

Chas Freeman: Return to the Approach of the Peace of Westphalia

The following presentation by Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr. (USFS, ret.), titled “Surviving the World Order to Come,” was delivered to Chinese attendees at the Cambridge Executive Leadership Program,¹ University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, on July 10, 2024 and published on the author’s [website](#). The presentation provided him with the opportunity to use his years of diplomatic experience and wisdom to give an accurate historical assessment of the world’s problems, and to provide a path out of the crisis. Ambassador Freeman is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, Rhode Island. The speech is reprinted here with the permission of the author. A video presentation of the text by the author is available [here](#). Items in square brackets are from the author’s website. Subheads and illustrations have been added by EIR.

Surviving the World Order to Come

A new world order is coming into being. Many call it “multipolar,” but it is better described as “multi-nodal.”² A “pole” is the end of a line between two points. But the emerging order is a three-dimensional network, not a one-dimensional axis, or even a collection of axes. “Nodes” (节点) are places where many connections of diverse sizes and intensities originate, terminate, and intersect on differing vectors. Multi-nodal is a more accurate depiction of the geopolitical geometry that is now emerging.

In the emerging, unfamiliar international system, countries interact and connect with each other in a multidimensional—not just a bilateral—context and in multiple, often inconsistent, ways. A nation may have poor political relations or military confrontations with

1. This lecture is a follow-on to the previous year’s talk, “A World Divided,” which can be read [here](#).

2. I am indebted to Brantly Womack, Professor Emeritus of Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia for this insight, described in *Recentering Pacific Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

countries with which it nonetheless has a lot of economic interdependence.

This is a fair description of the current Sino-American bilateral relationship. Or, for that matter, Sino-Vietnamese relations, despite the two countries’ ideological similarity. Or, as in the case of U.S. rela-



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

Left to right: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, and Chinese Premier of the State Council Li Qiang at the Ninth Japan-China-Korea Trilateral Summit: economic relations with cautious cooperation.

tions with Vietnam, major ideological differences may coexist with a flourishing economic relationship and a modest amount of cautious geopolitical cooperation.

This was the spirit of the recent meeting of the Chinese and Japanese premiers with the president of the Republic of Korea in Seoul. We will see more of this sort of complexity in relationships in future.

To the dismay of anti-Chinese or anti-American zealots, the international interests and aspirations of China or the United States cannot be understood or predicted by reference solely to their bilateral interactions. Each connects to the other in varying ways,

and each has complex interactions with other countries and groups of countries. Such countries and groupings connect in their own ways to still others. Important as the Sino-American relationship is, it is only part of the context in which Beijing and Washington interact and behave at home and abroad.

After a century and a half of decline, China is today once again at the center of Pacific Asia. For the first time in history, it is also a world power—a nation whose interests and preferences must be acknowledged and addressed in the management of every human domain and activity. In its comprehensive global and regional influence, China now resembles the United States. As of 2024, there is no other great power with a claim to do so.

But regional and middle-ranking powers are flourishing in the post-post-Cold War environment:

- Japan is a global power in economic terms and is cautiously returning to a leading role in the political and military affairs of Pacific Asia.

- Russia has global military reach but is not a major player in global trade and investment outside the energy sector.

- India is the hegemon in South Asia but currently has little influence beyond that region.

- Europe has global economic reach but is too disinclined to act decisively even in its own region, still less beyond it.

- Britain and France retain strong but receding intellectual and cultural influence in their former imperial domains.

- The Arab world has no cohesion and remains unable to manage its own affairs effectively, still less those of others.

- Brazil, Ethiopia, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Türkiye are growing in power in their regions but lack decisive global clout.

All seek to increase their strategic autonomy. None is willing to subordinate itself to China, the United States, or any other potential overlord.

So, the assertion that the international system and its dynamics are now defined by great power rivalry will not withstand scrutiny. This is a peculiarly American reaction to the progressive loss of U.S. dominance in every global domain other than the military. In a world no longer dominated by the bipolar order of the Cold War, all states have agency—the power to make a difference and to conduct themselves as they perceive

their interests to dictate.

Is there a Battle of Democracy vs. Autocracy?

The world does not share the Biden administration's insistent conjecture that history is culminating in a great battle between democracy and autocracy. America's obsession with democratic ideology arises not from foreign efforts to subvert constitutional democracy in the United States but from internal factors that are eroding democracy and the rule of law domestically. Constitutional democracy can only be built and sustained at home. It cannot be dismantled by foreign refusal to emulate it.

