

The Resurgent Idea of World Government

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The idea of world government is returning to the mainstream of scholarly thinking about international relations. Universities in North America and Europe now routinely advertise for positions in “global governance,” a term that few would have heard of a decade ago. Chapters on cosmopolitanism and governance appear in many current international relations (IR) textbooks. Leading scholars are wrestling with the topic, including Alexander Wendt, perhaps now America’s most influential IR theorist, who has recently suggested that a world government is simply “inevitable.”¹ While some scholars envision a more formal world state, and others argue for a much looser system of “global governance,” it is probably safe to say that the growing number of works on this topic can be grouped together into the broader category of “world government”—a school of thought that supports the creation of international authority (or authorities) that can tackle the global problems that nation-states currently cannot.

It is not, of course, a new idea. Dreaming of a world without war, or of government without tyranny, idealists have advocated some kind of world or universal state since the classical period. The Italian poet Dante viewed world government as a kind of utopia. The Dutch scholar Hugo Grotius, often regarded as the founder of international law, believed in the eventual formation of a world government to enforce it. The notion interested many visionary thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley. In 1942 the one-time Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie published a famous book on the topic, *One World*. And after the Second World War, the specter of atomic war moved many prominent American scholars and activists, including Albert Einstein, the University of Chicago president Robert Hutchins, and the columnist Dorothy Thompson, to advocate an immediate world state—not so much out of idealistic dreams but because only such a state, they believed, could prevent a third world war fought with the weapons that had just obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The campaign

continued until as late as 1950, when the popular magazine *Reader's Digest* serialized a book by the world-government advocate Emery Reves, while at the same time the Senate Subcommittee on Foreign Relations was considering several motions to urge the Truman administration to adopt a policy of world federalism.² In fact, to this day the World Federalist Movement—an international NGO founded in 1947 and recognized by the United Nations—boasts a membership of 30,000 to 50,000 worldwide.

By the 1950s, however, serious talk of world government had largely disappeared. The failure of the Baruch Plan to establish international control over atomic weaponry in late 1946 signaled its demise, for it cleared the way (as the plan's authors quietly intended) for the United States and the Soviet Union to continue apace with their respective atomic projects. What state would place its trust in a world government when there were sovereign nations that possessed, or could soon possess, atomic bombs?³

Certainly, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was willing to do so, and once the two states committed themselves to the international rivalry that became known as the Cold War, the impossibility of true global government became obvious and the campaign in favor of it diminished. Even after the invention of thermonuclear weaponry and intercontinental missiles in the late 1950s, a technological development that threatened to destroy all of humanity, few voices in the West (it was never an issue in the Soviet bloc, at least until Gorbachev) were raised to demand a new kind of government that could somehow eliminate this danger. There were some exceptions: a surprising one was the common conclusion reached by the two American realists Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau, who deduced around 1960 that the “nuclear revolution” had made a world state logically necessary. But how to achieve one when the United States and the Soviet Union would never agree to it? Niebuhr and Morgenthau had no answer to this question. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell, however, did: the antinuclear activist once argued that, since his preferred solution of total disarmament was not going to occur, the nuclear revolution had made global government immediately necessary and, thus, the only way to achieve it was to wage war on the USSR. There was a perverse logic to this, but we can be thankful that his demands were not heeded.

The end of the Cold War, together with the emergence of various intractable global problems, has spurred the resurgence of writing about world government. In this essay I will introduce three themes that appear frequently in this

writing: how the “collective action problem” lies behind many of the current global crises; the debate between those who support a softer form of “governance” and those who look toward a full-fledged world state; and the fundamental question of whether world government is possible, and whether it is even desirable.

THE INTENSIFYING DANGERS OF INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

Certainly, one of the most evident failures of the nation-state system in recent years has been its inability to deal successfully with problems that endanger much or most of the world’s population. As the world has become more globalized—economically integrated and culturally interconnected—individual countries have become increasingly averse to dealing with international problems that are not caused by any single state and cannot be fixed even by the focused efforts of individual governments. Political scientists refer to this quandary as the “collective action problem,” by which they mean the dilemma that emerges when several actors have an interest in eradicating a problem that harms all of them, but when each would prefer that someone else do the dirty work of solving it. If everyone benefits more or less equally from the problem’s solution, but only the actor that addresses it pays the costs, then all are likely to want to “free ride” on the other’s efforts. The result is that no one tackles the problem, and everyone suffers.

Several such collective action problems dominate much of international politics today, and scholars of course debate their importance and relevance to world government. Nevertheless, a few obvious ones stand out, notably the imminent danger of climate change, the difficulty of addressing terrorism, and the complex task of humanitarian intervention. All of these are commonly (though not universally) regarded as serious problems in need of urgent solutions, and in each case powerful states have repeatedly demonstrated that they would prefer that somebody else solve them.

