

Executive Summary

Debates about different visions for the future international order are often abstract and theoretical. By invading Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has made the clash of competing visions a brutal and deathly reality. The world's liberal democracies are awakening to the challenges posed by autocratic revisionists, and have taken the first important steps to pushing back. But for liberal-democratic principles to prevail over the autocratic variants, democracies must revamp their vision of a desirable international order. A re-envisioned liberal, rules-based international order is needed to strengthen democratic resilience in an era of fierce systemic competition with autocratic regimes. But to make this vision more attractive among the wider international community and help it win the contest for the future international order, democracies must also take into account legitimate criticism and concerns among the wider international community.

On February 24, 2022, Russia not only launched a war against Ukraine that has already caused tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilian casualties, forced millions to flee their homes, and inflicted war damages of hundreds of billions of euros. With its brutal and unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state, Moscow has also mounted an attack against the foundational principles of the post-World War II order. The attempt by an authoritarian power to eliminate a democracy as a sovereign nation-state is not the only sign, however, that autocratic revisionism is intensifying. China's tacit support for Russia's war, its military posturing to assert its own sphere of influence in East Asia, and its comprehensive efforts to promote an autocratic alternative to the liberal, rules-based international order epitomize the broader autocratic challenge. When asked about the main fault line in global politics today, the most prominent divide mentioned among those surveyed for the Munich Security Index 2023 is indeed that between democracies and dictators.

However, the relevance of the democracy–autocracy cleavage varies across policy fields. Whether a country is a democracy or not is clearly not the only factor that shapes the contest for the future international order. The mere fact that many governments from Africa, Latin America, and Asia have not been willing to speak up against Russia's aggression shows that powerful

autocrats are not alone in their deep dissatisfaction with existing international norms and institutions – and that simply defending the status quo is not enough to effectively push back against autocratic revisionists.

Human rights ([Chapter 2](#)) have been a major flashpoint in the growing systemic competition. China, supported by Russia, is at the forefront of broader authoritarian pushback against international human rights and the mechanisms built to protect them. The vision that Beijing is pursuing, Western observers worry, is nothing less than to create a world safe for autocracy. Among others, China seeks to ensure that collective rights, as defined and upheld by the state, take precedence over individual civil and political liberties. But disagreement on human rights is also evident within and among the democratic states of the world. Certainly influenced by the experience of Western colonialism and imperialism, many non-Western democracies show greater concern for sovereignty and non-interference than their Western counterparts, and are thus reluctant to support robust action in the name of human rights.

Global infrastructures ([Chapter 3](#)) have likewise become an important site of geopolitical competition. Democratic and autocratic camps openly compete to imbue physical and digital infrastructures with their governance visions. In the digital realm, China is spearheading a group of autocratic states intent on promoting their techno-authoritarian vision, while the transatlantic partners are only gradually converging on a shared vision of an open digital infrastructure. Regarding the global trade infrastructure, the fault lines are messier. Many governments are increasingly viewing interdependencies as both vulnerabilities and conduits for coercion. As a result, weaponization of trade links abounds, while all major powers are increasingly resorting to protectionism. A new vision for global trade infrastructure that serves mutual prosperity while limiting vulnerabilities is not yet in sight.

Development cooperation ([Chapter 4](#)) has not been spared from systemic competition either. Health and food security as well as climate finance have become key policy fields where competing narratives of a desirable development order are playing out. Beijing is promoting its own model of development cooperation, supposedly free from conditionalities, as a distinct alternative to the US and European models, which emphasize the importance of democracy, good governance, free markets, accountability, and transparency. But while China's growing engagement falls on fertile ground in many developing countries, this is often less a matter of conviction than of a lack of alternatives and deep grievances with the existing development order that has not yielded sufficient benefits.

Even if it does not neatly display a democracy–autocracy fault line, the new energy order ([Chapter 5](#)) increasingly reflects geopolitical considerations rather than market logic. Russia’s autocratic revisionism and its weaponization of fossil fuel exports have made energy dependency on autocratic great powers a major concern for Western liberal democracies. They now need to ensure that their efforts to wean themselves off Russian oil and gas do not simultaneously further increase their dependence on other autocracies, including China (for critical raw materials) and Qatar (for gas).

Revisionist autocracies present various challenges to the nuclear order and strategic stability ([Chapter 6](#)). Most importantly, Russian threats of using nuclear weapons in the war against Ukraine have raised concerns around the globe. China has significantly invested in additional nuclear capabilities without increasing transparency. And North Korea and Iran present their own challenges to the nuclear order. Given the deteriorating security environment, democratic nuclear powers have reiterated their commitment to nuclear deterrence, while the prospects for arms control initiatives have dimmed. Disappointment with the lack of disarmament, in turn, has led to frustration in many parts of the world, including in the “Global South,” where many countries envisage a different kind of nuclear order.

World leaders may not agree on much these days – but many of them share the sentiment that the world is entering a critical decade in the contest for the future international order. While 2022 will be remembered for ramped-up autocratic revisionism, it has also demonstrated that revisionists can be resisted and that liberal ideas are still able to inspire. The extraordinary resilience and determination of the Ukrainian people, as documented in the Munich Security Index 2023 ([Spotlight Ukraine](#)), has galvanized international support for their country’s struggle against the aggressor and instilled a new sense of purpose into democratic countries and governance formats. Liberal democracies need to use this momentum. If they succeed in re-envisioning the liberal, rules-based order as one that better represents the many countries in the world that have hitherto been confined to the role of rule-takers, as one that better delivers on its promises, and as one that truly benefits everyone equally, they may enlarge the coalition of committed stakeholders and render the order much more resilient. If the revisionist moment we are currently experiencing spurs the renewal of this liberal, rules-based order, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the people of Ukraine will have played a big part in this achievement.