The prerequisites for constitutional democracy include the combination of the rule of law with freedom of speech. This Western-invented composite has historically enabled debate among an informed citizenry so that they can advise and consent to government rulemaking. If the United States is becoming less constitutionalist and more authoritarian, as it is, this is disturbing to those who, like me, treasure the values of the European Enlightenment, but it is the result of decisions made by Americans, not manipulation by China, Russia, or any other foreign power.

The Western concept of the “rule of law” (法制) is quite different from the Chinese Legalist theory of “rule by law” (以法治国), which is now almost everywhere *de facto* gaining ground. The “rule of law” is a system in which rulers as well as citizens, institutions, and entities are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced, and independently adjudicated. “Rule by law” empowers a presumptively wise ruler to make rules that can remain unpublished, that are alterable on a case-by-case basis to produce desired results, and that do not constrain the ruler's own decisions or behavior.

“Rule by law,” as most clearly advocated by Han Feizi (韩非子), proposes a system of governance in which decisions by the ruler can and often should be made in secret and enabled by an explicit policy of keeping citizens uninformed (愚民政策) so that they cannot challenge their ruler's dictates. This system defines any view inconsistent with the officially approved narrative as “disinformation” that must be suppressed. It repudiates due process, is subservient to political power and privilege, and allows the rules to be applied selectively, based on who did what to whom rather than *what* was done and whether it was right or wrong.

These are quite different concepts of governance,



Han Feizi (d. 233 B.C.), a Legalist political philosopher, would agree with today's rules-based order.

and the world's nations differ on which is most effective and desirable. These ideological differences matter. They manifest themselves in nations' varied approaches to international interactions as well as in their views of the merits and legitimacy of domestic political systems. So be it. 百花齊放，百家爭鳴. "Let a hundred flowers bloom, a hundred schools of thought contend." As a great reformer once said, "practice is the sole criterion of truth"—“以实践为真理的唯一标准。”

International law is the intellectual legacy of Western societies committed to the rule of law. It is the product of international consensus or of institutions like the United Nations created by international consensus that have been empowered to make rules governing the actions of sovereign states or interactions between them. It resembles the rule of law in that it represents community values, is not the product of the arbitrary dictates of a single nation or group of nations, is openly declared, embraces the concept of the sovereign equality of states, and has established standards and authorized quasi-judicial mechanisms for the non-violent resolution of disputes.

The purpose of international law is to protect the weak against the strong. That is why its greatest champions today are nations that lack the power or ambition to impose their political or economic preferences on others.

Why the Global Majority Rejects the 'Rules-Based Order'

Ironically, given the historical U.S. role in promoting international law, the "rules-based order" now promoted by Washington is a modern version of "rule by law." Han Feizi would recognize and approve of it. It supposes that the United States—or the United States plus the club of former imperialist powers called the "G7"—can make the rules, alter them at will, exempt themselves from them, and determine to whom else they do or do not apply. This system is rejected as illegitimate by the Global Majority, which much prefers one based on the United Nations Charter and the decisions of the international community.

Meanwhile, the institutions of global governance created after World War II are disintegrating. The United Nations system has been unable to concert an effective response to war and state collapse, global warming, mass migration, pandemics, genocide, species extinction, nuclear proliferation, and other challenges to human existence. The Security Council is paralyzed. Regulatory regimes like the World Trade Organization have played a crucial role



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

Institutions of global governance created after World War II are disintegrating, as exemplified by the paralyzed UN Security Council.

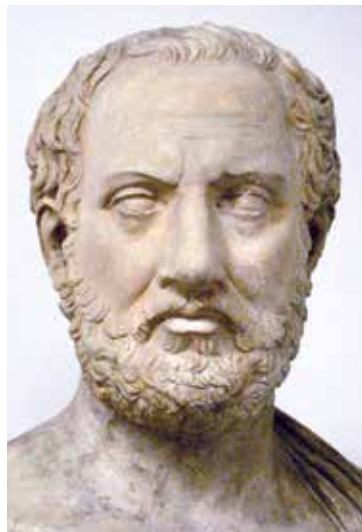
in fostering global prosperity and the expansion of the global economy but are now under attack and crumbling. The UN Charter and the international conventions that once constrained national behavior and made the world somewhat safe and predictable are now ever more widely flouted.

Like constitutional democracy, respect for international law is now in retreat. It is unclear whether it will be displaced by a version of “rule by law” or by an anarchy in which, as Thucydides wrote, “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Sadly, Thucydides would not be surprised by what is happening in Ukraine, in Palestine, at the United Nations, or at the International Court at The Hague.

If we cannot fix the UN, we must replace it, as we did the League of Nations. Sub-global institutions with less than universal membership, limited cohesion, uncertain authority, and no demonstrated capacity to address planetwide problems increasingly substitute for the global institutions and legal frameworks created by the international community after World War II. Sadly, my country will not lead the effort to reform these institutions or to preserve international law. Therefore, others must do this as best they can.

