From A Dysfunctional World Order To A Sustainable Future

Em. Prof. dr. Richard Falk

In the interview that follows, *Richard Falk*, an internationally-renowned scholar of Global Politics and International Law, offers his insights on the contemporary state of world politics and shares his radical vision of the future world order. Richard Falk is Alfred G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law and Practice at Princeton University, where he taught for more than forty years, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine and Advisor of the POMEAS Project, Istanbul Policy Center, Sabanci University. He has served on scores of Commissions on International Law and Justice and is author and editor of more than fifty books, including (Re)Imagining Humane Global Governance, Palestine: The Legitimacy of Hope and Chaos and Counterrevolution: After the Arab Spring.

C. J. Polychroniou is scholar, author and journalist. He has taught at numerous Universities in Europe and the United States, was founder and director of the now defunct Centre for the Study of Globalization in Athens, Greece, and author and editor of scores of books, academic articles and popular essays. His latest books Optimism Over Despair: On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change (conversations with Noam Chomsky) and The Political Economy of Climate Change and the Global New Deal (conversations with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin; forthcoming).

C. J. Polychroniou: Richard, I want to start this interview on the state of global affairs near the end of the second decade of the 21st century by moving from the abstract to the concrete. To begin with, it’s regarded as axiomatic that the

postwar international liberal order is fracturing and that we are at the same time in the midst of a geopolitical transition where the most prominent characteristic seems to be the decline of the United States as a global superpower. With that in mind, can you offer us a panoramic perspective on the contemporary state of global affairs? In that context, what do you consider to be the primary changes under way, and the emerging challenges and threats to global peace and stability?

Richard Falk: There are many crosscutting tendencies now evident at the global level. At the very time when globalizing challenges are intensifying, the mechanisms available for regional and global cooperation are becoming dangerously less effective. The failure to address climate change, so clearly in the global public interest, is emblematic of a dysfunctional world order system. This failure can be further delineated by reference to two distinct, yet interrelated developments. The first characterized by a vacuum in global leadership, which reflects both the overall decline of the United States as well as its explicit renunciation of such a role by the Trump presidency. Trump proudly proclaims that his only political agenda is shaped by American national interests, declaring he was elected president of the United States, and not the world. The second broader development is the rise of autocrats in almost every important sovereign state, whether by popular will or through imposed rule, resulting in the affirmation of an ultra-nationalist approach to foreign policy, given ideological intensity by chauvinistic and ethnic hostility toward migrants and internal minorities. This kind of exclusionary statism contributes to the emergence of what might be called 'global Trumpism' further obstructing global problem-solving, shared solutions to common problems. A discernable effect of these two dimensions of world order is to diminish the relevance and authority of the United Nations and international law, as well as a declining respect for standards of international human rights and a disturbing indifference to global warming and other global scale challenges, including to biodiversity and the stability of major global rainforests.

Overall, what has been emerging globally is a reinvigoration of the seventeenth century Westphalian regional system of sovereign states that arose in Europe after more than a century of devastating religious wars, but under vastly different conditions that now pose dire threats to stability of international relations and the wellbeing of peoples throughout the world. Among these differences are the

dependence upon responsible internal behavior by states in an era of growing ecological interdependence. The tolerance of fires in the Amazon rainforest by the Brazilian government for the sake of economic growth, via agrobusiness and logging, endangers a vital global source of biodiversity as well as depletes essential carbon capturing capabilities of the vast forest area, yet there is no way under existing international norms to challenge Brazil's sovereign prerogative to set its own policy agenda, however irresponsible with respect to the ecological future.

At the same time, there has emerged doctrine and technology that defies territorial constraints, and gives rise to contradictory pressures that subvert the traditional capabilities of states to uphold national security. On the one side, transnational extremism exposes the symbolic and material vulnerability of the most militarily powerful states as the United States discovered on 9/11 when the World Trade Center and Pentagon were allegedly attacked by a small group of unarmed individuals. Responses by way of retaliatory strikes directed at the supposed source of these attacks, according to a global mandate associated with counterterrorist warfare, and technological innovations associated with precision guided missiles and unmanned drones have produced this new conception of a boundaryless war zone. The world has become a battlefield for both sides in an unresolved struggle. Additionally, there are opening new uncertain frontiers for 21st century warfare involving cyber assaults of various kinds, evidently used by the U.S. and Israel in their efforts to destabilize Iran, as well as new initiatives by a few states to militarize space in ways that capable of threatening any society on the face of the planet with instant and total devastation.

