

Research Workshop Summary – New World Disorder



When the Global Order Unravels

The liberal order is fraying at the seams. New powers are rising. Non state actors are testing the boundaries of political authority and legitimacy. And (some) allies are becoming increasingly isolationist, unilateral and adversarial. How should the UK respond to these challenges as the international order transforms and new cleavages emerge in international affairs? Is international disorder becoming the new norm and what risks does this pose for national, regional and global security?

This research theme examines the sources of disorder in international affairs, how and why the existing order is under threat, and whether foreign and security policy decision makers need to reformulate their thinking for an increasingly disorderly world.

Key areas for exploration under this theme include:

- **Technological disorder:** How and in what ways are emerging technologies, including cyber, AI, quantum, the metaverse, biotechnologies, inducing disorder into the international environment?
- **Geopolitical disorder:** How will revisionist states like China and Russia advance their interests as western dominance and hegemony wanes? What kind of new (dis)order will emerge and how will it be influenced by other regional and global power centres?
- **Societal disorder:** How is our thinking, cognitive processes, psychology, identity and sense of safety and security affected by global disorder and its symptoms. Are new cleavages emerging driven by emergent extremist online subcultures and are these weakening our societal bonds?

The theme draws together a range of academic disciplines to explore these questions and seeks to develop technological solutions to understanding and responding to the new world disorder.

Summary

The Security Lancaster workshop on New World (Dis)Order aimed to explore long-standing concepts in both the social and physical sciences – order and disorder. The importance of this emergent theme within the Security Lancaster research institute is self-evident. At the global level, resurgent state actors are challenging the existing rules-based order that was established after World War 2, and indeed has a longer history.¹ American power, crucial to creating and sustaining that order, is waning, at least in relative terms.² At the same time, societal cohesion in many states around the world, including in the UK, is under severe strain. Domestic disorder, including violence, extremism, identity-based tensions, and governance challenges, have become more pronounced. Polarisation is increasing, fuelled by AI and other emerging technologies,³ and political instability is becoming the norm across the western world. Technological change is compounding these challenges. The ongoing influence of big tech and the emergence of powerful AI systems are both contributing to disorder, but at the same time creating new opportunities to manage and sustain order and respond to disorder. Existing conceptions of order and disorder, although well-established across many academic disciplines, are under pressure to maintaining their explanatory power as a new world order comes into being. There are opportunities for fresh new perspectives on order and disorder that emerge from interdisciplinary debates and collaboration.

Section 1 – Interdisciplinarity and the Geopolitics of Disorder

Key research and discussion questions: How can we conceptualise and define order/disorder in an interdisciplinary way and for a changing world? What is the relationship between complexity, disorder and global governance? What kind of new (dis)order(s) will emerge and how will they be influenced by emerging regional and global power centres? What are the sources of disorder in the transatlantic relationship?

In the field of international relations and geopolitics, order is a concept that has been well elucidated. Hedley, Bull, one of the foremost analysts in this area described order in the following way:

“Order in social life refers to ‘a pattern of human activity that sustains elementary, primary or universal goals... First, all societies seek to ensure that life will be in some measure secure against violence resulting in death or bodily harm. Second, all societies seek to ensure that promises, once made, will be kept, or that agreements, once undertaken, will be carried out. Third, all societies pursue the goal of ensuring that the possession of things will remain stable to some degree and will not be subject to

¹ Olsen, S (2026) How Europe Invented World Order, available: <https://samolsen.substack.com/p/how-europe-invented-world-order>

² The myth of American decline, China's rise is not America's fall

³ Burton, J. (2023) “Algorithmic extremism? The securitization of artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on radicalism, polarization and political violence,” *Technology in society*, 75. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2023.102262>.

*challenges that are constant and without limit... Order is thus a fact ... It is also a value.*⁴

Hedley Bull's long-standing argument was that an international 'society' existed that sought to mediate and control the 'anarchy' within a largely ungoverned international system.

Other approaches to order and disorder exist within the canon of IR theory. Realist scholars see order as resulting from a balance of power within the international system between evenly matched states. As balances of power shifts, conflict and war becomes more likely.⁵ Liberal internationalist scholars seek to mediate the anarchy of the international system through the establishment of laws, norms, rules and regimes, essentially transplanting domestic governance mechanisms to the international level through international institutions.⁶ A more critical body of theory has also emerged, challenging these assumptions, including Marxist theory and post structuralist work, concentrating on hegemonic orders, dominated by powerful states that seek to extend inequitable economic orders in pursuit of enrichment and power.⁷ Many states have rejected or become disillusioned with the western led international order, or indeed never felt part of it. Other scholarship has posited the existence of several world orders (military, economic, legal, environmental), which are engaged with selectively as global power shifts.⁸ Approaches to order within IR are thus contested and unresolved.

