

WORLD WAR II AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WORLD ORDER: HOW INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS WERE SHAPED FROM 1945-2025

Dušan PROROKOVIĆ

Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade (Serbia)
dusan@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs, ORCID: 0000-0003-3064-2111

Abstract: The Second World War is one of the most important events in recent history. From the point of view of shaping contemporary international relations, it is actually the most important event. Today's world political system was established in 1945, and despite the fact that the international order has changed twice in these eight decades, the system has survived. Among other things, this has happened due to the maintenance of the rules of functioning for eighty years. This paper explains the difference between the world political system and the international order. For the creation of the system, 1945 is taken as the reference year, while in addition to 1945, 1989 and 2008 can also be taken as reference years for the creation of different orders, which denote the transformations from bipolar to unipolar or from unipolar to multipolar. What connects 1945 and 2025 is the continuity of a global political system, which continues to endure despite all the challenges that have arisen over time. After the election and inauguration of Donald Trump and his first decisions, and given the importance of the place and role of the USA in international relations, the question of changing the principles and rules on which the system is founded is open. Although it is too early to draw any serious conclusions about the possible consequences of Trump's decisions, from a theoretical point of view, due to what is currently happening, 2025 could become another reference year in the study of international relations.

Keywords: world political system, international order, principles of governance, rules of operation, World War II, UN, Donald Trump

¹ The paper presents the findings of a study developed as part of the research project entitled 'Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2025', financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia and conducted by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade (No 200041).

Will 2025 be remembered as a key year for international relations? Undoubtedly, 1945 was one of the key years in that context, and it is quite understandable why it is often mentioned as a reference year in research and analysis. This is the year when World War II ended, the UN was founded, and the establishment of a new world political system and international order began. Key years are periods of time when certain “turning points” occur, events with which later processes are identified. The result of such processes is either systemic changes or the establishment of an order that has lasted. Most often, reference years are defined in this way to represent the time of the end of the war or the achievement of an important peace agreement. “In modern history, the years 1648, 1713, 1815, 1919, 1945, and 1989 are outstanding examples of critical points when the victors were given the opportunity to shape new policies, new rules, and principles of international relations. These are periods when a new distribution of power occurred and when leading states or hegemony faced choices on how to use their newly acquired power” (Akçapar, 2009, p. 1). It is noteworthy that, in this quoted passage, 1989 is also mentioned as one of the key years. Why? This year is declared a reference year because of the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989), which symbolically marked the end of the Cold War. The truth is, in fact, that the Soviet Union disintegrated (self-dissolved) only two years later (December 26, 1991), which also marked the end of the Cold War on a (geo)political level. When it comes to the symbolic level, Donald Trump’s decisions, signed or announced immediately before or during his inauguration (January 2025), may represent an event (or a group of interconnected events) that will identify the processes that will follow in the coming years. Because Trump’s moves affect international relations, thanks to them, a new international order is being formed, but what is even more important is that they seem to be able to produce systemic changes. Of course, Trump’s moves are largely a consequence of events in previous years (and decades); his strategies and policies are adapted to existing circumstances, so in a (geo)political sense, it cannot be claimed that everything in international relations will depend on the American president. However, the hypothesis presented primarily concerns the symbolic level when it mentions the possibility that, in certain developments, 2025 will be perceived as one of the key years in the future.

In general, if the answer to the initial question is affirmative, then it will also mean that after eight decades, the world political system built in 1945 has finally ceased to exist with the establishment of a new international order. Again, it is important to emphasize that even up until 1989, which is taken as the reference year, numerous turbulences within the established

system were detected, and it was only after 1989 that this became intense and easily noticeable. However, it is also necessary to emphasize that a change in the order does not always mean a change in the system; that is, the order can change due to a change in the balance of power (a disruption of the balance of power) between the key actors of international relations, while at the same time the principles of managing the system and the rules (even if they are basic) according to which the system operates remain largely the same or similar. Until 1989, neither the principles of governance nor the rules of operation were drastically or dramatically changed since the order was essentially bipolar, and an effective balance of power was established between the two superpowers based on reciprocity and mutual recognition of status. After 1989, in the era of unipolarity, there were recorded attempts by the USA to change the principles of governance, but they were not accompanied by a fundamental change in the rules of operation. During the era of unipolarity, the USA did want to bypass the UN system due to changes in the principles of governance and reacted unilaterally (even militarily, committing aggression against other sovereign countries) when it needed to protect its interests, but it failed to transform the UN and change the rules of operation of international organizations.