Under these pressures the world economy is also fragmenting, not only behaviorally but doctrinally. Trump's transactional mode of operations challenges the rule governed system established after World War II, which relied on the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization. The economic dimensions of resurgent nationalism also give rise to trade tensions, with real prospects of major trade wars, reminding expert observers of the atmosphere in the early 1930s that gave rise to the Great Depression. Underneath this new approach to political economy seems to be what amounts to a mostly silent revolt against neoliberal globalization, and its encouragement of transnational investments based on economic opportunity, as measured by the efficiency of capital rather than the wellbeing of people, including environmental protection. A

major source of dissatisfaction with traditional politics in democratic societies seems associated with increasing economic inequality, which has unleashed a populist assault on establishment institutions, being thought responsible for enriching upper elites while holding stagnant or worse the living standards of almost the whole rest of society, an astonishing 99% being left behind.

In this downward global spiral, additional negative factors are associated with poor management of ending the Cold War, and the accompanying collapse of the Soviet Union. I would point to three principal negative impacts: (1) the failure of the United States as triumphant global leader to seize the opportunity to move the world toward greater peace, justice, and prosperity by strengthening the UN, by reallocating resources from defense to civilian infrastructure, and by initiating denuclearization and demilitarizing policies regionally and worldwide; (2) the degree to which the Soviet collapse led to a world economic order without ideological choices for political actors ('there is no alternative' mentality), it pushed capitalism toward inhumane extremes; as long as socialism as associated with Soviet leadership was part of the global setting, there were strong political incentives in the West to exhibit ethical concerns for human wellbeing, and social protection frameworks moderating the cruelty of minimally regulated market forces; in effect, capitalism needed the rivalry with socialism to maintain an acceptable ideological composure; (3) the sudden withdrawal of Soviet balancing influence in several regions of the world, especially the Middle East, led to order-maintaining cycles of oppressive patterns of governance, U.S. regime changing interventions, and political turmoil causing massive suffering, famine, and devastation.

This combination of domestic authoritarianism and state-centric foreign policy is inclining the world toward ecological catastrophe and geopolitical uncertainty, even chaos. This pattern is accentuated by world economic orientations that are oblivious to human and global interests, while slanting national interest toward the ultra-rich. In effect, the political future for formerly leading democratic states is now more accurately described as a mixture of autocracy and plutocracy.

One symptom of these implosive developments calls attention to the altered role of the United States in this overall conjuncture of historical forces. On the one side, is the reality of U.S. decline, accentuated by the behavior of Trump since 2016, which reflects the impact of this impulsive and anti-globalist leader and national mood, but also exhibits some longer deeper trends that transcend his

demagogic impact. The most important of these is the failure to learn from the reduced effectiveness of military force with respect to the pursuit of foreign policy given changes in the nature of political power and international status, especially in relations between the West and non-West. Costly interventions in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq have all ended in political failure, despite U.S. military dominance and a strong political commitment to the mission. The U.S. reaction has been to reframe tactics rather than to appreciate the enhanced capabilities in the post-colonial world of militarily vulnerable countries to mobilize prolonged resistance to interventions from the West, and thus repeat the experience of failed interventions in a new context. In this narrow regard, Trump's seeming repudiation of regime-changing wars was more realistic than the Pentagon's tendency to return to the drawing counterinsurgency and counterterrorist drawing boards to figure out how to do better next time. Yet Trump's militarism is evident in other forms, including seeking to extend military frontiers to outer space, and by his boasts about investing in producing the most powerful military machine in human history. In this respect, the U.S. not only is increasing risks of global catastrophe, but also inadvertently helping its international rivals to gain relative economic and diplomatic advantages. A crucial explanation of America's likely continuing decline results from two refusals: first, of the neutralization of military power among major states by the mutually destructive character of warfare and secondly, of asymmetric conflicts due to the rising capabilities of national resistance frustrating what had once been relatively simple colonial and imperial operations.

Another source of decline is that the kind of confrontation that existed during the Cold War no longer seems to exert nearly as much control over the security dimensions of world order as previously. Most European states feel less need for the American nuclear umbrella and the safety afforded by close alliance relations, which translates into reduced U.S. influence. This shift can be observed by the degree to which most states currently entrust their defensive security needs to national capabilities, somewhat marginalizing alliances that had been formally identified with U.S. leadership. In this regard, the bipolar and unipolar conceptions of world order have been superseded by multipolarity and statism in the dynamic restructuring of world order since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The profile of American decline, with respect to the international policy agenda could be rather abruptly altered, if not reversed, by an internationalist post-

Trump foreign policy. This would be particularly evident, in all likelihood, with respect to reaffirming cooperative efforts regarding climate change, reviving the 2015 Paris Agreement, and calling for a more obligatory approach to international regulatory arrangements. Of course, a revived American bid for global leadership would be further exhibited by certain foreign policy moves such as seeking balance in addressing Israel/Palestine relations, lifting economic sanctions from such countries as Cuba, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, and renewing adherence to the JCPOA (Nuclear Agreement) with Iran.