The solution to the collective action problem has long been known: it requires the establishment of some kind of authoritative regime that can organize common solutions to common problems and spread out the costs fairly. This is why many scholars and activists concerned with acute global problems support some form of world government. These advocates are not so naïve as to believe that such a system would put an effortless end to global warming, terrorism, or human rights atrocities, just as even the most effective national governments

have not eradicated pollution or crime. The central argument in favor of a world-government approach to the problems of globalization is not that it would easily solve these problems, but that it is the only entity that *can* solve them.

A less newsworthy issue, but one more central to many advocates of world government, is the persistent possibility of a third world war in which the use of megaton thermonuclear weaponry could destroy most of the human race. During the Cold War, nuclear conflict was averted by the specter of mutual assured destruction (MAD)—the recognition by the United States and the Soviet Union that a war between them would destroy them both. To be sure, this grim form of deterrence could well obtain in future international orders, but it is unwise to regard the Cold War as a promising model for future international politics. It is not at all certain that international politics is destined to return to a stable bipolar order, such as prevailed during the second half of the Cold War, but even if this does happen, there is no guarantee that nuclear deterrence would work as well as it did during the second half of the twentieth century. It is well to remember that the two sides came close to nuclear blows during the Cuban crisis, and this was over a relatively small issue that did not bear upon the basic security of either state. As Martin Amis has written, the problem with nuclear deterrence is that “it can’t last out the necessary timespan, which is roughly between now and the death of the sun.”⁴ As long as interstate politics continue, we cannot rule out that in some future conflict a warning system will fail, a leader will panic, governments will refuse to back down, a third party will provoke a response—indeed, there are any number of scenarios under which deterrence could fail and thermonuclear war could occur.

It is possible that the United States, if not other nations, can fight against the thermonuclear dilemma with technology. By constructing an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system, America could perhaps defend itself from a nuclear attack. Also, and more ominously, the United States may be on the verge of deploying an offensive nuclear capability so advanced that it could launch a first strike against a nuclear adversary and disarm it completely.⁵ But these are weak reeds. As things currently stand, an ABM system remains acutely vulnerable to inexpensive decoy tactics, jamming, and the simple response of building more missiles. The first-strike option is even more questionable: an aggressive or terrified United States could launch a nuclear war against a major adversary, but no American leader could be sure that every enemy weapon would be destroyed,

making the acute risks of initiating such a war (unless a full-scale enemy thermonuclear attack was imminent and certain) likely to outweigh the benefits. Technology is unlikely to solve the nuclear dilemma.

Theorists considering world government regard the thermonuclear dilemma as particularly salient because it epitomizes the dangers of the continuation of the interstate system. As long as sovereign nations continue to possess nuclear arsenals, nuclear war is possible, and the only apparent way to put a permanent end to this possibility is to develop some kind of world government, an entity with sufficient power to stop states—not to mention subnational groups—from acquiring nuclear arsenals and waging war with them.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE VERSUS A WORLD STATE

Scholars nevertheless disagree whether an informal, loose form of governance is sufficient, or whether a more formal world state is necessary. Supporters of global governance argue that the unique dangers created by globalization can be solved by a gradual strengthening of existing international institutions and organizations, making the imposition of a full-blown world state unnecessary. Anthony McGrew, a leading scholar of globalization in the British academy, where support for global governance is particularly pronounced, suggests that global problems can be effectively dealt with by liberal international agencies, such as the World Trade Organization; nongovernmental organizations, such as Greenpeace and Doctors Without Borders; and security bodies, such as the U.N. Security Council. McGrew argues that the key is to grant increased and more formal powers to such institutions and organizations, ultimately giving them greater effectiveness and influence on the international stage than nation-states. Another British scholar, David Held, stresses the importance of making international institutions accountable to democratic controls. Held maintains that the world's population must have a direct say in the composition and policies of increasingly powerful international bodies.⁶ Held, along with others who insist on greater democratic oversight of global institutions, worries that the current "democratic deficit" afflicting existing international bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the U.N. Security Council, could become far worse as they acquire and wield greater and greater power.

The European Union is often offered as a model of what could happen at the international level. Gradually, once-hostile European states have cooperated to

develop forms of transnational governance without subjecting themselves to the convulsive and possibly violent task of creating a European state. Nations that might refuse to accept the formation of a dominant state have nevertheless readily accepted the establishment of institutions and bureaucracies that slowly create transnational political bonds and reduce their own sovereignty. True, the process of establishing the European Union has been unsure and—for those who want to see a stronger political union—remains incomplete, but it has taken place, and in a peaceful manner. A similar process at the international level, contend advocates of global integration, would constitute a practical way to establish global government.