For the sake of further analysis of the phenomenon of the transformation of international relations, at this point, and in accordance with what was written earlier, it is necessary to explain four concepts: world political system, international order, principles of governance, and rules of functioning.

The world political system is one, and within it, the order can change (unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar). Changing the structure of the system also changes the order. According to the basic definition, a system consists of a fixed arrangement of parts that make up a whole. As the arrangement of parts changes, a new structure is created. The basic characteristics of the system are anarchy and disorder, and therefore, it is impossible to maintain a unipolar hierarchy or bipolar strictness in the long term. In other words, that is why every structure is temporary, and order is temporary. Because of anarchy, there are continuous dynamics within the system — political, security, and economic. In historical stages, when it becomes clear that due to the dynamics of the above processes within the system, it is no longer possible to establish even a temporary structure, that is, it is not possible to organize even a temporary order, the system collapses, and a new one is built on its foundations.

The international order arises as a result of the balance of power between actors within a system. Actors, among whom states are still the most important (although the growing importance of non-state actors, be it

international organizations, multinational corporations, transnational banks, etc., should not be ignored) differ in their potential for military, economic, and political power. As the interests of actors intertwine, coincide, and/or conflict, relations between them are repaired or damaged. Among states, according to one of the offered classifications – we distinguish between superpowers, great powers, regional powers, small states, and microstates. Also, the concept of a middle power is theoretically elaborated, which can be mentioned, although it is not crucial for the conclusions that will be drawn. The most powerful actors, states with the greatest and most pronounced power potential (superpowers and great powers), arrange the order in a way that is in their interest. More precisely, they try to organize the order hierarchically or temporarily arrange it. Of course, it is in the interest of these actors that the order with which they protect or satisfy their own interests lasts as long as possible. Therefore, they defend it with available means against the attacks or aspirations of challengers (mostly regional or middle powers or great powers with smaller power potentials – the actors who represent the challengers), which produces crises, conflicts of varying degrees of intensity, and ultimately – wars. Regional and middle powers can adapt, satisfying their own interests through cooperation (alliances with superpowers and great powers) or confront each other and, in agreement with other dissatisfied actors, try to influence the transformation of the order. Small and micro-states, in the overwhelming majority of cases, must adapt, rely on international law, sign treaties, and protect their interests through alliances. Order implies hierarchy, and it is defined through principles of governance and rules of operation.

Management principles relate to the effective use of available resources (instruments, means) to achieve a specific goal. In general, the goal is related to the pursuit of interests, but as many specific interests there are, as many different goals that an actor wants to achieve are defined. The effective use of available resources is, to a certain extent, regulated by operating rules. Operating rules are regulations, decrees, agreements, contracts, and a complex legal heritage that restricts actors from using available resources as they wish and as much as they wish.

Practice shows that too often, the most powerful actors in the international order have not been successfully constrained by the rules of operation; that is, the most powerful actors have bypassed these rules without any consequences, violated them, and ignored them. In international relations, the rule applies: *quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi!* Superpowers and great powers have violated international agreements, failed to respect the territorial integrity and

sovereignty of smaller states, established illegal sanctions, and then, as a rule, expected others to verify their actions. However, it should also be said that, even if only formally supported by actors with lower power potential, the rules of operation in the form of declarations of principle often persisted, thus preventing the legitimization of the effective use of available resources without any restrictions. This turns out to be very important. If all restrictions are ignored, if all rules of operation are violated, the hierarchy is based solely on which of the actors will use the available resources more efficiently. Normally, resources will be used most efficiently by the actor who is ready to use his own power potential most brutally; when hierarchy is established based on the brutal use of force, wars occur, which inevitably change the order but can also change the entire system. The dynamics of the process exceed the ability of the system's (self-)regulation to create a temporary structure and organize a temporary order.