Fig 1 – Conceptions of order within the discipline of International Relations (ChatGPT generated)

IR Theory	Order	Disorder
Realism	Balance of power; stability through deterrence, alliances, and great power rivalry; survival under anarchy	Breakdown of balance → wars, arms races, security dilemmas; disorder is inevitable under anarchy
Liberalism	Rule-based international system (UN, WTO, law); cooperation through institutions, democracy, and trade interdependence	Collapse of cooperation, violations of rules, authoritarian or nationalist backlash
English School	<i>Society of states</i> bound by shared norms, sovereignty, diplomacy, and international law (Hedley Bull's "international order")	Breakdown of shared rules and institutions → war, illegitimacy, failed diplomacy
Constructivism	Socially constructed order shaped by norms, identities, and shared ideas (e.g., nuclear taboo, human rights regimes)	Norm contestation, identity clashes, breakdown of shared understandings
Marxism / Critical Theories	Hegemonic order sustaining capitalist, imperialist, and class hierarchies	Resistance, revolutionary struggle, crises of capitalism; disorder as disruption of unjust hierarchies
Post-structuralism / Postcolonial	Order as a discourse that legitimizes dominant power relations (e.g., "liberal international order")	Disorder as disruption, alternative narratives, exposing exclusions and inequalities
Complexity / Global IR	Multiple overlapping orders (regional, economic, security); pluralistic and dynamic rather than a single global order	Disorder as tension between overlapping systems; unpredictability in multipolar, interconnected world

⁴ Bull, H. (2012) *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. 4th ed. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁵ Kirshner, J. (2019) "Offensive realism, thucydides traps, and the tragedy of unforced errors: classical realism and US–China relations," *China International Strategy Review*, 1(1), pp. 51–63. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-019-00013-y>.

⁶ Keohane, R.O. (1982) "The demand for international regimes," *International organization*, 36(2), pp. 325–355. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830001897X>.

⁷ Foot, R. (2020) "China's rise and US hegemony: Renegotiating hegemonic order in East Asia?," *International politics (Hague, Netherlands)*, 57(2), pp. 150–165. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-019-00189-5>.ee also Nexon, D.H. and Neumann, I.B. (2018) "Hegemonic-order theory: A field-theoretic account," *European journal of international relations*, 24(3), pp. 662–686. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117716524>.

⁸ Johnston, A.I. (2019) "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International security*, 44(2), pp. 9–60. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360.

IR is not the only discipline with something to say about order and disorder. In the physical sciences, debates about order and disorder are even more well established, especially in physics and mathematics. In the physical world, order is seen as predictability and stability in the activity and behaviour of elements, molecules and atoms. In maths, randomness and unsolved problems are the sources of disorder. In computer science, order is represented by structured and ordered data, and disorder by errors, breaches, and bugs. Synthesising approaches to order and disorder also reveals that the breakdown of order can lead to new, more equitable and even efficient orders to emerge.

Fig 2 – Interdisciplinary approaches to order and disorder (ChatGPT generated)

Discipline	Order	Disorder
Philosophy	Rational structure, harmony, cosmos, intelligibility	Chaos, irrationality, contingency, breakdown of reason
Physics	Predictable, law-governed behavior (symmetry, conservation laws)	Entropy, randomness, chaos in dynamical systems
Biology	Organization of life (genetic code, ecosystems, homeostasis)	Mutation, disease, ecological collapse (but also a driver of evolution)
Mathematics	Structure, symmetry, axiomatic systems, patterns	Randomness, unpredictability, unsolvable problems (but chaos can emerge from order)
Sociology / Anthropology	Social norms, institutions, routines, stability	Deviance, anomie, revolution, breakdown of norms (sometimes generative)
Political Science	Governance, law, sovereignty, stability	Conflict, rebellion, failed states, war (can also disrupt unjust orders)
Economics	Equilibrium, efficiency, predictable cycles	Crises, shocks, bubbles, recessions (but also “creative destruction”)
History / Literature / Arts	Narrative coherence, continuity, stylistic rules, canons	Rupture, fragmentation, subversion, ambiguity (modernism/postmodernism)
Psychology	Mental stability, schemas, coherent self	Mental illness, dissonance, breakdown of meaning (but disorder linked to creativity)
Religious Studies	Divine law, sacred harmony, cosmic justice, moral order	Sin, evil, chaos, separation from divine (sometimes part of cyclical renewal)
Computer Science	Algorithms, structured data, computational efficiency, order in information systems	Bugs, errors, security breaches, unpredictability in complex systems, algorithmic bias, emergent chaos in networks
Synthesis	Order = stability, structure, predictability, coherence, control (whether in nature, society, thought, or technology)	Disorder = unpredictability, breakdown, instability, disruption — but also a source of creativity, transformation, and new orders

