On the Future of Order in Cyberspace

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Abstract

This brief response takes aim at the theoretical determinism present in the building blocks of James Forsyth and Billy Pope's work. Reference to a variant of political realism that emphasizes the coordinative nature of international society brings forward several potential problems for scholars and strategic planners attempting to move beyond the authors' work in the future. In particular, overemphasis on the definitive power of state functionality online runs counter to conventional wisdom on the developmental nature of cyberspace as societally horizontal in nature. While this does little to affect the final argument, there are significant consequences in lessons that actors might take and apply to policy production and operational planning efforts. Another critique of Forsyth and Pope's main argument has to do with their assertion that the distribution of power in international affairs is likely to shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. A side effect of their overreliance on the notion of anarchy, competition, and social order in international politics is that such thinking ignores both recent history and more recent scholarship on the balance of power in world politics.

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These days, few areas of scholarship and analysis capture the attention of policy makers and academics in the security studies field as effectively as does the broad cyberspace and national security enterprise.

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One needs only look to recent events—notably, official statements that cybersecurity has become the number one concern in military planning and development and the major digital assaults against North Korea's online infrastructure—to see the degree to which security policy is often synonymous with cyber policy.

In a recent edition of this journal, James Forsyth and Billy Pope outline and assess a significant question that links digital developments in national security to international politics: "Will international order—the kind that is essential to sustain the elementary goals of the society of states—emerge in cyberspace?"[1] They argue that order in all things cyber is inevitable due to the shifting dynamics of state interactions in world politics. Order derives in different ways from dynamics of power and competition, particularly competition over issues of sovereignty.[2] The inevitability of order between states in cyberspace, they argue, comes from the fact that power and the framework of competition are always—explicitly or otherwise—being negotiated among states. Thus, particularly as the international system moves from a unipolar format to a multipolar one, great powers will have no choice but to cooperate and "create rules, norms and standards of behavior to buttress" the formation of a broader new political order.[3]

Forsyth and Pope's contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on cybersecurity as a facet of international security is extremely welcome. Few enough scholars have turned their attention to issues of cyberspace and national security beyond the technical or the organizational, and the authors' article makes a strong argument about the interconnection between state auspices and the trajectory of cybersecurity trends. Notably, Forsyth and Pope's argument possesses appropriate scope to accommodate and mitigate a large number of potential critiques, many of which have become commonplace in emergent debates on digital affairs. For the authors, "cyber order" does not mean harmony in digital security interactions, and there is no attempt to graft their assertion regarding regime inevitability onto existing international order. The normative make up of a future regime cannot be known and, beyond arguing that norms and rules will likely emerge based around minimal standards of permissible interactions, there is no effort—rightly so, in my opinion—to describe in detail what the "normalization" of cyber in world politics might look like.

However, quite apart from the reasonable and defensible conclusions of their piece, it seems important to put the assumptions that drive Forsyth and Pope's analysis under the microscope. While their argument appears robust in the face of obvious criticism—that it proposes to "solve" cyber concerns, for example, or that it fails to consider the "extraordinary" nature of the online domain—the implications of it derive from particular theoretical assumptions about the nature of power and actor capabilities in the international system. Value to be drawn from such work in the pursuit of policy-relevant assumptions or in strategic understanding of various cyber developments essentially relies on the strength of the merits of broad assessments of the dynamics of world politics. In other words, moving beyond the general argument in research or policy making requires reference to the assumptions made in the piece about the nature of world politics and the disposition of digital developments. Thus, a debate on conceptual precepts is critical; otherwise, the scholarly enterprise on cyberspace and international security stands to accept the risks of rigid parametrization—for example, accepting one set of perspectives on the dynamics of world politics over alternatives—of analysis beyond the scope of mainstream work in international relations.

The remainder of this brief response takes aim at the theoretical determinism present in the building blocks of Forsyth and Pope's work. Reference to a variant of political realism that emphasizes the coordinative nature of international society brings forward several potential problems for scholars and strategic planners attempting to move beyond the authors' work in the future. In particular, overemphasis on the definitive power of state functionality online runs counter to conventional wisdom on the developmental nature of cyberspace as societally horizontal in nature. While this does little to affect the final argument, there are significant consequences in lessons that might be taken and applied to policy production and operational planning efforts. Moreover, the poorly justified assertion that the international system is undergoing, or is likely to undergo, transition toward a multipolar distribution of power requires further explication. Thus far, it seems fair to suggest that comprehension of the nuance of cyber dynamics depends on understanding the mechanical (both political and technical) nature of digital developments. Given this, the nature of system constraints under a different future political order, such as state-centrism or issues of polarity, significantly affects the degree to which any regime on cybersecurity

might reflect the power dynamics of interstate relations. By contrast, prominent alternatives of future political order might suggest a radically different institutional or societal basis for a normative cyber regime. After all, different political developments in the aggregate lead to different governance structures, which mean different nodes of interaction for actors looking to build a regime. Again, these points do not contradict the high-level argument made by Forsyth and Pope, but the points are worthy of significant consideration as determinants of the utility of scholarly work about future order in cyberspace.