The Second World War broke out precisely for this reason. Due to the absolute anarchy that produced very dynamic processes, it was not possible to organize the hierarchy of a multipolar system at that time. There were no universal rules of operation; the various actors began to be guided by the principles that they defined themselves in accordance with the proclaimed goals. The end of the Second World War and the victory over fascism brought, first of all, the definition of new rules of operation embodied in the UN Charter, on the basis of which all members of this international organization had to formally adopt their own principles of management, and thus an international order was established in the new world political system. Tired and frightened by the devastating war, unable to impose their will, the actors agreed to certain restrictions (this is also seen in the UN system since the five permanent members of the Security Council were given the right of veto, which simultaneously rewarded and limited these victorious powers – all permanent member of the Security Council were given the opportunity to block each other's proposals). Further establishment of order, in the Cold War circumstances, took place around the two most powerful poles – the USA and the Soviet Union, and over time, almost all possible differences concerning two opposing worldviews were completely rounded off between these two poles (the differences were ideological-political, economic-social, cultural, etc.).

Despite the differences, despite the fact that the order has become increasingly asymmetrically bipolar over time (the Non-Aligned Movement emerged, which did not want to align itself with either of the two poles; China gradually moved away from the Soviet Union, although both states remain

in the communist bloc; socialist ideology “penetrated” Western European societies, resulting in the birth of “capitalism with a human face” that differs significantly from the American one and influenced the building of awareness of European identity and the subsequent creation of the EU), it is noticeable that the world political system persisted, even took root through the activities of an increasing number of international organizations and (pan)regional integrations. Even the military interventions of the US in Latin America or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan did not disrupt systemic solutions, as the overwhelming majority of actors remain on the stand that management principles based on declared rules of operation must be applied.

The test of the system’s survival was provoked with the end of the Cold War, after the reference year of 1989. Only one superpower remained on the world stage. The order was transformed from bipolar to unipolar. Unipolarity is established in periods when the total power potential of one actor is in absolute and relative disproportion with the indicators of other participants. Absolute disproportion can be identified by comparing military and economic potentials, and relative disproportion can be identified by analyzing the political potentials of power.

“The symbol of a unipolar system is the dominance of a superpower in world politics. From one center of power, every issue in international relations and therefore international security can be influenced. And not only international, but also the national security of most other states. By entering into various arrangements with weaker states in different parts of the world, controlling geopolitical hotspots and creating regional security complexes, the superpower manages issues important for global and regional security, and therefore for the national security of other actors. Therefore, it can be concluded that pure unipolar structures simply do not exist in political practice. An ideal type of unipolar system would exist if one center of power could establish a world government, whose decisions would be legally and formally binding on other actors. This would happen, for example, if the USA, during a period of complete domination, managed to reform the UN Security Council and establish new ways of decision-making, thanks to which it would not be possible to make a single decision without them. This would establish control over the UN and build a solid foundation for the UN Security Council to grow into a world government dominated by the USA.” (Proroković, 2018, p. 295).

Despite its military and economic superiority, the US has failed to establish control over the UN in a way that would allow it to use this resource to achieve its goal of establishing long-term global dominance. Instead, on the one hand,

it has relied on the concept of global governance. Anne-Marie Slaughter describes this concept as governance through a complex global network. Various state institutions, from those dealing with financial regulation through investigative bodies responsible for combating terrorism and international crime to legislative bodies that harmonize legal norms in agreement with other states and international organizations and encourage the cross-border exchange of information, capital, people, goods, knowledge, etc. on a daily basis. This is how global networks are formed, which are, to a greater or lesser extent, interconnected and dependent. These global networks are the basis of global governance, and states will have to adapt to the new circumstances if they have not already done so (Slaughter, 1997; Slaughter, 2004). On the other hand, the USA continued to strengthen the position of international organizations that it completely controlled, and this is best (and most clearly) seen in the case of NATO. The implementation of the first approach was supposed to result in "hegemonic unipolarity", and the second was supposed to make it impossible to achieve a balance of power. Simply put, the power of a superpower is such that it eliminates "hegemonic rivalries," which reduces the importance of the balance of power for international relations (Wohlforth, 1999, pp. 7–36). From the point of view of shaping international relations, the first approach was intended to create new rules of operation, while the second was oriented towards defining separate principles of governance.

It turned out, however, that such a thing could last only a few decades. Why? First, accepting the leadership of one (and the only one in the system) superpower means that it can establish the order it wants and, in this way, guarantee peace. Hegemonic stability excludes the balance of power. As Robert Gilpin explains, changes in the structure occur due to the "overexertion" of the superpower, which causes its power to decline. Maintaining order costs money, and every superpower faces a moment when the costs of maintaining the system become greater than the benefits it reap. This opens the way for the rise of a new hegemon, who will establish a new order with its own rules of the game and new values to promote (Gilpin, 1988, pp. 592–611). Instead of constantly balancing, the system faces cycles of stabilization – which occurs when the hegemon establishes order, and destabilization – when the hegemon's power begins to decline, and other actors begin to compete to occupy the vacant position (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 4).