America’s distraught response to its loss of economic and political primacy has been to adopt protectionist trade and investment policies and to militarize its foreign policy. But neither protectionism nor militarism can or will “make America great again.” And neither is an answer to hegemonic overextension—“trying to squash ten fleas at once with all ten fingers”—“十个手指按十个跳蚤”—an absurd effort that is both futile and debilitating.

In effect, in place of “reform and opening,” Washington has adopted a national politico-economic strategy of industrial constipation and hunger strike. Unable to compete with Chinese electric vehicles, batter-



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Ancient Greek author of the History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides (460-400 B.C.): “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”



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Emperor Qian Long (1711-1799) in a portrait by Giuseppe Castiglione at the Palace Museum, Beijing. Qian foolishly dismissed the opportunity to use Western industrial prowess to China’s advantage.

ies, solar panels, or wind turbines, it is barring them from the U.S. market. This may seem like an unprecedented response to the challenges posed by competition from advanced technology originating in a more dynamic foreign economy, but it is not.

Walling out products with which the United States cannot compete recapitulates the bungled response of Qing China to its encounter with the industrial revolution in 1793. In that year, having inspected the wide range of innovative products presented at his court by a large British trade mission, the Emperor Qian Long (乾隆) dismissed the opportunity to leverage Western industrial prowess to China’s advantage, saying complacently that he and China already “[possessed] all things,” while condescendingly adding that he and China “set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and [had] no use for [such foreign] manufactures.”

This smugly arrogant refusal to recognize the merits of opening China to trade with a rising West or to collaborate with foreign scientists, technologists, engineers, and mathematicians led to economic stagnation, military defeat, and internal disorder. It culminated in the overthrow of the very primacy and regional “Pax Sinica” that Beijing sought to preserve. Shutting the door to superior goods and services perpetuated China’s competitive inferiority and entrenched mediocrity rather than promoting self-improvement.

Obviously, when self-reliance is overdone it can backfire. 闭门造车—trying to manufacture everything yourself behind closed doors—is a losing politico-economic strategy. As

the coarse but pertinent saying: 拉不出屎来不要站着茅—advises: “if you can’t crank out the crap, don’t fart around in the outhouse.” There is no reason to believe that Washington’s constipated response to the challenges posed by an economically dynamic and increasingly innovative China will lead to a different result.

China now produces thirty-six percent of the world’s manufactures, and its economy is one-third larger than America’s in terms of domestic purchasing power. For the first time in two centuries, China has a convincing self-defense capability, but China’s major challenges to the world are not primarily military. An American military response to them will not overcome them. Still, the United States has chosen an almost exclusively military response to China’s return to wealth and power. Diversion of investment to forever wars, military buildups, and arms races with China and Russia has led to deteriorating U.S. domestic infrastructure, declining educational standards, disinvestment in scientific research and public health, and rising debt.

The Danger of Great Power Conflict in the Nuclear Age

In the nuclear age, no great power should wish to make an implacable enemy of another. But that is how Washington is currently treating both Beijing and Moscow. Meanwhile, the threat of nuclear escalation is demonstrably no longer an effective deterrent against conventional warfare between nuclear powers. Russia is the world’s most heavily armed nuclear power, but the United States has become engaged in a losing proxy war with it in Ukraine. India and Pakistan have fought each other despite their nuclear arsenals. But the risk of escalation to the nuclear level is serious. Just wait till a nuclear power faces a threat of defeat it regards as existential!

It’s worth noting that no navy of any great power has fought a major battle in 79 years. There have been no major amphibious landings since 1950 (74 years ago). There have been no direct air battles between peer competitors since 1954 in Korea, when the embryonic Chinese air force and North Korean planes piloted by Russians engaged in dog fights with the U.S. Air Force. That was 70 years ago. Western combat experience against all but insurgencies is lacking.

Everywhere but in Russia and Ukraine, awareness of how technology has changed warfare has made little headway against political posturing based on wishful

thinking. All Western militaries are configured to fight opponents with inferior technology and no air forces or navies. All envisage short, victorious wars, not protracted wars of attrition. No Western economy has the industrial surge capacity or stamina to win a war of attrition against a “peer competitor.”

A Sino-American war over Taiwan might decide the island’s status but, even if it did, it would lead to protracted hostility between China and the United States. A war of attrition or catastrophic mutual destruction through a nuclear exchange might prove unavoidable. The one certainty, should such a war occur, is the destruction of Taiwan’s prosperity and democracy, the elimination of its semiconductor and other advanced technology exports, and the loss by both China and the United States of the greater part of their respective navies and air forces. It is said that a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought. For many reasons, the same is true of a Sino-American war over Taiwan.