Theorists who believe that a more formal world state is necessary do not necessarily disagree with the logic of global governance: it is difficult to dispute the claim that the gradual creation of supranational institutions is likely to be more feasible and peaceful than the imposition of a true world state. The “key problem” for the governance argument, however, as Alexander Wendt writes, is “unauthorized violence by rogue Great Powers.”⁷ As long as sovereign states continue to exist under a system of governance, in other words, there is nothing to prevent them from using violence to disrupt the international peace for their own purposes. The European Union has created forms of transnational governance, but decision-making in the areas of security and defense is still the prerogative of its member states. Thus, the EU remains effectively powerless to stop violence undertaken by one of its own members (such as Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war), not to mention war waged by other nations even in its own backyard (such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Until this problem is solved, world-state advocates argue, any global order will be too fragile to endure. Sooner or later a sovereign state will wage war, and the inability of a regime of global governance to stop it will deprive it of authority and legitimacy. International politics would then revert to the old state system.

In “Why a World State Is Inevitable,” Wendt argues that a formal world state—by which he means a truly new sovereign political entity, with constitutional authority over all nations—will naturally evolve as peoples and nations come to realize that they cannot obtain true independence, or what Wendt calls “recognition,” without one. In other words, the advent of global technologies and weaponry present weaker societies with an emerging choice between subjugation to powerful states and globalized forces or participation in an authentic world government; a world state would not threaten distinct national cultures,

as pluralist scholars have argued, but rather it is the only entity that can preserve them. Wendt sees this as a teleological phenomenon, by which he means that the logic of globalization and the struggle by all cultures and societies for recognition are bound to lead to a world state whether it is sought or not. Such a state, Wendt argues, would not need to be particularly centralized or hierarchical; as long as it could prevent sovereign states from waging war, it could permit local cultures, traditions, and politics to continue.⁸ But a looser system of governance would not be enough, because societies that seek recognition could not trust it to protect them from powerful states seeking domination.

Daniel Deudney's recent book, *Bounding Power*, provides the fullest and most creative vision yet of formal world government in our age.⁹ Deudney argues that the driving force behind world government is the fact that international war has become too dangerous. Unified by a common interest in avoiding nuclear extermination, states have the ability to come together in much the same way as tribes and fiefdoms have in the past when advances in military technology made conflict among them suicidal. Unlike Wendt, Deudney does not see this as an inevitability: states may well choose to tolerate interstate anarchy, even though it will sooner or later result in a nuclear war. But Deudney is also optimistic that a world government created for the purpose of avoiding such a war can be small, decentralized, and liberal. In *Bounding Power*, he develops an elaborate case for the establishment of a world republic, based upon the same premise of restraining and diffusing power that motivated the founders of the American republic in the late eighteenth century.

World-state theorists such as Wendt and Deudney stress the danger that advocates of more global governance often downplay: the risk that ambitious sovereign states will be unrestrained by international institutions and agencies, even unprecedentedly powerful ones, and wage war for traditional reasons of power and profit. For Wendt, military conflict of this sort will simply push along the inevitable process of world-state formation, as societies and peoples recognize that a return to interstate anarchy will only unleash more such wars, while a world government will put an end to them and so guarantee their cultural independence. Deudney is less hopeful here. Military conflict in our age can well mean thermonuclear war, an event that could put an end to the pursuit of meaningful human independence and of the kind of world government that would respect it.

IS A WORLD GOVERNMENT POSSIBLE?

The initial argument against a world state, and even a coherent system of global governance, is the one that anyone can see immediately: it is impractical. How could nations of radically different ideologies and cultures agree upon one common political authority? But the “impracticality” argument disregards historical experience. The history of state formation from the days of city-states to the present era is precisely the history of warring groups with different ideologies and cultures coming together under a larger entity. While the European Union is not at all yet a state, who would not have been denounced as insane for predicting a political and economic union among France, Germany, and other European states seventy years ago? For that matter, how “practical” would it have seemed forty years ago to foresee the peaceful end of the Cold War? As Deudney argues, smaller political units have always merged into larger ones when technology has made the violence among them unsustainable. The surprising thing, he maintains, would be if this did *not* happen at the planetary level.

The more important objections to world government posit not that it is impractical but that it is unnecessary and even undesirable. According to one such argument, the world should be governed not by a genuinely international authority but rather by the United States: a Pax Americana.¹⁰ This school of thought stresses two main points: that such authority could more readily come into being without the violent convulsions that would likely accompany genuine world-state formation; and, as neoconservative writers particularly stress, that a world run by the United States would be preferable to a genuinely transnational world government given the superiority of American political, economic, and cultural institutions.