Secondly, Kenneth Waltz, in criticizing the American policy towards NATO, underlined that "the ability of the USA to prolong the life of a dying institution best illustrates how more powerful states create and maintain international institutions to serve their assumed or wrongly assumed

interests" (Waltz, 2008, p. 2). He is against the expansion of NATO and explains this in several points: 1) this will create new dividing lines in Europe; 2) Russia will perceive this step as a threat and will enter into an alliance with China; 3) other actors in international politics will also perceive it as a threat, which makes it impossible to reach an agreement on arms reduction in the future; 4) Eastern European countries that become members of NATO will be obliged to spend large amounts of money on armaments, which will make their economic growth impossible; 5) NATO cannot influence the construction of democratic systems in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, because this is not the task of a military organization (Waltz, 2000, p. 24). Through global governance and investment in controlled international organizations, the USA has failed to achieve long and continuous global dominance, among other things, because the USA has established a new order but has not changed the system. The USA wanted to change the system by establishing parallel structures that would gradually take over the role of the structures formed in 1945, but they did not succeed in doing so. For the overwhelming majority of other actors, the rules of operation established in 1945 remained formally valid.

The formation of a multipolar order that has been intensifying since 2008 confirms this thesis since every reference to universal principles by any state or international organization is based on the rules of operation from 1945. In this context, eight decades after the end of World War II, we still live in a system that was built in 1945 and which could only now, if Donald Trump's announcements come true, be transformed. Undoubtedly, Trump, like previous US presidents, establishes his place in the order by presenting the principles of leadership, only he does so by unequivocally relying on force (threats of sanctions, asymmetric measures, announcements of unilateral moves, etc.).

But now, instead of the failed strategy of establishing parallel structures, which he is abandoning, Trump is showing interest in establishing new rules of operation that will suit the most powerful actors in international relations, primarily the United States. WTO rules do not prevent him from unilaterally increasing tariffs on other countries, and he does so even towards allies with whom the United States forms the NAFTA integration unit; he openly demands that Denmark give up Greenland, even though the United States and Denmark are members of NATO; for the second time in his career, he is withdrawing the United States from the Paris Agreement, etc. The system built on the foundations of 1945 is too narrow for Donald Trump, and that is why he is showing an aspiration not only to reshape the order in which the United States will occupy a more significant place but also to define a

new system, with new principles of management and rules of operation. Will he succeed? There is no unequivocal answer to this question. It does not depend only on Trump, nor does it depend only on the United States, but also on the other most important actors in international relations, who must agree with this and enable some kind of consensus. It also depends on the extremely unpredictable dynamics of the processes that will take place, which will be given impetus by Trump's decisions. In any case, what we face in international relations post-2025 is fundamentally different from almost anything we have faced since 1989. The intention now is not only to change the order but also to transform the world political system. The desire is not only to impose new principles of governance as legitimate but also to establish new rules of operation (at the expense of the old ones). This will, in every respect, have consequences in international relations. In fact, on a symbolic level, it has already had consequences. It remains to be seen what they will be like on a political level.

References

- Akçapar, B. (2009). The Mutual Existence of Nascent and Senescent World Orders. Portland, Portland State University (Occasional Papers Series, Vol. 1, No. 1), pp. 1-122.
- Gilpin, R. (1988). The Theory of Hegemonic War. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4), pp. 591-613.
- Mearshaimer, J. (2001). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York, Norton.
- Proroković, D. (2018). Era multipolarnosti. Beograd, Službeni glasnik.
- Slaughter, A-M. (1997). The Real New World Order. *Foreign Affairs*, 76(4), pp. 183-197.
- Slaughter, A-M. (2004). A North American Perspective. Old Rules, New Threats: Terrorism, Proliferation, and Anti-Americanism. In A-M. Slaughter & C. Bildt and K. Ogura (Eds), *The Challenges to International, National, and Human Security Policy* (pp. 11-28). Washington - Paris - Tokyo, The Trilateral Commission.
- Waltz, K. (2000). Structural Realism After The Cold War. *International Security*, 35(1), pp. 5-41.
- Wohlforth, W. C. (1999). The Stability of a Unipolar World. *International Security*, 24(1), pp. 5-41.