In a sense, the assessment and contours of American decline, reflective of so many factors, will become clearer after the 2020 elections. If Trump prevails, the decline thesis will be confirmed. If a centrist Democrat, say Biden, prevails, it will likely create a sense of relief internationally, along with a temporary suspension of doubt about the reality of decline, but will not override the longer run decline hypothesis as such a Democratic Party president will not challenge the Pentagon budget or the militarism that underpins American policy for the past 75 years. If, as now seems highly unlikely, the Democrats nominate a progressive candidate, say Sanders or Warren, and he is able to gain enough support in Congress, the trends pointing to further decline might not only be suspended, but possibly reversed. Addressing inequality arising from the plutocratic allocation of benefits resulting from neoliberal globalization and undoing the excessive reliance on military approaches to foreign policy are the only two paths leading to a sustainable renewal of American global leadership and prospects for a benevolent future.

C. J. Polychroniou: Do you detect any similarities between the current global geopolitical condition and that of the era of imperial rivalries prior to the outbreak of World War I?

Richard Falk: The imperial rivalries, at the root of the stumble into major warfare, were much more overt in the period preceding World War I than is the case today. Now imperial strategies are more disguised by soft power expansionism as is the case with China or geopolitical security arrangements and normative claims as is the American approach, but the possibility of an unwanted escalation in areas of strategic interaction are present, especially in areas surrounding China. Confrontations and crises can be anticipated in coming years, and without skillful diplomacy a war could result that could be more destructive and transformative of world order than was World War I.

There is also the possibility of hegemonic rivalry producing a major war in the Middle East, as between Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States on one side and Iran and Russia on the other side. The Syrian War prefigured on a national scale such hegemonic rivalry that could now recur on a regional scale. A more optimistic interpretation of developments in the Middle East is to suggest that the stability of the Cold War era might reemerge in light of Russian reengagement, which could restore the balance imposed earlier, and seem preferable to the turmoil and confrontations of the last 25 years. It would be prudent to take note of the World War I context to remind political leaders that they risk unwanted sequences of events if promoting aggressive challenges to the established order in regional or global settings.

Of course, triggering conditions prior to World War I were concentrated in Europe, whereas now it could be argued that the most dangerous situations are either geographically concentrated in the Middle East or in a variety of regional circumstances where coercive diplomacy could result in an unintended war that was as possibly on the Korean Peninsula or in relation to China where interest collide in the Western Pacific and South China Sea.

Graham Allison has written a widely discussed book, Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap? (2017), which argues that throughout history when the dominance of a state is challenged by a rising power a major war has frequently resulted to establish geopolitical ranking. Of course, circumstances have changed drastically since the time of Thucydides, due to the possession of nuclear weapons on both sides, a fact that is likely to encourage geopolitical caution as risks of mutual catastrophe are quite evident. At the same time complacency is not warranted as governments have not changed their reliance on threats and bluffs to achieve their goals, and the possibility of miscalculation is present as antagonisms climb escalation ladders.

More broadly, the existence of nuclear weapons, their deployment, and doctrines leading to their use in certain situations create conditions that are very different than what existed in Europe more than a century ago. Yet there is one rather frightening similarity. Threat diplomacy tends to produce conflict spirals that can produce wars based on misperception and miscalculation, as well as accident, rogue behavior, and pathological leadership. In other words, the world as it is now constituted, can as occurred in 1914, stumble into an unwanted war, and this time with casualties, devastation, and unanticipated side effects occurring on

a far greater scale.

Finally, there was no ecological issues confronting the world in 1914 as there are at present. Any war fought with nuclear weapons can alter the weather for up to ten years in disastrous ways. There is the fear validated by careful scholarly study that 'a nuclear famine' could be produced by stagnant clouds of smoke that would deprive the earth of the sunlight needed for agriculture. In other words, the consequences of a major war are so much more serious that its avoidance should be a top priority of any responsible leader. Yet, with so many irresponsible leaders, typified by Donald Trump, the rationality that would seem to prevent large scale war may not be sufficient to avoid its occurrence. Also, the mobilization of resources and the focus of attention on the war would almost certainly preclude urgent efforts to address global warming and other ecological challenges.