The pursuit of ‘final’ orders has been a regular facet of the evolution of global politics. In the 1990s, for example, Francis Fukuyama, claimed the end of the Cold War was the ‘end of history’ - a moment in which liberal democracy became the only feasible and realistic ways of governing societies.⁹ That vision has been rejected and there now exists a sustained authoritarian and populist challenge to the liberal order, rooted in autarky, sovereignty, deglobalisation and deep scepticism about free trade, interdependence, and globalism. Authoritarian and revolutionary movements have proposed their own final orders – Marxist ideology posits the end of capitalism, the withering away of the states, and a final order based on class liberation. Fascistic visions of final orders advocate racial purity, eugenics, the centralisation of power, and cults of personality as the way to achieve orderly politics.

The workshop discussion also highlighted two of the key questions for studies of order and disorder – what a China led world order would look like, and what are the sources of and consequences of disorder in the transatlantic relationship. Discussions highlighted that China had an alternative design for the international system based around core principles of sovereignty, stability, non-interference and development first approaches. These were embedded in initiatives that pose a challenge already to regional and global order, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Digital Silk Road, the growing influence of the BRICS

⁹ FUKUYAMA, F. (2013) “The ‘End of History’ 20 Years Later,” *New perspectives quarterly*, 30(4), pp. 31–39. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/npqu.11399>.

grouping and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. This was an emerging order in which civilisational pluralism replaced liberal norms and where sovereignty trumped universality. Keynote speaker Sam Olsen argued that four contrasting pillars of order are emerging, as the figure below reveals:

Fig 3. Four pillars in a China-led order¹⁰

VALUES	RULES
<p>US-Led: universal rights, Individual freedoms, democracy</p> <p>China-led: sovereignty, stability, development-first, cultural pluralism</p>	<p>US-Led: open norms, Responsibility to Protect, intervention permissible</p> <p>China-led: strict non-interference, "true multilateralism," civilisational diversity</p>
LAWS	INSTITUTIONS
<p>US-Led: accountability, ICC, tribunals, human rights enforcement</p> <p>China-led: dialogue replaces enforcement, rights contingent on state discretion</p>	<p>US-Led: Bretton Woods, NATO, civil-society access (NGOs)</p> <p>China-led: UN tilt, BRICS/SCO/AIIB/DSR, filtered NGOs</p>

The implications of China’s rise for Transatlantic order and disorder were also discussed. It was argued that China’s rise has been a wedge issue for US-EU cooperation, and the two sides of the Atlantic did not always see the challenge in the same way. Perhaps more importantly, there were deep fissures in the transatlantic relationship which went beyond any one presidential administration. The sources of disorder in the transatlantic relationship are deeper and more structural and include long-running burden sharing disputes, ideational differences in perceptions of the transatlantic economic relationship and divergence in digital governance.

Section 2 – Technology and Disorder

Key research and discussion questions: How do emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, natural language processing and decentralised identity systems contribute to order/disorder, and how might they be harnessed to build civic orders? What gaps exist in our current understanding of digital order/disorder? How can we design technologies that serve society rather than shape it unaccountably? Does a lack of trust, safety and security in technological systems contribute or spread disorder?

To explore these questions, the session centred on three case studies, each highlighting a different facet of technological disorder and its implications for society.

The first case study focused on natural language processing (NLP) and its dual role in both enabling and mitigating information disorder. Recent elections across the US, UK and EU have demonstrated how generative AI and large-scale language models can be used to produce disinformation at scale, overwhelming existing fact checking infrastructures and

¹⁰ Olsen, S (2025). Presentation at workshop.

eroding public trust.¹¹ However, these same technologies also offer powerful detection and defence capabilities. The session showcased emerging techniques in deepfake and synthetic content detection, multi-lingual disinformation analysis and coordinated inauthentic behaviour detection. These approaches enable early warning systems and cross-border tracking of synthetic content, while also supporting civic engagement through chatbots, transparency dashboards and plain-language translations. The breakout discussion on NLP for online safety revealed key research gaps around provenance tracking, cultural nuance and the need for interdisciplinary governance frameworks.

