical all-powerful creature who would provide safety and stability. This was contested by fellow English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704 AD) and French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778 AD), neither of whom saw nature in the dark Hobbesian way but as a pristine, idyllic place—the home, for Rousseau, of the “noble savage,” imagery he seems to have borrowed from Native American societies. Yet, for Locke and Rousseau, the political state was also needed. Nature alone could not create or maintain order but would degenerate into chaos as society became more complex.

Twentieth-century US leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt saw their own nation’s ideals as a universal force for good, which stood in opposition to what they feared were the forces of disorder, especially communism. The United States went on to organize a world order around these beliefs, often called the liberal international order. Indeed, the image of the Leviathan has been so powerful that it has been applied to the United States with a glitteringly positive spin: America is the “liberal leviathan,” whose main role in the world since it became the global superpower has been to preserve order and prevent chaos.¹³ The liberal leviathan has the same political purpose in the international sphere as the Egyptian *ma’at* and *isfet* had in domestic and

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foreign relations. And it is the same chaos-versus-order narrative that now defines much Western fear about the end of its dominance and the rise of other nations.

Although building world order has often relied on the specter of chaos, it has not always required violence. Instead, it has rested on a variety of other means, such as moral principles and rules of diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchange among societies. Some early examples of this can be found in the rules of peacemaking and cooperation among great powers in the ancient Near East, religious tolerance and limits to violence in ancient India, cultural respect in exchange for trading privileges in Chinese history, and the vast networks built by the Islamic world, the Incas, and Indian Ocean merchants and priests to smooth the flow of goods and ideas. These principles and modes of communication became the building blocks of the contemporary world order.

Adding all this together, this book argues against the notion, widespread in the West, that the world order of today is essentially a derivative of Western history and Western political ideas, especially of freedom and democracy.

Before thinking about how to challenge this notion, let us think for a moment why such a view exists. One important factor, aside from sheer Western power, is the global dominance of the English language in the writings and debates about international affairs and world order. English has absorbed many political words from Greek and Latin, including some key terms about the modern world order. For example, the term *sovereignty* derives from the Latin *super* (above); *hegemony* from Greek *hēgemonía* (leadership, supremacy); *balance* or *balance of power* from Latin *bilancia* or *bilanx* (scale of a balance or two scaled); and *peace* from Latin *pacem* or *pax*. This linguistic heritage has led scholars and pundits across the world to assume that the ideas expressed were invented in Greece and Rome, and hence in the West. This, in turn, has led these scholars to be ignorant of terms with the same or similar meanings from the languages of other civilizations. This is a major source of the bias in favor of the West.

Moreover, we often forget that the ideas and institutions of world order that the Greeks and Romans developed were at best approximations.

The common Eurocentric belief, for example, is that democracy emerged from ancient Greece, but Greece did not in fact invent democracy as we know it today. The right to vote was restricted to male citizens only, and the Greek system did not include individual liberty. Yet, the late American political scientist Robert Dahl argued that denying ancient Greece as the source of democracy because of its flaws and limitations would be like denying the Wright brothers credit for inventing the airplane. Nor, to take another example, did the Magna Carta spell out human rights as they are defined today. It was basically a violent demand for property rights by the nobility, who had most to gain from it and who would continue to oppress the serfs. Yet, Eleanor Roosevelt, chair of the committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, wrote when submitting the documents to the UN General Assembly that it could “well become the international Magna Carta for all men everywhere.”¹⁴

Using similar logic, if we accept Greece as the birthplace for democracy and the English Magna Carta as the model of human rights, why shouldn't we also accept the Sumerians as the inventors of property rights? The code of Sumerian King Urukagina forbade the rich from appropriating the house or produce of the poor unless the poor person wanted to sell for a price he deemed fair. Why should we not give similar recognition to King Ashoka's rock edicts, which prohibited cruel and unjust punishment of ordinary people, as laying the foundation of human rights? In proposing such a mode of thinking, I am guided by the explanation of human rights from Indian economist Amartya Sen, winner of the Nobel Prize. According to Sen, the “idea of human rights as an entitlement of every human being . . . is really a recent development.” The notion of rights as “universal” never existed as an ancient idea, he argues, either in the West or elsewhere, but many civilizations across the globe maintained “limited and qualified defences of freedom and tolerance, and general arguments against censorship.”¹⁵

