THE NEW WORLD ORDER:
THE CONCEPT IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

“World order”, in its most general sense, is an analytic, descriptive concept, referring to the aggregate of norms, procedures and institutions which give shape and structure to international society at any given time. The New World Order (NWO) is a new term that was coined after the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq. Former President of the United States, George Bush first used this term. The term has gained momentum, and continues to be used more and more, in discourses on the post-cold war world.

The accelerated pace of international change in recent years represents a watershed of historic proportions. This is obvious in the break up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, as well as the reunification of Germany. Other examples of dramatic change are apparent in Europe’s move towards full political, economic and financial integration, the emergence of Japan as an economic giant and East Asia’s development as an engine of global growth. Finally, the widespread embrace of liberal, political and economic ideals that transcend boundaries of geography and culture (otherwise known as ‘globalization’) represents the most dramatic change facilitated by the growth of information and communications technology (ICT). Amidst all these changes, the concept of a New World Order had emerged and gained momentum.

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The most basic questions—does the NWO exist; how substantial is it?—cannot be answered without an historical perspective. Such a perspective is essential for understanding the nature of the contemporary international system and the NWO. This perspective will also reveal how the NWO developed and how it differs from the previous ‘order’.

DEFINITION OF "NEW WORLD ORDER"

The phrase "New World Order" is commonly used without explicit definition, and ideas on it vary. Most definitions point towards the involvement in peace making missions of various kinds in different troubled spots of the world. These missions are intended to preserve or restore law and order; to deter and halt aggression and oppression; to relieve civilian suffering and promote civil and human rights.

One therefore could define the NWO as an international system in which the United States and like minded allies, act together, preferably under the aegis of the United Nations, to preserve or establish peace by upholding international law and order against aggressors, law-breakers and oppressors. If the NWO is to survive and work, the international community in some cases will have to proceed beyond persuasion, mediation and conciliation, onto deterrence and the use of force. The use of force will have to be resorted to, to force some nations to stop certain actions and perform others.

Many scholars are of the opinion that the term was first used during the Gulf War, when the UN sanctioned a collective opposition against Iraqi aggression. Military action was taken by the United States and others towards Iraq (during the Gulf War), and towards Somalia and Bosnia, in other conflicts. Subsequently, coercive action that was taken against other aggressors was done in the name of the NWO. Humanitarian arguments used to support such measures assume that there is an NWO that mandates such peacekeeping actions by the international community. There are however, some pertinent questions which need to be answered.

For instance, who is to decide what is right among the parties in conflict, and by what principle? What gives UN resolutions the sanctity and force of law? Why should some resolutions be rigorously enforced and others not, some international crimes punished and others ignored? For example, there are few Americans who do not support the notion of an NWO on principle. There are others who oppose all US participation in international peace keeping efforts, especially if it is through the use of force to uphold the NWO. They argue that the UN is the best organisation to deal effectively against any threat. It can impose sanctions against the aggressor (as was the case of Iraq). This organisation can be used effectively to deal with any incident in the present world order.
It is clear that a genuinely new and influential NWO has emerged, especially within the last decade. This could be seen in the transformation of pre-WWII Germany and Japan into stable, democratic and industrial giants. What is also obvious is the economic and political integration Western Europe. A third indication of a NWO is the disintegration of Eastern Europe into several new nation-states. Fourthly, the new role of the UN as military peace-keeper has been increasing since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Fifth, and most important, there seems to be a gradual development of restraints on the arms race and the cooling off of ideological rivalry.

The above developments in the world order may bring about a perfect NWO, only if force is used appropriately by the international community, if and when required. The roots of the current NWO can be traced to about twenty years (and some say, even further) ago. It is obvious that the international order has failed, in some areas, to enforce international law against violators, which in turn has led to greater violence, wars and destruction, persecution of civilians and widespread human rights violations. When there is such a threat to peace and security, the UN must enforce the law against these violators. They are bound by duty to protect the NWO. At all costs, there must be a prevention of the global domination (either militarily or politically) by one country, as can be seen during the recent Gulf War.

The nonaligned group, comprising countries such as India and Malaysia, can play a positive role in the NWO. An important aspect of this role would be to sort out economic issues concerning the disparity between the rich and the developing nations.

SOME OBJECTIONS

There are some likely objections to this view that deserve brief discussion to avoid misunderstandings and correct wrong impressions. One is that this view of the international order is too ‘soft and sentimental’, that it ignores the harsh realities of global politics and realpolitik. It has also been said that this view of the NWO relies on reason and moral persuasion for peace and stability. However, the view that it projects is one of an impersonal, objective system and process in international politics which should take priority over all other goals. Of primary importance is the promotion of justice, civil and human rights, international law, the relief of innocent suffering, and prevention of wars. This is certainly not a ‘soft and sentimental’ goal; on the contrary it is the most noble of ideals. Neither is it ‘soft’ to call for the total eradication of aggressor states from the international community, nor is it ‘weak’ or ‘sentimental’ to bring the wrongdoers to justice.
The other objection is that this proposal reflects a concept that is too academic. It is said that the proposal does not know how the world actually functions, and that it expects history to teach peoples and states their errors and induce them to change. The arguments further go that in fact people, generally, learn what they want from history, and not the other way around. However, we believe that people actually learn the wrong things from history, if nothing at all. Many leaders are totally indifferent to the ‘lessons of history’ and the costs of their failures, so long as they can keep their state machinery and essential followers under control, as well as make the masses support them financially. Any misgivings that society may have on their leaders are laid to rest by simply blaming the outside world for their sufferings.