The United States now habitually substitutes coercive measures short of war for diplomatic dialogue. Sanctions and ostracism have displaced negotiation as the preferred American response to disagreements with other countries. But in international relations, as in warfare, one should never lose contact with one’s adversary. Empathy—知己知彼—[“knowing yourself and knowing your opponent”] is as indispensable to success in diplomacy as it is to victory on the battlefield.

The United States and its Western partners now routinely use unilateral sanctions to isolate countries and their economies, deny them access to trade settlement mechanisms, freeze or confiscate their government assets, bar their access to technology, curtail their exports and investments, prohibit transactions with them, and bar the issuance of visas to their officials and citizens. Sanctions create resentment and fuel the recalcitrance of their targets, while distorting markets and creating vested interests in their perpetuation. They entrench rather than solve problems, but they have a devoted following, especially in my country.

The net effect of American sanctioneering and protectionism is to make the world ever less than the previous sum of its parts. The new U.S. stand on trade and investment:

- Substitutes geopolitical risk judgments based on national security paranoia for comparative price and quality as the basis for business decisions, thereby reducing global economic efficiency, growth, and prosperity.

- Exempts uncompetitive domestic oligopolies—which now dominate the American economy—from competitive pressures to produce better, cheaper products.

- Deprives U.S. producers of economically desirable production inputs and locks in inflation.

- Replaces quasi-judicial dispute settlement mechanisms in international trade with zero-sum contests of economic power.

- Undermines global monetary reserve and trade settlement systems and encourages the formation of competing currency blocks and exchange mechanisms.

- Divides the world into multiple segregated political and economic blocs, restricting trade and investment flows with other blocs or countries to the detriment of global prosperity and economic efficiency.

- Constitutes a pivot to further stagnation and technological decline, not a realistic approach to reindustrializing America.

- Drives the world toward attempted military rather than diplomatic solutions to problems, most of which cannot be resolved on the battlefield.

The U.S. political elite portrays its new stance on trade and investment as consolidating alliance relationships while fending off unfair competition from foreigners. But from a global perspective what is happening is:

- the resurgence of civilizational states like China, India, Japan, and Russia;

- the strengthening renaissance of the Islamic world;

- the reassertion of strategic autonomy by France and other European powers;

- the rise of new middle-ranking powers like Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa;

- the emergence of ASEAN as a significant independent factor in the global economy; and

- the beginning of Africa’s realization of its tremendous demographic and economic potential.

‘The *de facto* isolation of the West’

This looks more like a G7 retreat into a defensive citadel than a reassertion of the global centrality of Atlantic civilization. It risks placing the West on the fringe rather than at the center of the future, marginalizing its previously dominant role in human progress as parallel international communities and orders emerge. The *de*

facto isolation of the West from the Global Majority is exacerbated by worldwide ideological shifts as well as by behavior driven by the loss of self-confidence by the nations of the Atlantic world.

The trends at work include the rise of religious zealotry in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism as well as radical shifts in the norms of social behavior in Western societies. Even as much of the world reaffirms traditional values, Western elites extol the virtues of gender fluidity, hedonism, and other aspects of so-called “wokeism,” which intolerantly demands tolerance of behavior long universally considered to be immoral.

Meanwhile, the United States and the G7 continue to insist on the adoption by other countries of models of governance and rules the West itself seems to be abandoning. The domestic divisions, instability, and decadence of the United States and its G7 allies find expression in self-contradictory and ineffectual statements and actions abroad. The Global Majority sees Euro-American behavior on issues like the wars in Ukraine and Palestine as transparently hypocritical, based on double standards, and justified by narratives that belie visible realities. The countries that the West once colonized or dominated are no longer prepared to follow its lead in world affairs.

In short, we are witnessing the end of a unified, Western-dominated global order and its replacement by a hodgepodge of collaborations and rivalries at the sub-global level. Something similar happened to cause the devastating chaos of the “Thirty Years’ War” in Europe. That was a disorder composed of warring states, much like the history of China before the Qin unification or India before Aśoka. But the “Thirty Years’ War” ended in the establishment in the Peace of Westphalia of a system of peaceful coexistence between multiple sovereign states that respected their cultural diversity. Its result is memorialized in the “five principles of peaceful coexistence.”

The question for your generation and the next in China, the West, and the rest of the world is whether we can replicate that outcome and end our descent into anarchy. We need to craft a peace based on mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, tolerance, and equality and cooperation for mutual benefit. If we cannot do this, we risk more than our prosperity. We risk our very existence.