
Global Discord: Values and Power in a Fractured World Order

By Paul Tucker

Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2024, 552 pages, \$16.75 (paperback), ISBN: 9780691229317

Reviewed by Maheera Munir, Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS)

DOI: 10.25253/99.2026282.BR1

Global Discord: Values and Power in a Fractured World Order by Paul Tucker portends a dichotomy between legitimate (democratic) states and autonomous (autocratic) states. The author is a former Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, now serving as a Harvard Kennedy School Fellow. With years

of experience as a monetary regulator, Tucker attempts to reconfigure the intersection of politics and economics in understanding the current geopolitical and changing global order. In Tucker's view, the liberal international order is now fractured, given the increasing discord between long-standing Western powers and the rising challengers.

The book comprises 20 chapters, divided into five sections. The first section builds on the history and theory of International Relations, praising how the Westphalian system of the late 19th century paved the way for the liberal order. However, what Tucker regards as the success of the West was, in reality, the period of imperialist overstretch for the rest of the world. The author is a staunch supporter of international institutions, norms, and principles that collectively create the international society, with the U.S.-led order serving as its foundational block. The book compares the strategic competition between the U.S. and China today to the 19th century rivalry between Britain and France for influence in the



international system. It examines how the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is challenging the global system, asserting that these current tensions are ideological, rather than civilizational, which reflects the author's Cold War-style political thinking.

Against this assertion, Tucker proposes the concept of legitimate realism in the next sections, which is an incentives-based, values-informed strategy to protect liberal institutions from autarkic powers. Legitimate realism finds its philosophical roots in David Hume's theory of conventions, i.e., the conventions governing the international system ensure stability under the incentive of mutual advantages they offer to all participants, and Bernard Williams' theory of politics, i.e., those in power are required to justify the use of power to their subjects to uphold political legitimacy. Based on this Hume-William nexus, the central argument of the book is that the fragmenting global order necessitates liberal democratic states to devise ways of cooperation with autarkic states that maximize their interests and political legitimacy, while upholding liberal norms and institutions.

Derived from this argument is Tucker's idea of concentric circles: the extent of cooperation should depend on common values and interests, as well as the degree of threat per-

ception, to sustain both internal and external legitimacy. This suggests strengthening cooperation between Western and like-minded states, while limiting cooperation with autocratic states to a level that falls somewhat short of peaceful coexistence. The author calls it the responsibility of all liberal states – a distinctly British thought, indeed – to identify what principles are non-negotiable, form coalitions of like-minded states for the protection of core public goods, and design institutions with self-enforcing mechanisms that make compliance attractive, rather than forced.

Methodologically, the incentives-values approach of legitimate realism appears useful as it offers a middle ground between naïve universalism and absolutist realism. It calls for international institutions to be both moral (seen as just by relevant publics) and useful (providing benefits to all). Practically, however, feasibility remains a challenge. While the incentives-values approach of legitimate realism provides a critical lens in understanding the contemporary global realities, it is not decisive. More often than not, incentives and values conflict, and it would be largely impossible to define a set of criteria for choosing one over the other. Given the multitude of involved variables, even democracies struggle to reach a consensus regarding which values can be compromised and which incentives can be forsaken.

Interestingly, most of the book's arguments revolve around the assumption that democracies can coordinate without challenges, ignoring power asymmetries between democracies themselves. The size of material capabilities, national interests, and domestic political conditions often complicate the formation of coalitions. Bigger democracies often employ coercive diplomacy to influence

the actions of smaller democracies. While the ideologies match, the interests might not always align.

Moreover, although the author acknowledges that states cannot be made liberal by fiat, his ideas of legitimate realism and concentric circles overlook the fact that the liberal order itself has created interdependencies through globalization. From international institutions like the World Bank to supply chains and trade, the world is deeply integrated. Developed countries are dependent on these autocratic states for oil, gas, raw materials, and food products. For instance, since the Russia-Ukraine war broke out in 2022, the EU has not been able to fully decouple from Russian gas and petroleum imports. Considering the interdependent and interconnected nature of the contemporary international system, the concept of concentric circles appears to necessitate protectionist, containment-like approaches that would only encourage bloc politics and invite greater anarchy.

Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the transnational application of norms, rather than applying them only where and when necessary, to maintain the order that allows cooperative regimes to be feasible in international society. The author also discusses pluralistic liberalism as a plausible way for allowing constitutional democracies to sustain in this new order and defend liberal economic and political norms. At the same time, however, the author's evaluation of which norms and values are non-negotiable highlights an implicit Western liberal bias. In practice, his approach cannot accommodate pluralistic governance models without sliding into containment or permanent bloc politics.

In the final section of the book, Tucker illustrates the implications of a fractured world

order for international financial institutions that control the global economy. Here, he expresses confidence that dollar dominance is likely to uphold the lingering status quo in the near future. However, he also acknowledges that the dollar's preeminence faces challenges from the superpower struggles, the rise of digital currencies, and technological advancements. In this scenario, the author shifts his emphasis back to strengthening the legitimacy of international financial institutions, such as the WTO and IMF, to ensure that even if the global reserve status of the dollar declines, these institutions can deliver global financial stability and prevent and manage crises.

Overall, the expansive scope of the book effectively links the problems of consent and legitimacy to modern challenges, including supply chain dependencies, the superpower struggle, and a fraying liberal order. However, the Western liberal bias is too evident in the author's framing of the Hume-William thesis and its application to a wide range of problems, which undermines the book's usefulness for policymakers in the East. Tucker also totally ignores the fact that the U.S. hegemony has not entirely been governed under liberal principles. From a realist standpoint, the U.S. itself has often transcended liberal values at the cost of others, democracies and autocracies alike. Furthermore, the book reinforces Cold War rhetoric throughout its arguments,

creating more discourse problems than it solves. While the multipolar order is now a systemic reality, it is only a matter of time before the liberal system is replaced by a pluralistic model, but not entirely rooted in liberal values.

All in all, *Global Discord: Values and Power in a Fractured World Order* offers a mechanism that transcends the binary choices of idealistic universal liberalism and absolutist cynical realism. Tucker's insistence on the incentives-values framework aligns well with Western liberal thought but sways from the underlying systemic realities. Even within the Western boundaries, both geographical and ideological, the incentives-values framework faces political and operational challenges. Forming a coalition of democracies requires sustained political will that many democratic states will not be able to offer due to material interests tied to actors in the outermost circle of concentric circles. Overall, the book is an instrumental read for researchers, scholars, policymakers, diplomats, and practitioners associated with economic institutions, seeking to understand the tension between power and values in this fractured world order and the changing role of global institutions. Despite its accessible writing style, the book is more valuable for readers with a foundational understanding of international politics and economics to fully grasp the ideas of the author and analyze them with a critical lens.