State-Centrism: A Limiting Assumption

Forsyth and Pope, in outlining the realist perspective on order in world politics, refer principally to the societal view of the anarchic international system presented in Hedley Bull's famous 1977 work.[4] In *The Anarchical Society*, Bull argues that anarchy drives international politics but is not the bottom line in determining state behavior. Anarchy does incentivize competitive political behavior that leads to the construction of international order, but thereafter, actors invariably respond to social cues present in the composition of power politics to coordinate with peer competitors. The result is a dynamic form of normalized modes of interaction—in essence, a "society" that, of course, takes on different shapes depending on the conditions of history. Actors within the system are motivated to coordinate on a number of fronts, including the preservation of the broader political order itself and of the "rules of the road" that govern interaction. This general understanding of the shape of cycles in world politics forms the first of two predeterminant implications of Forsyth and Pope's argument.

An appropriate criticism of reliance on the societal view of world politics can be found in Bull's own 1977 work and has some relatively significant implications for the utility of Forsyth and Pope's argument. Bull argued, quite apart from the state-centric system he and others tended to describe in their discussions of anarchy and political behavior, that the international system is likely to experience a complexification of processes as state power erodes.[5] New political actors possessed of new means of social construction and power projection will increasingly tax the ability of states to affect governance outcomes across the highest levels of politics in domestic and international affairs. An obvious example

of this, a prominent feature of the global agenda for a decade and a half now, would be transnational terrorist networks that leverage global information and propaganda techniques to undermine traditional national integrity. In terms of the development of cyberspace, the erosion of state power manifests in the capacity of nonstate actors to achieve far-reaching effects online, the reliance of governments on private industry as part of a "new" national security paradigm, and more.

Though it would be an overreach to describe today's international system as one defined by "new medievalism," it is certainly the case that aspects of Bull's articulation of the power erosion trend resonate with a brief empirical glance at the trajectory of major issues in the global agenda in recent years. Indeed, even if one were to take a position opposing the new medieval perspective, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter's vision of world order as increasingly network-based, one still must admit the sources of authority in world affairs have diversified and continue to do so today.[6] Additionally, while neither Bull nor Slaughter would argue that states are an inappropriate bellwether of political trends today, understanding future order as one driven by network interactions and transnational, nonstate actions *as well as by state processes* yields significantly different implications for organizations and countries—particularly militaries—that seek to adapt to meet future challenges.

Taking the development of military doctrine and organizational capacity as an example, the foundation of assessments of future cyber order as based on a networked, transnational set of global conditions instead of an institutional, state-centric set of conditions has several obvious implications. Programmatic outreach for the purposes of intermilitary cyber cooperation, though still focused in several obvious cases on major powers, might instead benefit from a structural design that emphasizes low-level, broad-scope attempts to interface with local security infrastructure around the world. After all, governance structures are likely to be markedly different in a world in which authority on security affairs continues to fragment (unlike the great power-centric vision outlined by Forsyth and Pope). Programmatic points of interaction would necessarily be different, and strategic planning would have to accommodate the restructuring of public-private and governmental global operations consistent with the need to line up with a markedly diffuse network of foreign counterparts.

Moreover, as future military campaigns using cyberweaponry in support of regular forces might be expected to increasingly mirror recent trends towards antimilitant or anticonventional military forces centered on select urban environments, it seems logical that military forces should eschew a centralized combatant command for cyber operations aimed at supporting conventional assault in favor of a distributed set of commands attached to particular service outfits. While some countries, such as the United States, might be able to accommodate a large enough set of operational structures to meet both traditional and nontraditional mission imperatives, most states will have to prioritize appropriately. Additionally, there is wisdom in adopting the assumption that partner or target authorities for combat, training, or other operations in years to come will increasingly be regional or local in nature, as even state authorities will necessarily devolve capacity as appropriate to deal with decentralized issues of cyber governance and cybersecurity.

Polarity: A Potential Incentive to Avoid Great Power-Based Order Online

Another critique of Forsyth and Pope's main argument has to do with their assertion that the distribution of power in international affairs is likely to shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. A side effect of their overreliance on the notion of anarchy, competition, and social order in international politics is that such thinking ignores both recent history and more recent scholarship on the balance of power in world politics. This does not mean to suggest the authors ignore the present state of global politics. However, the framework they construct is reminiscent—for obvious reasons—of the structural realism of the 1960s and 1970s. A variety of updated analyses of determinants of power distributions in global affairs offer alternative possible trajectories for future power dynamics that could have major implications for policy makers and strategic planners in the future.