C. J. Polychroniou: Given that the historical conditions and specific political factors that gave rise to Cold War policies and institutions have vanished, what purpose does NATO serve today?

Richard Falk: Although the conditions that explained the formation and persistence of NATO were overcome by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and of the Soviet Union a few years later, NATO remained useful to some of its members for several reasons. For the United States, it kept the U.S. engaged in Europe, and sustained its role as alliance leader. For the major European powers, it represented a security guaranty in the event of a revived Russian threat, and lessened internal pressures to develop effective European military capabilities that did not depend on American participation. The Kosovo War in 1999 displayed a European consensus to transform NATO into an intra-European peace force, while the Libyan War of 2011 displayed a misleading willingness to manipulate the UN into authorizing NATO to engage in a regime-changing out of area military intervention that not only weakened the legitimacy of the post-Cold War UN and harmed Libya, but also understandably eroded trust in UN procedures on the part of Russia and China that had been persuaded to support a decision for a strictly limited humanitarian intervention but not for NATO sponsored regime change.

The NATO alliance should be disbanded in the interest of world peace and stability. Its only real function since 1989 has been to further the geopolitical

goals of the United States, and to a lesser extent, France and the UK. The persistence of NATO after its Cold War rationalization was undercut exemplifies a refusal of the West to make the structural adjustments that could have expressed an intention to make a transition from a pre-war environment of strategic confrontation that characterized the Cold War to a post-war atmosphere of dealignment and demilitarization. Had such a transition occurred, or even been attempted, we would now most likely be living in more positive historical circumstances with attention to the real economic, political, and ecological challenges to human wellbeing now and in the future being addressed. We would not need the awakening alarms being set off by a 16 year old Swedish girl!

C. J. Polychroniou: Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle East is unabashedly pro-Israel, while also supportive of Erdogan's grand vision for Turkey and the Arab world. Can you explain for us this apparent anomaly?

Richard Falk: It may be intellectually satisfying to give a coherent spin to Trump's seemingly antagonistic policies in the Middle East, but I feel it conveys a false sense of plan and strategy beyond the play of personality and ad hoc circumstance. The most that can be claimed it that there is a kind of hierarchy in arranging American foreign policies priorities, yet overall, lacking any sense of regional grand strategy. At the top of the Trump policy pyramid seem to be upholding the two 'special relationships' with Israel, first, and Saudi Arabia, second. Turkey is somewhat supported because of the seeming personal rapport between Erdogan and Trump, and partly also for reasons of continuity of alignment and economic trade relations. Iran is the perfect regional enemy for the United States to demonize. Iran is antagonistic to Saudi ambitions to assert a kind of regional hegemony and to Israel because of its pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist stance, and not a trading partner or strategic ally with the United States ever since the revolutionary overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Besides, Iran as the leading Shi'a state in the region is a sectarian foil for the Gulf/Egyptian Sunni affinities. Besides, Trump's insistence on repudiating Obama's initiatives encouraged the repudiation of the Nuclear Program Agreement negotiated in 2015 (JCPOA, that is, Joint Comprehensive Program of Action), are all part of this anti-Iran agenda carried forward at considerable risk and expense.

Although Trump campaigned on a pledge of disengagement from senseless regime-changing interventions of the past in the Middle East, especially the attack on and occupation of Iraq since 2003, it has been a difficult policy to

implement, especially in relation to Syria. This seems to reflect American deep state resistance to all demilitarizing moves in the Middle East, as well as Trump's quixotic and ambivalent style of diplomacy.

As far as Turkey is concerned, there seems to be some continuity in Erdogan's foreign policy, which is to support the Palestinian national struggle and to favor democratizing movements from below, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, but to avoid entanglements of the sort that led to a major foreign policy failure in Syria. Also, to support global reform by questioning the hold of the permanent members of the Security Council on UN decision-making, relying on the slogan 'the world is greater than five.').

C. J. Polychroniou: Do you see China emerging any time in the near future as a global superpower?

Richard Falk: I think China is already a global superpower in some fundamental respects, although not a global leader in the manner of the United States in the period between 1945-2016. Whether it has the political will to play a geopolitical role beyond its East Asia region is difficult to predict. Its top officials seems to sense a dangerous vacuum and inviting opportunity created by the withdrawal of the United States from its leadership position. At the same time, the Chinese themselves seem aware of their lack of experience beyond the Asian region, are preoccupied with domestic challenges, and realize that Chinese is not a global language nor the renminbi a global currency. For these reasons, I expect China to stay largely passive, or at most defensive, when it comes to the global geopolitical agenda, and use its considerable leverage to promote multipolarity in most international venues.

