A broken **international system?**

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Three summits in quick succession – the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Beijing, the annual East Asia Summit in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, and the G-20 summit in Brisbane, Australia – are bringing together a host of world leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama and Japanese, Chinese, Russian and Australian leaders. Although the world is at a turning point in its history, these summits will tinker at the margins, instead of boldly considering fundamental reforms to rules and institutions.

The current international crises and conflicts cry out for far-reaching changes in the global institutional structure, which has remained largely static for more than six decades. Former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin was not exaggerating when he told the recent annual meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi, Russia, that the international order is broken because its rules have broken down. The specter of crises and conflicts multiplying looms large.

Today's manifold global challenges and major power shifts epitomize the birth pangs of a new order. While we know the world is in transition, the contours of the new order are still not visible. If the pressing international challenges are to be effectively managed, the 21st century world cannot remain saddled with 20th century rules and institutions.

A WORLD WHERE HUMILIATION REIGNS WILL REMAIN TORN BY CONFLICTS AND CRISES

In different ways, APEC, the EAS and the G-20 underscore the slow retreat of the age of Atlantic dominance. With just 12% of the world's population living in the West, the post-World War II transatlantic order has to give way to a more international order. The West's contribution to the world's gross domestic product has plummeted from about 60% to 42% in the past decade. Developing nations now account for almost 40% of global GDP, up from 18% two decades ago. In fact, according to the International Monetary Fund, the combined GDP of the seven biggest emerging powers, on a purchasing power parity basis, now surpasses that of the Group of Seven leading industrial nations.

With the global balance of economic and financial power shifting rapidly, the circumstances that helped spawn the Bretton Woods institutions in the mid-1940s – the World Bank and the IMF – are no longer relevant today. The recent establishment of two multilateral financial institutions – the New Development Bank by the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – represents the first tangible challenge to the Bretton Woods institutions, which have been slow to adapt to the new realities of the global economy. One reality is that wealthy economies in the West are increasingly dependent on capital inflows from the cash-laden economies of the East.

The G-20, for all its shortcomings, symbolizes a shift toward the new realities, even if the change is occurring too slowly from the perspective of the emerging economies. Composed of both wealthy and emerging economies, and aimed at bridging the divide between the interests of the old economic giants and the new ones, the G-20 has replaced the G-7 as the main forum for discussions and decisions concerning the global economy, as well as for connecting the complexities of finance, investment, trade and energy. Its 19 member-nations plus the European Union account for 90% of world GDP.

Forcing precedents

Yet there is no G-20-type initiative to deal with the deepening political schisms in the world. The declining relevance of the political institutions inherited from World War II is reflected in one stark fact: The 21st century has so far turned out to be no different from the previous two centuries, with conflict endemic and peace elusive. Dozens of armed conflicts have raged in this century.

To compound matters, geopolitical competition and rivalries between the great powers are sharpening, including over natural resources. Africa has become the theater of a new resources-related Great Game, a term originally coined in the 19th century to describe the British-Russian contest for supremacy in Central Asia. One dimension of this Great Game is farmland acquisitions in sub-Saharan Africa by foreign governments and agribusinesses. Another is infrastructure development by foreign governments that is driven, as in the European colonial era, by one specific interest – to facilitate mineral extraction and export.

Worse still, the power shifts and imbalance are having a profoundly destabilizing effect. For example, there is no longer any common interpretation of international rules. Powerful states interpret international rules to suit their own geopolitical agendas and interventionist policies. Power usually trumps international law.

Consider two examples since 2011 that illustrate the international law of convenience: The U.S.-led overthrow of Libyan ruler Moammar Gadhafi through aerial bombardment, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea. Putin cynically justified the Crimea takeover in the name of a "responsibility to protect" the Russian-speaking majority on the Crimean Peninsula – the same moral (but not legal) principle that Obama invoked to rationalize Gadhafi's overthrow.

The EAS meeting in Myanmar will not have on its agenda the most pressing concern for several Asian nations – China's relentless efforts to change the territorial status quo in the East China and South China seas and the Himalayas, and to re-engineer the cross-border flows of international rivers that originate on the Tibetan Plateau, known as "Asia's water tower."

Two of a kind? *Matryoshka* dolls depicting Barack Obama, right, and Vladimir Putin, second from right, are displayed in a shop in Tallinn, Estonia, on Sept. 2.

AP

That China continues to press steadily outward on its borders was illustrated by its 2012 seizure of the Scarborough Shoal, located within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, and by its subsequent establishment of an air-defense identification zone extending to islands controlled by Japan and South Korea. President Xi Jinping's India visit in September coincided with a Chinese military incursion in Ladakh, triggering a tense standoff on the frigid heights of the western Himalayas before the intruding troops withdrew – after extracting a concession from India to demolish a key observation post.

Law must rule

China's creeping expansion reflects a strategy to alter the status quo little by little as part of a high-stakes effort to extend its control to strategic areas and resources. Its strategy focuses on a steady progression of steps to create new facts on the ground by confounding and outwitting opponents. Such efforts extend even against one of the smallest nations in the world – Bhutan, which has faced Chinese military incursions. China claims 764 sq. km of territory in Bhutan's north and west.

Dispute settlement is at the heart of building harmonious interstate relations. China, however, opposes any international fact-finding, mediation, arbitration or adjudication on its disputes with neighboring countries. Although it is a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, China, as if to stress that might makes right, has refused to accept the convention's dispute-settlement mechanism in a case brought against it by the Philippines.

The U.S., for its part, is undermining the post-World War II order it helped to set up by sidelining or bypassing international institutions. Obama's latest war in Syria is his presidency's seventh military campaign in a Muslim nation, and the one likely to consume his remaining term in office. This Nobel Peace Prize laureate, however, made no effort to seek a mandate from the U.N. Security Council because he wishes to wage his open-ended war on U.S. terms, like his earlier interventions.

The new Cold War between the West and Russia makes it more difficult to fix a broken international system. After all, Obama has lumped Russia, Ebola and terrorism together as the key international threats, and spearheaded Western economic sanctions to squeeze Moscow. This is likely to result in an effectively paralyzed security council and greater dissonance on regional and global issues, while making China – the only genuine potential rival to the U.S. – the real geopolitical winner.

The only way to contain the new international instability is to search for solutions on the basis of dialogue, dignity and respect for international law and for each other's interests. A world where humiliation reigns will remain torn by conflicts and crises.

The forthcoming summits will likely yield new promises to establish a rules-based 21st century. But who will determine the rules in a way that ensures fair play and prevents competition from sliding into conflict? Which institutions will enforce the rules on all? Unless these issues are settled, the powerful will continue to cite international law to weaker states but ignore it when that is in their interests.

Mao Zedong famously asserted that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." In the 21st century, will that still be true? If great powers assert one set of rules for themselves and a different set for other states, the answer will be yes.

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