For example, the structural realism of Kenneth N. Waltz and, in broad terms, Hedley Bull dictates that a system hegemon invariably suffers the effects of balancing from nonpeer competitors in the international system as they try to deal with the outweighted distribution of power in world politics.[7] Balancing can occur internally or externally and through a number of different means. During the past 35 years, work on soft bal-

ancing and alliance politics that seeks to explain the dynamics of exactly this type of behavior has developed within the international relations field.

The issue with the assumption that other states are balancing against the United States—even in granular terms that do not interfere with enjoyment of the public goods of the current international system—is that, according to some, American power continues to present in such a way as to discourage balancing. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth note that unipolarity holds and is likely to continue to hold on almost every front.[8] American military supremacy is remarkable, even in an era where commitments to meeting security challenges have spread forces relatively thin. Military spending is massive and yet remains a drop in the economic pond that is America's national income potential. Likewise, the natural advantages of isolation in North America continue to protect the country from threats on a number of fronts. Against those who argue that America's reputation has suffered from protracted wars in the Middle East, Brooks and Wohlforth show that this reputation is actually a multipronged phenomenon and that the American reputation—in particular, its reputation as global leader—remains intact and vibrant across many different issues including trade and human rights. Against those who argue that issues of institutional legitimacy will undoubtedly prove to be a drag on American unilateralism, Brooks and Wohlforth assert that leadership on global issues continues to compensate for the "bending" of rules in the American case. Unipolarity is not only a fact; it is also likely an enduring and relatively stable condition for world politics.

To any organization, agency, or service attempting to develop doctrine regarding the future shape of challenges and resources on cyberspace and cybersecurity issues, this one alternative to the "unipolarity naturally gives way to multipolarity" perspective provides a glimpse of potential problems that arise from mislabeled foundational baselines. The literature on the effects of unipolarity on international politics provides a number of unusual hypotheses and predictions regarding the motivations of secondary "great" powers and nonstate groups around the world. Nuno P. Monteiro argues that low-level conflict is almost inevitable under unipolarity, as regions and specific lesser actors react to shifts in unipole sponsorship and oversight.[9] Unipolar engagement polarizes regional actors that cannot find other states with which to align,

while disengagement maintains only system-level assurances about security and leaves regional actors desperate to secure local security, often against nonstate actors that are motivated by a lack of a coherent regional security infrastructure.

The unipolar baseline differs significantly from a multipolar or transitional world in which government entities might safely construct strategies for development and engagement via reference to the assumption that peer institutions abroad respond to the same international political dynamics. For US military and other governmental services, engagement on cyberspace issues is unlikely to fit with the picture of great power politics presented by Waltz, Bull, and others. Strategic planners might again find value in adopting a fragmented programmatic approach to force structuring that emphasizes limited theater engagements with cyber support. Likewise, intelligence and diplomatic outreach will necessarily have to work with region-specific entities responsible for information infrastructure management, whether these be state governments, local authorities, market entities, or not existent.

Conclusion

International order in cyberspace is, indeed, inevitable. One might say that about most broad-scoped phenomena in world politics, of course, but Forsyth and Pope have done the emerging field of cybersecurity research a favor in flouting the trend to treat digital developments as "extraordinary." Normative and rule-based standards of behavior regarding cyber will undoubtedly emerge in the international system over time, and those concerned with particular digital threats to national security should expect the task of conceptualizing cyberspace in the context of trends in global affairs to ease in decades to come.

In terms of the usefulness of such an expectation, however, the nature of international politics beyond cyberspace matters a great deal. Particularly with cyber, where technical developments and agent-specific capacity significantly rests beyond the auspices of high-level state decision-making processes, international order and subsequent constraints on state behavior might not result from the distribution of power and the nature of interstate competition in the international system. Analyzing the digital domain in the context of world affairs beyond traditional structural perspectives is necessary if scholars, analysts, and policy plan-

ners aim to extract any value from such a basic understanding of the trajectory of the political outgrowths of technical evolutions. **SSQ**

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Notes

1. James Wood Forsyth Jr. and Billy E. Pope, "Structural Causes and Cyber Effects: Why International Order is Inevitable in Cyberspace," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 113–30.

2. Ibid., 114–19.

3. Ibid., 121–23.

4. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London, UK: MacMillan, 1977), 335.

5. Collier and Mahoney (1996) coined the phrase complexification to reference the unnecessary complexity added to conceptual notions by social scientists in the quest to build the tools necessary to generate inference and knowledge. See David Collier and James Mahoney, "Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (October 1996): 56–91.

6. Anne-Marie Slaughter, "The Real New World Order," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (September–October 1997): 183–97.

7. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 256.

8. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 248.

9. Nuno P. Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is Not Peaceful," *International Security* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2011/2012): 9–40.

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