

Review – The New World Disorder and the Indian Imperative

Written by Arenla Jamir

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ARENLA JAMIR, SEP 29 2020

The New World Disorder and the Indian Imperative
By Shashi Tharoor and Samir Saran
Aleph Book Company, 2020

This ambitious and incisive book *The New World Order and the Indian Imperative* details the changing international order and offers a succinct analysis of the state of the world today, which is now in complete flux. The book begins with a prologue that narrates the events towards the close of the last decade. These events depict the fluidity of the global balance of power: Trump's 'America first' and 'Isolationist policy'; the aggressive and expansionist rise of China; the emergence of 'illiberal democracies'; great power ambition; 'strongmen,' and the return of identity politics. The authors contend that the world order has led to marked tensions globally. Amidst political polarization, technological transformation, and major global power shifts, uncertainty surrounds the international liberal order, which therefore raises the obvious question of "where do we go from here?"

New centres of power, new alliances and new rivalries are emerging, putting pressure on institutions governing global trade and security. As power is shifting and dispersing, domains for geopolitical rivalry or participation are also extending. The central aim of the book, therefore, is to describe and understand this phenomenon of disorder and provide a solution to it (p.xviii). Dr Shashi Tharoor and Dr Samir Saran, two of the most influential thinkers and shapers of policy for India and beyond, have united on this eager and promising plan, which blueprints the role that India could play on the world stage in a new international order.

Approaching the global disorder from an institutional perspective, the authors pivot to global governance. Institutions based on American liberal values, including the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), have been the foundation of international order, and the systems of alliances and multilateral institutions that have upheld this order have been the safeguard of international stability.

The authors highlight four essential aspects of global governance in Chapter 1, accompanied by events or case studies: history (p.1); forces of convergence and disruptions (p. 4); the emergence of institutions and processes (p.6); and universal norms (p.7). Very interestingly, in the second part of the first chapter, the authors put together the five crises that characterise global governance today: the crisis of legitimacy, representation, the collective, identity and sovereignty, again with some insightful accompanying case studies. Recognizing the emerging crises, challenges, inequalities and the discontents of the present-day liberal order, the authors voice a strong argument for the 'Re-forming', rather than reforming of this governance structure (p.44), so that it accommodates the diverse cross-section of interests.

The global governance of peace and security faces mounting challenges. The UN as the leading guarantor of peace and security to the sovereign nation-states failed to mitigate issues and is criticised for its inaction, for example, during the South China Sea dispute, violence in Iran, Libya and Syria (p.48), the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan, Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the civil war in Yemen and so forth. The UN's response to humanitarian crises has been selective, and this issue has remained contentious in international politics. To this, the authors contend in Chapter 2

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that the selective intervention of the UN has damaged the legitimacy of the international order. It is to be made aware that the interventionist policies of the UN depend on several factors: the level of human suffering, the level of spillover effects of the crisis; the military strength of the target state and the extent to which the UN has previously engaged in a crisis. The scholarship of the UN's humanitarian intervention is, therefore, debatable. The underlying fact remains, "the governance structures of today still reflect the realities of 1945 and not 2020" (p.61). Questioning the legitimacy (or inadequacy) of the UN, the authors conclude that the UN is not indispensable nor is it irrelevant. It is 'intransigent' (p.66), stuck in one moment in history.

Chapter 3 and 4 discuss in length the two strands of global governance: discourse on sustainable development and internet governance or cyberspace. The global discussion on climate change and development has degenerated into a north-south debate that is widely discernible. The Global North refuses to take into account its historic role in afflicting climate change and alleges the Third World countries are responsible for degrading the environment, due to poverty and increased population (p.81-82). The Global North undermined the newly independent states to exercise sovereignty over their natural resources, and believed that climate change is a natural phenomenon and therefore, the costs and liability of mitigation and adaptation have to be borne collectively (p.77). The Global South discourse on climate change is glaring: the rich nations must take on the basic burden of financial mitigation, consume less of the world's resources and reduce their contribution to global warming. The underdeveloped and developing nations of the Global South have repeatedly voiced their concerns that equity and climate justice must play a key role in any climate change governance (p.78). By equity, it means holding the Global North responsible for bearing the brunt of the historical role in exacerbating environmental degradation.

