

International Reconfiguration and the Challenges of Contemporary Complexity

La reconfiguración internacional y los desafíos de la complejidad contemporánea

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Rapid changes, uncertainty, and the reconfiguration of the international order have characterized the 21st century. The convergence of multiple crises, the proliferation of armed conflicts, and the rise of unconventional and transnational threats generate scenarios that place humanity at risk. The international society faces critical and contradictory moments.

Evidence suggests that, since the end of the Cold War, we have transitioned from an “old” international order to a “new” one. However, it can be argued that the old order has yet to fully “disappear” while the new order has yet to fully “emerge.” Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has triggered perceptions reminiscent of the *realpolitik* of World War II and the bipolar system that divided the world during the East-West struggle. This unfolds in a complex and interdependent international context where new forms of economic, political, military, technological, and ideological competition emerge.

Nation-states remain central actors. However, non-state actors have increased their prominence: individuals whose wealth surpasses the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of some countries, ever-evolving transnational technology companies with vast influence, as well as terrorist groups and transnational criminal organizations that threaten peace and security.

In this context, we cannot overlook the rise of social movements around the world, among which the following stand out: demonstrations advocating for the environment and climate justice; the social protests known as the Arab Spring; youth mobilizations in Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador; as well as struggles led by feminist movements.

During the first quarter of the 21st century, we are witnessing yet another cycle of the international order that emerged after 1945. Consequently, we are transitioning from the heyday of economic liberalism to the resurgence of protectionism, from the expansion of global value chains to processes of reshoring, and from the promotion of regional economic integration to multiple forms and configurations of regionalism.

Within this trajectory, China’s rise as an economic, technological, and military power stands out as it strategically positions itself on the global stage. The Asian giant, identified

by the United States as its primary strategic competitor, moves decisively by fostering alliances with countries in the Global South. In this light, we may ask ourselves: Are we on the brink of a new bipolarity?

The premises regarding the relationship between economic interdependence and peace, which gained significant prominence at the end of the last century, are now under debate, considering ongoing wars across multiple regions: the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and Asia. There are currently more than 50 active armed conflicts, with daily violations of human rights and International Humanitarian Law norms, a situation in which the United Nations (UN) appears to be overwhelmed.

We are watching the rise of new forms of conflict, renewed arms races, and the reactivation of military-industrial complexes. Because of the war in Ukraine, the European Union (EU) has redefined its security and defense strategy for the first time in its history, moving beyond its status as a “civilian power” to what has been termed “geopolitical Europe”, with all the implications that entail. Meanwhile, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has repositioned and expanded, with Finland and Sweden abandoning their neutral status to become member states.

As a result of ongoing wars and escalating geopolitical tensions, global military spending in 2023 reached its highest level in history, surpassing \$2.4 trillion (SIPRI, 2024). The specter of potential nuclear weapons use has resurfaced. Cyberspace is now considered a strategic domain, and new military technologies —such as hypersonic missiles, unmanned vehicles, lethal autonomous weapons, and artificial intelligence applications— are advancing rapidly.

The growth of radicalism and fundamentalism has been a defining feature of the 21st century. Democracies are in crisis, evidenced by the rise of radical political forces, the ascent of populism, new forms of personalist leadership, and authoritarian regressions alongside autocratic regimes. The discontent within democracies and contemporary societies is the result, among other factors, of widening inequalities between and within countries and the failure of political elites to construct welfare states and inclusive, secure societies. The current cycle of economic and political nationalism is closely tied to the role the United States will play in the world under Donald Trump's next administration.

Welfare was never globalized. On the contrary, numerous challenges regarding individuals' protection, well-being, and security persist. The Covid-19 pandemic, which claimed the lives of millions worldwide, coupled with escalating wars, climate crises, and food insecurity, has led to a deterioration in human development indices. In fact, uncertainty remains over achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

The 2024 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reveals that globally, “1.1 billion people live in extreme poverty, 40% of whom reside in countries affected by war, fragility, and/or limited peace”.

The convergence of crises and the rise of new risks to humanity—such as pandemics, environmental degradation, climate change, and natural disasters—demand new forms of international governance to confront them. Today, more than ever, multilateralism and the reform of international organizations are urgently needed.

This special issue of the *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* addresses the need to analyze the international system and its challenges, considering the ongoing reconfiguration processes within a context of crisis and heightened conflict. The articles in this issue contribute to the development of scientific knowledge and invite reflection on the imperative to promote a more just and equitable international system.

References

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