Put another way, ancient Greece and the Magna Carta are best viewed as approximations of the modern concepts of democracy and human rights, which only came into their current form in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One should not forget that Europe's political order

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in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been called, with not too much exaggeration, the “age of absolutism.” At the same time, many mechanisms of building a stable world order—whether in their foundational or advanced forms—came from non-Western civilizations. These include the independence of states, inter-state cooperation, diplomacy, peace treaties, protection of people against cruel and unjust punishment, religious and cultural tolerance, freedom of the seas, mutually beneficial trade, and environmental protection. Add to this list the provision of security and trade benefits by a leading nation without it colonizing others. In this sense, China’s tributary system is a distant cousin of the post–World War II American world order.¹⁶

Other examples of ideas and practices include, as we will see, peace-treaty making, diplomacy, economic interdependence, international law, and great power cooperation. Yet, the West—aided by its centuries of global dominance—has championed the narrower and most recent versions of these ideas, instead of their original, broader, and more universal roots. This has allowed the West to falsely present the contemporary world order as its unique and exclusive creation. While there can be genuine disagreement over whether modern concepts can be traced backward this way, it is hypocritical to do it for Greece, Rome, and early modern Europe but not for other civilizations. Hence, this book challenges the widespread tendency to use Greece, Rome, or western Europe as the benchmarks for assessing what constitutes progress in global civilization.

A related point is that today we think of ideas like order, peace, stability, cooperation, democracy, republicanism, human rights, and interdependence in the way Western philosophers and leaders have defined them, drawing from European or Western experience and reflecting and showcasing Western history. Similar ideas or even better pathways to peace and progress developed by other societies are ignored or dismissed. Taking a broad view of these ideas allows us to recognize their multiple points of origin, in nascent forms, and explain the contributions of diverse civilizations to the contemporary world order.

This brings us to the world order that we live in today. Conventional wisdom holds that it emerged after the Allied victory in World War II

in 1945, with the creation of international institutions like the UN and, after the Cold War, the emergence of a unipolar world dominated by the United States. In fact, while there is much truth to that view, the “rise of the West”—meaning western Europe and the United States—had been occurring for centuries, as far back as the “discoveries” of America and India by Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama in the 1490s. The West’s slow ascendancy then accelerated dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century, as Western imperialism swept across the globe and crushed existing empires. Several related events were critical to this global phenomenon: the defeat of China in the two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), the crushing of the Indian revolt against British colonial rule in 1857, and the partition of Africa by European powers at the Berlin Congress in 1884. In other words, the Allied victories over Nazi Germany and imperial Japan in World War II were certainly important in consolidating the world order that we know today, but the framework was already established by European imperialism’s subjugation of large parts of Asia and Africa. Britain and France, the two leading colonial powers, imposed their governing bureaucracies, their schools, their police forces and courts, their languages, and, to a considerable extent, their religions and values on subjugated peoples all over the world. The Germans, Belgians, and Portuguese participated in this spread of European power and practices to Africa, and the United States did much the same thing in the Philippines. China, though never directly controlled by a colonial power, was forced to cede some of its territory—Hong Kong, Macao, and portions of Shanghai, Shandong Province, and Manchuria—to foreign rule.

The current world order also emerged through multiple stages and points of origin. We may think of world order as the “situation in the world at a particular time” (the *Macmillan English Dictionary*’s definition), but the reigning order has always incorporated the elements and features of previous world orders, including those that developed in what we now consider the non-Western world: Asia, Africa, Islamic areas, and pre-Columbian America. The rise of a civilization or a world order is

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never purely of its own making; it is always helped by borrowing political, cultural, and technological ideas and innovations from others, especially preceding ones.

Thus, the divine kingship of Egypt, the world's first major centralized state, was itself influenced by prior Nubian political traditions, and in turn it inspired Alexander the Great's ambition to be a divine ruler. Persia rose to become the world's first big empire by borrowing from Assyrian warfare techniques. Persia's own institution of the great king was eagerly emulated by its conqueror, Alexander the Great, and might also have been the model for the Indian concept of a universal emperor (*chakravartin*), which emerged during the Maurya dynasty. Rome's world order was influenced by the Etruscans and the Greeks. In all likelihood, the emergence of the Chinese concept of *tianxia* and the Mongol concept of *tenggeri* had their roots in central Asian nomadic traditions. Indian Buddhist ideals influenced the political legitimacy of China's Tang and other dynasties, while Islamic science, technology, and philosophical debates, along with Chinese technology and Indian mathematics, helped the rise of Europe and America's world orders. A good deal of this book focuses on these prior influences and their combined legacies, showing how they lie behind our contemporary world order, which should therefore not be viewed as a unique creation of a handful of European nations and their progeny, the United States.