To mitigate climate change and development, the book distinctly mentions three elements: technology, finance and knowledge (p.106). Contradictorily, the dynamics of the divide between north and south lie in the lopsided development of these elements: technology highly monopolised by the global north that favored a market-based arrangement; failure or negligence of the global north to live up to its financial obligations in areas of climate change and development; science, research and knowledge dependent on the paramountcy of the global north. The facts exhibit that the climate change negotiations and sustainable development discourse carried over various conventions have been unsuccessful in fully addressing climate governance. So at that point, what are the solutions to address this global inequality? How would we defuse the polarization between the north and the south? Besides addressing the issues, the authors failed to provide substantial explanation to the predicament.

The authors have strikingly covered an exhaustive section on the governance of cyberspace. The section discusses the birth of the internet, inextricably linked to America's unipolar prominence, framed in democratic and market-centric terms, in line with the American vision of international liberal order. Much the same as the north-south debate on development, the divide between north and south set in even at the global infrastructure of cyberspace.

Cyberspace is a new global common that defies formal governance. The internet governance landscape is marred by conflicting normative visions competing for commercial realities and cyber geopolitics (p. 176). For long, the American ideas in market-centric terms dominated views and shaped policy with regard to internet governance. Be that as it may, global events including the Arab Spring, the Edward Snowden Case and the rise of information sovereignty (p.139-148), as the authors highlighted, have had a definitive impact on the perception in developing countries about global internet governance.

Emerging technologies are becoming the centre of a global contest for leadership and dominance. Following the Snowden episode, China rallied against America's perceived domination of the internet by demanding the return of the state and the expansion of 'cyberspace sovereignty'. Undeniably, China has a 'de facto control over the internet' (p.49), with its two sole objectives being information censorship and eliminating the use of foreign technology companies to ramp up its own technology companies. China's internet power rose exponentially, becoming the new cyber power to lead the charge against US cyber power supremacy (p.148). The paradigm for global governance of the internet, however, is just being shaped. Against the global backdrop of flux, how countries develop a proactive strategy to shape the emerging global regime on Internet governance requires further exploration.

The concluding chapter also uncovers the principles that upstage the norms of liberal international order (p.239) and

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gives a recapitulation of the liberal international order and the norms that set up the international institutions, including the UN and its agencies: WB, IMF and several other regional groupings including Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN), European Union (EU), BRICS, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), African Union (AU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Group of Seven (G7), Group of 20 (G20), Group of 77(G77), and others (p.238-239).

Turbulence and disorder affects India profusely. However, India has taken numerous initiatives, globally and regionally, to hedge the adverse consequences of the changes underway. On a global stage, India has embarked on a journey towards creating an enabling environment for digital innovation, peacekeeping, or forging cooperation and mutual support in multilateral fora.

To make its presence felt in the international order, the authors recount that India has managed to control pressures and demands at home while balancing their role in the international system. The book mentions five major attributes on 'Indian Imperative'. India seems primed to take on this leadership role, first, given its democratic credentials which are non-western in nature and based on a free market (p.275); the second component is India's strategic geographical expanse (p.279); the third feature is India's unique cultural ethos (p.281) followed by India's role in global governance and development (p.284); and lastly, India's affirmative position to greater international equity (p.290).

The authors gave a passing mention on the development problems entrenched in India as elsewhere, including corruption, law and order, unemployment, caste and religion and weak political and economic reforms (p.278). To reaffirm its position as a responsible stakeholder, the contribution of India's young demography or its 'soft power' diplomacy, besides others, could have been featured. Be that as it may, too much optimism about India's position in the global order on the one hand, and concealment, on the other hand, of its inadequacies on the domestic front could be delusive. Domestic policies including the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy, the passage of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, and the possibility of implementing a National Register of Citizens depicts policies inherently incompatible with the ethos of liberal internationalism. The book lacks a substantial explanation on most vital domestic issues, including minority rights, communal tensions, and religious violence, which is irrefutable in India's context.

Overall, this book situates the rich analysis of the causes and consequences of the existing international order in the historical, political and economic context. Amid unprecedented geopolitical and technological disruption, this work is a crucial combination of the most important transformation of our time, as the centre of gravity shifts towards emerging multipolar world order, especially in Asia.

About the author:

Having obtained her doctorate degree in 2016 from Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, Dr. Arenla has done extensive research on International Relations, Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific. She has published in *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, contributed to *The Diplomat*, *The Wire*, *Pioneer*, Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS), Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and others.