This definition of the NWO does not propose to let history teach the Slobodan Milosevic’s of the world that aggression does not pay. True, history left to itself, can and does ‘teach’ almost any lesson it wants to, including the lesson that aggression might even be worthwhile. This is instead an argument that the NWO enables the current generation, unlike past generations, to control the “lessons” of history to some extent. It might even cause governments and societies to recognize that certain courses taken in the past have failed, yet others have proven profitable, while still others are unavoidable. Certainly peoples often resist learning from history, clinging stubbornly to a familiar version of the past that validates their collective image, justifying their actions. The historian Lewis B. Namier’s comment that Freud’s definition of neurosis, which is “to be dominated by unconscious memory, fixated upon the past, and unable to overcome it”, is the “regular condition of some historical communities. This points exactly to a big part of the current problem, especially in the Balkans”. The strategy of exclusion and denial is a good way of helping states and peoples get over their history, to break out of it. Repeated, long-term experience of failure is a powerful teacher, especially in teaching that one must break with one’s past to have a tolerable future.

The most important criticism of the NWO, however, is the charge of ineffectiveness that the incentives and sanctions of association-benefits and exclusion-denial are too weak to produce a stable world order. They will be ineffective with dictators or against dedicated or desperate peoples, groups, and organizations of all kinds, and will fail to stop civil wars, settle serious territorial disputes, or curb terrorism. They also act too slowly, and therefore, cannot prevent developments such as the invasion of any State, the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by rogue governments or terrorist organizations, the spread of aggression, conflict, and ethnic cleansing from one region to another, or genocide and mass starvation. In other words, even if the so-called NWO and its methods may work with reasonable mature, developed, peaceful states, they cannot handle the real problems of a world which is still violent, hostile and chaotic. These problems call for either the old instruments of individual state action and power politics, or newer ones in the form of effective forcible sanctions imposed by the international community through the UN, or a combination of the two.
This essay has emphasized that there are tasks the NWO cannot be, and should not be expected, or asked to do. One can go further; forcible sanctions are still needed in cases where a particular evil or danger so clearly and directly threatens the general peace and the continued existence and operation of the whole international system that it must be averted promptly, at almost any cost. This does not annul the cases for the NWO as presented here, or even weaken it. To believe in the reality and efficacy of the NWO does not mean to suppose that everything in international politics is new, that coercive force, including military force, need not ever be used. Any “new order” in history (even where this much abused term is legitimate) is never wholly new; the term means only that a corner has been turned, a trend set, a new way of doing things become dominant, and an old one recessive. So, here, the claim made about the NWO means only that the principal hopes and chances for durable, general, relative peace in the world rest now, on a world order operating primarily by association-exclusion rather than deterrence-force. This certainly implies that the rewards and sanctions of association-benefits and exclusion-denial must be in general more effective for more of the required purposes of general world order and peace than deterrence-force.

There is further objection to this view of how the NWO works. The way the NWO is conceived of, and operationalized, does not fit the US understanding of what the geopolitical arena and world political system should be. It requires patience, steady attention to a long viewpoint projected into the future, a willingness to wait for results, the ability to adjust to changed realities and to accept blurred, complex, uncertain outcomes and live with them if they are the best attainable. Most of these characteristics do not exist within the US political system. Instead, it is focused on domestic concerns, immediate issues, simple solutions, and clear-cut moral dichotomies.

Americans, both leaders and the public, have, over the last 50 years or so, shown a striking ability to learn, adjust, stay the course, and adapt to change in the international arena. Yet it may be that calling on Americans to accept this version of the NWO and lead it means calling for a United States that is different from the existing one. This would mean a US that is less prone to violence at home and abroad, less shortsighted about its own interests and those of other states and less provincial and ignorant about the rest of the world. It also means a US that is less insistent on dealing with any crisis in which it calls the shots and that, if it decides to get in, other states, must help it get the job done quickly, and then get out. Clearly, the NWO cannot work under this kind of leadership or these conditions. Even more important, this attitude on the part of many Americans, is incompatible with the ongoing transformation of international politics through a collective mentality and political culture involving whole nations and peoples, enabling them to adjust to each other successfully in a new order.
The place of the US in the NWO can be clarified in the following manner. The United States cannot follow certain policies in international affairs, even though they may be necessary and legitimate, because the American people will not support it and the American political system makes it impossible to sell it to them. What the US really means by this is that they want to run the NWO and enjoy its benefits, but not belong to it, or change and grow with it. Such an attitude should not be acceptable. A nation that uses this excuse for very long must sooner or later excuse itself into disaster.

CONCLUSION

A NWO has not come upon us and if it has, it may take decades to evolve into an entity that is more tangible and real. From a long-term historical perspective, the world appears to be heading toward a NWO and may be a supra national order. Following the historical watershed of recent years, the coming period will be a time of transition. There may be a bigger role for the US in the coming years. Its influence, patience, power and relative wealth will be critical factors in the progress toward an order or the descent into disorder. In Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the US leadership must take on new forms. But in recognising the importance of the three points of the triangle, the US leadership must understand that there are risks of disorder of a genuinely historic nature within the triangle. The United States, along with UN must take the lead in focusing international efforts to address this very seriously.

REFERENCES