To be sure, civilizations never borrow others' ideas wholesale. They do so selectively, taking what they need most and leaving out what they don't. Moreover, they often modify, or "localize" foreign ideas to make them fit into their own societies. Foreign ideas never totally displace local ones but are blended into them to build more advanced and progressive societies. Creating this mixture of local and foreign ideas is fundamental to understanding the rise of civilizations and world orders.

However one sees it, the truth is that the ability to create a world order has never been the monopoly of any single civilization. Every major nation is the creator or aspiring creator of world order. World orders have existed for millennia, succeeding each other and building on each

other throughout human history. What we call world order today draws on the ideas and approaches of different civilizations at different points in time. This will continue even as the Western-dominated order gives way to the new world order of the not-very-distant future.

A few words about the terms *West* and *non-West* (or *the Rest*) used in this book: The idea of the West was originally a geographic and spiritual expression, evoking the division of the Roman Empire or the Chinese pilgrim's "journey to the West" in search of Buddhist knowledge, but it became a geopolitical and racial notion in the modern era. It is a product of the self-glorifying dominance enjoyed in the modern era by western Europe and the United States, which use the division to place themselves politically and racially above the rest of the world. The terms *non-West*, *Third World*, and *global South* are of much more recent origin, having emerged to give collective voice to decolonized nations in the twentieth century. This broad division—West and non-West, or simply West versus the Rest—has become perhaps the defining fault line of the contemporary world order. The late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, who famously coined the term "clash of civilizations" to warn that the world after the Cold War would be defined by conflicts among the world's major civilizations, was actually referring to the West-versus-the-Rest conflict, an idea he attributed to Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani.¹⁷ While neither the West nor the Rest is a homogenous category, the idea of a West-Rest divide has had great staying power, and it will continue so long as the media, political leaders, and intellectuals identify challenges to Western dominance—such as the rise of China, to take the most frequently cited example—as existential threats, replacing world order with world disorder.

But in this book, I use *West* and *non-West* as terms of reference or convenience, rather than accepting them as fixed and homogenous categories. My aim is to subvert both, and I hope to do so by showing the long historical interdependence and mutual learning among the nations, an interdependence that refutes the West's claim of being the dominant contributor to the contemporary world order. I will challenge this pernicious and artificial division of the world, which is, in any case, rendering

itself irrelevant as we enter a new stage of history. And I will argue that ending this divide, which will involve “retiring” the idea of the West first, is necessary for a fresh beginning in world order.

What Kind of Future World?

In my view, the plunge into the past does not mean the new world order will be an exact rebirth of world orders before the rise of the West, before Pax Americana, before colonialism and world wars. But non-Western nations will be more important in shaping their destinies and that of the world at large, as they were before the rise of Europe. Neither will the future world be united under a “one world” government or universal empire. It will not be dominated by any single nation or civilization. By this I mean neither the West nor the East (China) will get to shape the future world after its own interests and values.

Moreover, this future world will be shaped by cultural and political diversity. It will be a far cry from the end of history, Fukuyama’s idea that Western liberalism represented the final stage of social and political development, in which ideological conflict would disappear. The future world will have competing ideas as well as a degree of convergence, similar to the world order that is passing from the scene. But it will also be a world order of new forms of connectedness and stability, where neither the Rest nor the West is dominant. In other words, it will be akin to a multiplex—and here I draw on my 2014 book, *The End of American World Order*—where there are multiple shows on offer, giving the audience a choice of producers, directors, actors, and plots.¹⁸ This world order will be more broadly post-Western, not just post-American.

While China has played an important part in this transformation, the foundations were laid well before that country’s rise was enabled by Deng Xiaoping’s economic opening in 1978. The emergence of the global multiplex has been driven more generally by the return of the Rest, not just of China or India. Because of this, there will be a plurality of ideas, institutions, and approaches operating at global, regional, national, and local levels to manage common problems facing humanity:

from poverty and inequality to climate change to diseases. Political and cultural diversity will go hand in hand with economic interdependence and growing connectivity.