At the same time, China's superpower status can be affirmed in two different fundamental respects: as the only credible adversary of the United States in a major war and as a soft power giant when it comes to spreading its influence beyond its territorial limits by a variety of non-military means, most spectacularly by its Road and Belt Initiative, the largest investment undertaking in the world. If soft power status is the best measure of influence in a post-political world order, then China may have already achieved global leadership if history is at the dawn of a new period in which the role of military power and conquest as the principal agent of change is morphing toward obsolescence. Arguably the most telling symptom of American decline is its gross over-investment in military capabilities

despite enduring a series of political setbacks in situations where it dominated the battlefield and at the expense of domestic infrastructure and social protection. Perhaps, the Vietnam War is the clearest instance of total military superiority resulting in the loss of the war, but there are other notable instances (Afghanistan, Iraq).

C. J. Polychroniou: If you were asked to provide a radical vision of the world order in the 21st century, what would it look like?

Richard Falk: This is a difficult assignment. I would offer two sets of response, but with a realization of the radical uncertainty associated with any conjectures about the future of world order. My responses depend on some separation between considerations of policy and of structure. I respond on the basis of my tentative diagnosis of the present reality as posing the first bio-ethical-ecological crisis in world history.

With respect to policy, I would emphasize the systemic nature of the challenges, global in scale and scope. The most severe of these challenges relate to the advent of nuclear weapons, and the geopolitical policy consensus that has opted for a nonproliferation regime rather than a denuclearizing disarmament option. Such a regime contradicts the fundamental principle of world order based on the equality of states, large or small, when it comes to rights and duties under international law. It does, however, reflect adherence to the fundamental norm of geopolitics that is embedded in the UN Charter, which acknowledges inequality with respect to rights and duties, evident in other spheres of international life, including accountability for international crimes, as recognized by the demeaning phrase, 'victors' justice.' To address the challenges to world order that threaten the peoples of the world does not require overcoming political inequality, but it does require achieving two radical goals: 1) adherence to international law and the UN Charter by all states, which would at least entail national self-discipline and the elimination of the right of veto, but not necessarily permanent membership in the Security Council; 2) the strengthening of the autonomy of the United Nations in relation to the peace and security agenda by creating an independent funding arrangement based on imposing a tax on transnational travel, military expenditures, and luxury items. The objectives would be to move toward a global organization that was dedicated to the global and human interest as well as to the promotion of national interests as is now the case, which would depend on vesting implementing authority in the UN Secretary General as well as

the acceptance of a degree of demilitarization by current geopolitical actors, with proclamation of shared goals of making national security unambiguously defensive, and regulated.

In effect, the policy priorities to be served by such a radical reordering of global relations, shifting authority and power from its present geopolitical nexus to one that sought global justice and ecological sustainability, and was more institutionally situated in global networks and arrangements. In the scheme depicted above it would mean a rather dramatic shift from geopolitical autonomy to a more law-governed world order with effective mechanisms to serve the whole of humanity rather than being focused on the wellbeing of its distinct territorial parts. In the process, accompanying social democratic arrangements for trade, investment, and development would need to be adjusted to serve the attainment of basic economic and social rights as implemented by monitoring and regulatory procedures that were also sensitive to ecological sustainability.

It hard to imagine such policy and structural modifications taking place without a renewed confidence in democratic and generally progressive styles of governance at the national level, accountable to future generations, as well as to short-term electoral cycles. In other words, the behavioral tendencies and values that are now dominating most political arenas by dangerously myopic approaches to policy and structures of accountability would have to be transformed on the basis of ecological consciousness, respect for human rights and international law, and an international institutional structure oriented around the protection of human and global interests. There is no path visible to such a future at present, although there is a growing sense of alarm, as epitomized by the charismatic impact and impressive insight of Greta Thunberg. What is altogether missing are credible sources of revolutionary energy guided by such a vision of a necessary and desirable future, which would imply a rejection of autocratic governance of sovereign states and apartheid geopolitical regimes (as with nuclear weapons, accountability to international criminal law, and double stanndards). In effect, a drastic shift from a zero-sum world of destructive rivalry and political egoism to a win/world based on the emergence of a sense of global community accompanied by the mechanisms and structures to convert policy directives into behavioral conformity.

Previously published in Global Policy Journal, January 2020