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West's Failure to Reform Threatens World Order

China and Russia take advantage of economic crises, weak governance and populism to challenge US-led international order

Humphrey Hawksley is the BBC's former China Bureau Chief. He is an Asia specialist and, over the past thirty years, has reported crises and development from every continent. He is the author of the acclaimed *Dragon Strike* 'future history' series which examines conflict in Asia and of several best-selling international thrillers. He is a regular speaker and panelist in Britain, US and China. His most recent book Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the Asia-Pacific and the Strategy of Chinese Expansion was published in June. www.humphreyhawksley.com

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LONDON: Two years ago, China and Russia issued a joint declaration with the aim of throwing out an open challenge to the current US-led world order.

Coming after Moscow's annexation of Crimea and a court ruling against Beijing's claim to the South China Sea, the two governments announced bluntly in June 2016 that they would enhance cooperation to establish a "just and equitable international order," in effect saying they no longer trusted the rules-based system largely drawn up after the Second World War. Since then debate has picked up about the threat posed to Western values by authoritarianism, often accompanied by a specter of confrontation, such as the recent condemnation of China by US Defense Secretary James Mattis for "intimidation and coercion" in building military bases in the South China Sea and overflight of US B-52s over Chinese-claimed Spratly Islands.

War talk is rolling far too easily off tongues, creating a false prism, not least because Beijing is well aware that the system created by the United States and its allies remains the bedrock of their own success. Even now, China needs the West more than the West needs China. China, however, is stepping into an array of vacuums created by economic crises, weak governance and unpredictable populism, yet neither Beijing nor Moscow has the wherewithal to build rival institutions of the strength that has allowed the West to hold sway in the world order for centuries.

Still, the speed of China's rise and Russia's aggressive resurgence have caught the West on the back foot, exposing many Western-dominated global and regional organizations and rules as outdated and ineffective. There is no question that a rebalancing of world power is

underway There must be reform if such a rebalancing is to go smoothly without violence and if Western values are to continue to prevail. As yet, that is not happening, and the West cannot afford further procrastination, hubris or complacency.

Creation or reform of global institutions is difficult. Both the 1815 Congress of Vienna planning for the defeat of Napoleonic France and the 1919 Treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War failed to keep a lasting peace in Europe.

There are no hard and fast rules as to what works in molding a group of countries into a cohesive unit with a common goal, except that any organization, by testing its boundaries and moving out of its comfort zone, can expect to face more risks. Two organizations that deliberately operate below a parapet of risk are the regional 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, and the global 53-member Commonwealth made up mainly of Britain and its former colonies.

ASEAN, established in 1967, promotes the interests of its region with an emphasis on quiet diplomacy and consensual decision making. While this low-key culture keeps the group united, weakness has been revealed in ASEAN's failure to unify against China's expanding influence, marked by the military bases in South China Sea territory claimed by four of its members. Hence, the United States is directly involved.

In a similar way, the Commonwealth comprises a third of the world's population who, technically, have signed up to the principles of democracy and human rights. Ceremonial photographs of Commonwealth leaders with the British monarchy also show a coming to terms with injustices suffered during colonization, a benchmark that should not be ignored given the ongoing link around the world between conflict and historical grievances.

At this level, the Commonwealth is effective. But member states routinely violate these principles, and on contentious issues, the Commonwealth's voice is barely audible. The organization also operates on consensus and rarely makes tough decisions.

Two formidable international organizations that do make decisions and push boundaries, albeit it in different ways, are the United Nations and the European Union. The UN is global, and its Security Council is a key arbiter of world order. The EU is regional, representing the most successful attempt so far to bring numerous states under a single umbrella of shared values and laws. But it is faced with the high-stakes challenge of determining how far to intrude on individual national sovereignty and is already becoming unstuck.

Both organizations were born out of the Second World War and took decades to develop.

The UN Security Council still operates under its original system designed more than 70 years ago. One of its more archaic mechanisms is the right of any one of five permanent members to veto resolutions, routinely leading to paralysis. The Security Council also has ten rotating members, elected every two years in a process cloaked by behind-the-scenes deal-making.

Efforts by rising powers like India, Japan and Brazil to reform the Security Council have not succeeded. There are no formal drafts on how a new Security Council could be restructured. The last notable change was in 1965 when the number of rotating members increased from

six to ten. The world, however, has seen many changes since the post-war 1940s and Cold War 1960s, and it is difficult to see how the Security Council's present system can remain fit for purpose.

The EU is facing pressure, too. Unlike the UN, the EU has been in a state of constant change from a six-member trade alliance for steel and coal in the 1950s to the 28-member regional organization. Until recently, the EU was held up as a beacon on how regions could bond. But that reputation lies weakened after currency and immigration crises, the rise of nationalism, separatism and Brexit. Too many critics see the EU as elitist, unfair, undemocratic – presiding over a system that has failed to deliver. "There is a list of triggers that could ultimately be devastating for the EU," argues Ian Kearns, of the European Leadership Network and author of *Collapse: Europe after the European Union,* an analysis of the EU's weaknesses. "Unless the EU finds a more effective way of countering them, the entire European integration project will remain vulnerable."

As with the UN, the EU has no roadmap. French President Emmanuel Macron has set out an ambitious vision based on closer union and "European Sovereignty." But his is a lone voice, and alternative plans to exchange ideas have not been forthcoming. The recent electoral victory of anti-Euro parties in Italy poses a direct challenge to the concept of European sovereignty.

None of this bodes well for the tasks ahead, but if Western democracies want their values to prevail over the coming century, they must clarify and model these values, and do so without conflict. They could begin immediately at two levels.

First, the UN, EU and other institutions should initiate reform that accommodates the grievances and initiatives of rising powers and those that feel shut out of the system. The demand is there, but doors at the top must be opened. To begin the process, the Security Council's permanent five members – Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States – should signal willingness to relinquish some of the powers they now enjoy. So far, they have not. In a similar way, the big beasts of Europe – Britain, Germany and France – could concede that, Brexit aside, the EU may be unsustainable in its present guise and set up a formal mechanism for reform.

Second, Western leaders should refrain from painting China and Russia as threatening archetypal dictatorships. The situation is far more complex, and such stereotyping carries high risk, particularly when used repeatedly within simplistic narratives of the 24-hour news cycle.

In this current climate of inertia, the West's failure to act on modernizing the world order is becoming as much a threat to the West's rules-based system as is Russia and China's attempt to challenge it.

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