In contemplating this world ahead, the West needs to recognize that all civilizations that have played central roles in building world orders have been as capable of cruelty and violence as they were of compassion and stability. The West, which now claims to be the founder of the modern world order—with its tolerance, democracy, and rule of law—has been the source of a great deal of global disorder—past and present—through its violence, lawlessness, and dominance of other peoples. The Roman historian Tacitus observed that the supposed *Pax Romana* was “frightful in its wars” and “even in peace full of horrors.”¹⁹ The same applies to most civilizations that claim to have established peace, whether at home or abroad, including the present-day American-led world order. One should not forget that some of the most brutal ideas of the West, such as fascism (which takes off from ancient Rome’s symbol of authority, fasces), have been challenged from within. There are always two sides to any civilization at a given point: German philosopher of Enlightenment Immanuel Kant’s racist views were challenged by his contemporary Johann Gottfried von Herder. In ancient India, political strategist Kautilya advocated conquest and expansion at the time of the founding of the Maurya Empire. The third ruler of that same empire, Ashoka, renounced war for good and ruled with justice and compassion, although not before a bloody imperial conquest.

Similarly opposing ideas of how to deal with people, pitting Confucian benevolence against legalist oppression, emerged in ancient China. But modern leaders and intellectuals in the West have relentlessly insisted that the most profound ideas about world order have come almost entirely from the West and that only the West can provide a peaceful, prosperous, and just world order, while others would take us back to barbarism. This assertion has no foundation in history.

This argument is so at variance with the standard view on this topic—as expressed by Henry Kissinger, Niall Ferguson, Francis Fukuyama, and other popular commentators such as Fareed Zakaria, Thomas Friedman,

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and Richard Haass—that it may seem a radical point of view, one contradicted by the flow of current events, most recently Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war. But a narrative history of world orders provides a deeper perspective than we can gain from day-to-day events, preoccupying as they may be. The lessons and arguments of this book ought to provide some reassurance to those worried that the decline of the West would lead to a global disaster.

There is no question that, in the long march of history, Western dominance has been but a blip and that a new world, one very different from the past few hundred years of Western modernity, is coming over the horizon, riding on the economic decline of the West, the return of major non-Western civilizations and powers, the fading global influence of the United States, and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, whose long-term impact is not yet clear. But this does not mean global chaos. Some elements of the old order, including good ones like multilateral bodies, will survive into the new one. No world order is a totally new beginning or a fresh start. Those who lament the chaos and violence the decline of the Western-led world order might bring must not forget that some of the old actors and ideas of the West, including the United States and Europe, will be around even as the ideas and approaches of the rising powers and non-Western nations become more visible and important for managing world order. One possibility out of this change is that the new world order will resemble what some thinkers—among them the former Czech president Václav Havel and the economist Sen—have called a “global civilization.”²⁰

The idea is not that there will ever be a single, seamless, homogeneous culture around the globe, something like the “global village” idea popular not so long ago. Such a global civilization is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, a global civilization would mean a kind of underlying interconnectedness among civilizations, which compete but also cooperate while retaining cultural and political differences. As Havel described it, “The distinguishing features of...transitional periods are a mixing and blending of cultures, and a plurality or parallelism of intellectual and spiritual worlds. These are periods when all consistent value systems

collapse, when cultures distant in time and space are discovered or rediscovered. . . . New meaning is gradually born from the encounter, or the intersection, of many different elements.”²¹ We are entering such a period now, helped by the end of Western dominance.

The idea of a global civilization implies that civilizations—Western or non-Western—are seldom totally distinctive or unique unto themselves. No civilization is an island. All people of the world are connected by their shared humanity, and they tend to offer—either on their own steam or through mutual learning—similar solutions to deal with similar problems. This means there exist shared ideas and approaches to world order from multiple locations worldwide. The future world, underpinned by my idea of a global multiplex, will be built around such a confluence of civilizations, rather a clash of civilizations. To evoke the words of Ibn Khaldun, writing seven hundred years ago, there is “a world [being] brought into existence anew.”²² No past world has been a utopia, and our future world won’t be one either, but the past has shown that while civilizations can clash, they can also learn from each other, cooperate, and even forge something better than what came before. History will not end but will move on and move forward.