

Interpreting a Changing World Order

Contemporary international politics is marked by a paradox: at a time when geopolitical transformations appear increasingly visible, the conceptual frameworks through which those transformations are interpreted seem increasingly uncertain. The return of war to Europe, the re-emergence of great-power competition, the fragmentation of global governance, the acceleration of technological and energy transitions, and the growing centrality of information in international affairs all point towards a rapidly evolving international environment. Yet while change itself has become impossible to ignore, there is far less agreement on how it should be understood. This raises a broader question: do the conceptual frameworks that shaped our understanding of world politics over the last decades remain adequate for interpreting the emerging international order?

The contributions collected in this issue do not offer a single answer to this question. Rather, they illuminate different dimensions of a common problem: how to understand a world in which established balances, traditional forms of power, and long-standing analytical categories are all undergoing significant transformation.

A first set of reflections concerns the evolving structure of international order. The assumptions that accompanied the post-Cold War era appear increasingly contested: strategic rivalry has returned to the centre of international politics, geopolitical competition has intensified across multiple regions, and the future configuration of the international system remains uncertain; questions concerning European security, the role of major powers, the consequences of geopolitical realignment, and the capacity of regional actors to navigate an increasingly fragmented environment have once again become central to scholarly and political debate. Whether the contemporary international system is witnessing a process of strategic rebalancing or a more profound transition remains open to discussion.

What is clear, however, is that the stability once associated with the liberal international order can no longer be taken for granted.

At the same time, the contemporary international system is witnessing important changes in the forms through which power is exercised and influence is projected. For much of the twentieth century, power was primarily understood through military capabilities, economic resources, and institutional leverage. While these dimensions remain fundamental, contemporary world politics increasingly highlights the strategic importance of other factors: energy systems, technological innovation, access to critical resources, information networks, public diplomacy, and international reputation have become central components of political competition; climate and energy transitions are no longer merely environmental issues: they are also questions of development, global inequality, technological dependency, and geopolitical influence. Similarly, credibility, legitimacy, and reputation have acquired a strategic value that extends well beyond the traditional boundaries of soft power. In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to shape perceptions and mobilise trust has become an essential component of international influence.

Yet the transformations affecting international politics are not limited to institutions, power relations, or geopolitical alignments: they also concern the analytical frameworks through which contemporary developments are interpreted. As the international environment becomes more complex, scholars are increasingly confronted with the limits of inherited conceptual categories: the relationship between war and politics, the interaction between global and regional dynamics, the dialogue between historical processes and contemporary challenges, and the growing need for interdisciplinary approaches all point towards the necessity of intellectual renewal.

Understanding a changing world order therefore requires more than the observation of events: it demands continuous reflection on the concepts, assumptions, and methodologies through which those events acquire meaning. Read through this lens, the contributions gathered in the present issue invite readers to reflect on three closely interconnected questions: how international order is changing, how the forms of power shaping contemporary politics are evolving, and whether the analytical frameworks inherited from previous decades remain adequate for understanding these transformations.

Particularly significant in this regard is the *Horizons* section, which brings together a rich set of reflections that, from different geographical, historical, and disciplinary perspectives, engage with some of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary world politics.

Interpreting a changing world order is ultimately not only a matter of analysing geopolitical developments: it is also an exercise in intellectual adaptation. If contemporary international politics is increasingly defined by uncertainty, the challenge is not merely to explain change, but also to rethink the conceptual tools through which change is understood.

At a time when the future configuration of international order remains uncertain, intellectual renewal may prove no less necessary than political adaptation.