The case against Pax Americana, however, can be boiled down to one word: Iraq. The war in Iraq has shown that military operations undertaken by individual nation-states lead, as they have always done, to nationalist and tribal reactions against the aggressor that pay no heed to larger claims of superior or inferior civilizations. The disaster in Iraq has emboldened other revisionist states and groups to defy American will, caused erstwhile allies and friends of the United States to question its intentions and competence, and at the same time soured the American people on future adventures against states that do not overtly threaten them. In conceiving and executing its war in Iraq, it would have been difficult for the Bush administration to undermine the project of Pax

Americana more effectively had it tried to do so. The United States could choose in future to rally other states behind it if it can persuade them of a global threat that must be vanquished. But, as Wendt implies, to do that successfully is effectively to begin the process of world-state formation.

Another objection to world government was first identified by Immanuel Kant. In articulating a plan for perpetual peace, Kant stopped short of advocating a world state, for fear that the state could become tyrannical. In a world of several nation-states, a tyranny can be removed by other states or overthrown from within. At least it could be possible for oppressed citizens of that state to flee to less repressive countries. But a sovereign world government could be invulnerable to such measures. It could not be defeated by an external political rival; those who would overthrow it from within would have nowhere to hide, no one to support them from the outside. Kant concluded that these dangers overrode the permanent peace that could be had with world government, and he ended up advocating instead a confederation of sovereign, commercial states.

One can raise two points in response to Kant's deeply important concern. First, he wrote in the eighteenth century, when the specter of war was not omnicidal and the planet did not face such global crises as climate change and transnational terrorism. International politics as usual was not as dangerous an alternative to his vision of perpetual peace as it potentially is today. Second, as Deudney argues, there is one central reason to believe that a world government could avoid the temptations of tyranny and actually exist as a small, federal authority rather than a global leviathan.¹¹ This is the indisputable fact that—barring extraterrestrial invasion—a world government would have no need for a policy of external security. States often become increasingly tyrannical as they use external threats to justify internal repression and authoritarian policies. These threats, whether real or imagined, have throughout history and to the present day been used by leaders to justify massive taxation, conscription, martial law, and the suppression of dissent. But no world government could plausibly make such demands.

Will the world-government movement become a potent political force, or will it fade away as it did in the late 1940s? To a degree the answer to this question depends on the near-term future of international politics. If the United States alters its foreign policy and moves to manage the unipolar world more magnanimously, or, alternatively, if a new power (such as China) arises quickly to balance American power and instigate a new Cold War, the movement could

fade. So, too, if existing international organizations somehow succeed in ameliorating climate change, fighting terrorism, and preventing humanitarian crises and other global problems. On the other hand, if the United States continues to pursue a Pax Americana, or if the transnational problems worsen, the movement could become a serious international cause.

These considerations aside, as Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and others discerned during the height of the Cold War, the deepest argument for world government—the specter of global nuclear war—will endure as long as sovereign nation-states continue to deploy nuclear weaponry. Whatever occurs over the near-term future, that is a fact that is not going away. The great distinction between the international system prevailing in Niebuhr and Morgenthau’s day and the system in our own time is that the chances of attaining some form of world government have been radically enhanced by the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar order. This condition, however, will not last forever.

NOTES

¹ Alexander Wendt, “Why a World State Is Inevitable,” *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (2003), pp. 491–542. For a more extensive discussion of new scholarship on world government, see especially Catherine Lu, “World Government,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2006 Edition); available at plato.stanford.edu/entries/world-government/.

² See Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); and Luis Cabrera, “Introduction,” in Cabrera, ed., *Global Governance/Global Governance*, forthcoming.

³ Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁴ Martin Amis, *Einstein’s Monsters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), pp. 16–17.

⁵ Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, “The End of MAD?: The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy” *International Security* 30, no. 4 (2006), pp. 7–44. Lieber and Press do not advocate an American first strike against a potential aggressor; they simply argue that the United States has developed a capability to do so.

⁶ For an overview of McGrew’s and Held’s positions, see Anthony McGrew and David Held, eds., *Governing Globalization* (London: Polity, 2002), chaps. 13 and 15. Also see Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). American scholars in favor of global governance include Richard Falk, *On Humane Governance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). For an innovative treatment of the problem of global democracy, see Luis Cabrera, *Political Theory of Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Case for the World State* (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁷ See Wendt, “Why a World State Is Inevitable,” p. 506.

⁸ *Ibid.*, especially pp. 507–10 and 514–16. For the argument that world government would threaten cultural pluralism, see Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁹ Daniel H. Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ For example, Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹¹ Deudney, *Bounding Power*, esp. chap. 6 and conclusion.