The concept of a "liberal, rules-based world order" is often associated with the post-World War II international system that was shaped and has been led by the US and Western democracies. This order was built on supranational rules that emphasized peace, prosperity, and the protection of individual rights on a global scale. While this system has been dominant for almost 80 years, there are ongoing debates and challenges to this order, with some countries advocating for alternative models of international relations. Indeed, nothing lasts forever.

The war in Ukraine highlights the current system’s fragility, as well as the long-term fraying of the post-World War II institutions formed to support globalization. Much of the world has remained neutral in the European conflict, waiting on the sidelines. If the US, the EU, and NATO falter in their resolve to resist Russian aggression, what will be the effect on international norms and institutions? Will China and its leadership of the BRICS help accelerate global fissures? How effectively have regional and international institutions responded to other crises, such as the pandemic crisis? Even if the West contains Russian aggression, are we inevitably moving towards a multipolar world that is replacing the American unipolar era? If so, how might the United States maintain its role as the leader of the liberal, rules-based world order? How can it fend off challenges from China and Russia for leadership roles without appearing to protect a hegemonic position?

Proposed Topics and Questions for Discussion (The readings below have links but you may encounter a pay wall. If so, access the readings through your institution’s library):

1. Evolving Foreign Policy Philosophies and Worldviews

   In the wake of the Post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. domestic views on the role of the United States in the international community have shifted within the major political parties. Threads of non-interventionism are visible in national-level political campaigns, including debates over whether the United States should provide military aid to Ukraine. How might political elites’ domestic signaling affect international perceptions of American commitment to allies and partners? What outcomes may be affected by a withdrawal of U.S. international engagements? Further, what larger forces are reshaping the international order as well as state-level responses to the conflict in Ukraine, including that of the United States? Some observers argue that the United States has failed to appreciate let alone respond to the erosion of American unipolarity and the fitful emergence of multipolarity in various global domains. For them, this seismic shift will undermine Washington’s global leadership unless it adjusts its worldview and institutional preferences in time.

Readings:

SCUSA 74 Roundtable Topic: An Enduring World Order: The Future of International Norms and Institutions


2. The Evolving Role of the UN

For almost 80 years, the United Nations has provided a venue for multilateral decision-making and international norms-setting. However, recent geopolitical tensions and global economic turbulence are affecting international perceptions of the UN’s utility. What role does the UN play in international norm setting, and how might that role change in the wake of world events?

Readings:

3. China’s Role in a New Global Order

In the last 40 years, China has risen from a relatively poor, isolated nation to become the world’s largest trading partner and second largest economy – some say the largest, based on certain metrics. With its economic rise, China has attempted to build greater geopolitical influence through three recent ambitious programs: the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative. What are the country’s geopolitical ambitions behind such efforts? How should the US respond to China’s ambitions?

Readings:


4. The Role of Swing States in the International Community

Swing states are defined as those states that do not directly align with the U.S., China, or Russia within the existing world order. Swing states are also defined by their outsized impact on the global order relative to their population and economies. To varying degrees, these states align with the U.S.-led global order along pillars of trade, human rights, territorial integrity, and nonproliferation. Brazil, India, Indonesia, and Turkey are four powerful swing states. How should the United States approach its engagement with global swing states to promote prosperity, enhance peace, and advance human rights and democracy?

Readings:


5. Military Implications for the Privatization of Space

The war in Ukraine provided a case study of direct military reliance on private sector satellite and communications technology. However, the use of such technology also demonstrated the potential precarity associated with governmental reliance on private sector actors for the enabling capabilities required military operations. As the private sector competes with governments and/or lead in the development of critical space technologies, how should U.S. policy address the development and distribution of technologies that were previously the domain of federal governments alone?

Readings:


6. AI/Autonomy and Military Decision Making:

The evolution of AI tools provides policymakers and military leadership with a rapid increase in up-to-the-minute tactical, operational, and strategic information. However, the rise of AI tools also presents a range of challenges to civilian and uniformed decisionmakers, who must identify what information is true, informative, and actionable, and how such information affects the range of policy, strategic, or tactical options available. How might the rapid advancement of AI capabilities affect decision-making processes either positively or negatively?

Readings