The second case study examined AI security. As AI systems become embedded in critical infrastructure and decision-making processes, the protection of models, application and data from adversarial threats becomes increasingly important. The discussion highlighted the speed at which this market is emerging, and the regulatory and ethical challenges that accompany it. Participants raised concerns about the integrity of AI systems in shaping future societies, and the need for robust safeguards to prevent misuse, manipulation and systemic bias. The question of whether AI should be allowed to shape society, or whether society must shape AI, emerged as a central theme, with strong consensus that reclaiming control after ceding it to autonomous systems would be far more difficult.

The third case study explored digital identity futures, particularly the promise and risks of decentralised identity systems. These systems are often presented as a solution to growing concerns around data ownership and control. However, they also introduce new tensions around privacy, transparency and accountability. The session examined how cryptographic design choices and governance models, whether centralised, decentralised or hybrid, have profound implications for security, adoption and legitimacy, and thus order/disorder. Participants discussed what a trustworthy digital identity system might look like, and how it could be designed to serve both individuals and society, balancing control with collective responsibility.

Together, these three domains served as lenses through which broader questions of technological disorder were examined. Each revealed how assumptions, for example, about user behaviour, regulatory environments or institutional trust, baked into system design can either reinforce or challenge existing power structures. Through the workshop, it emerged that persistent misunderstandings about technological solutions, particularly the tendency to apply models across domains without regard to context.

Technological disruption is inherently socio-technical. It arises not only from the properties of systems themselves but also from the contexts in which they are deployed, the tolerance of risk within societies, and the distribution of trust, agency and power. Participants emphasised that technological disorder cannot be understood in isolation from its social embedding. Interdisciplinary collaboration is essential, and legal, technical and social perspectives must converge to address complex threats. Participants warned against allowing emerging technologies to shape society unchecked.

The session concluded with a call to build a sustained interdisciplinary community around technological disorder. Participants stressed the importance of converging legal, technical and social perspectives to address complex threats, and of designing technologies that empower

¹¹ Stockwell, S. (2025) From Deepfake Scams to Poisoned Chatbots: AI and Election Security in 2025 Expert Analysis, <https://cetas.turing.ac.uk/publications/deepfake-scams-poisoned-chatbots>

users rather than surveil them. Ultimately, the session emphasised that technological disorder is not inevitable, but addressing it requires intentional design, inclusive governance, and a commitment to societal values.

Section 3 – Societal Disorder

Key discussion questions: While disorder is clearly present and growing at the international and geopolitical level, it is unclear in the scholarship how that disorder spills over into our societies. What indeed is the role of technology as a conduit between the geopolitical level of analysis and the domestic realm, and, conversely, how does societal disorder spill outwards into the international arena?

Three key themes emerged from the workshop. The first was the proactive role psychological warfare and manipulation is playing in our societies. This is happening organically, with misinformation spread by users on technological platforms. But there are also clearly malign actors hoping to spread disorder by amplifying divisive online content. The 2024 Southport riots were an example of this. As Mark Owen Jones has argued, “business models, personal ideology, algorithms, and content moderation failures enabled the rapid spread of xenophobic disinformation that preceded violent attacks on minorities and migrant housing.”¹² This included high profile accounts, such as Elon Musk’s X account spreading disinformation. When domestic disorder occurs, technology thus appears to play an amplifying role, and external/international actors with distinct political and commercial interests act as conduits and boosters for disorder. As was argued at the workshop, this type of deliberate manipulation should not be separated from problems within our societies, including long term economic disenfranchisement, a failure to address issues around community cohesion, and the amplification of disorder by domestic actors seeking to gain from crisis situations. In this sense, psychological warfare, psyops, or deliberate attempts to manipulate people by state and other adversaries, are targeted and coordinated, but also exploit pre-existing weaknesses, frailties and vulnerabilities within societies.

Workshop participants discussed online subcultures and communities at the workshop. There is a new power in online communities and online forums that shape identity. New and merging brands, ideologies and subcultures are shaping norms and values at the societal level. The contribution of online subcultures to questions of order and disorder is partly shaped by technological affordances of those platforms, including presence and possibility of algorithmic manipulation, recommendation loops and emotional contagion, but they also affect human behaviour, where humour masks radicalisation, and “belonging becomes belief”.¹³ The presentation highlighted the range of online subcultures and groups that have emerged, and which arguably contribute to order and disorder at the societal level, including AI companion applications, KPOP fandoms, QAnon subcultural groups, Incel forums, and “red Pill” communities, involving rebellion against societal norms. As Noah Harari has argued, the emergence of AI is compounding the dynamics of manipulation:

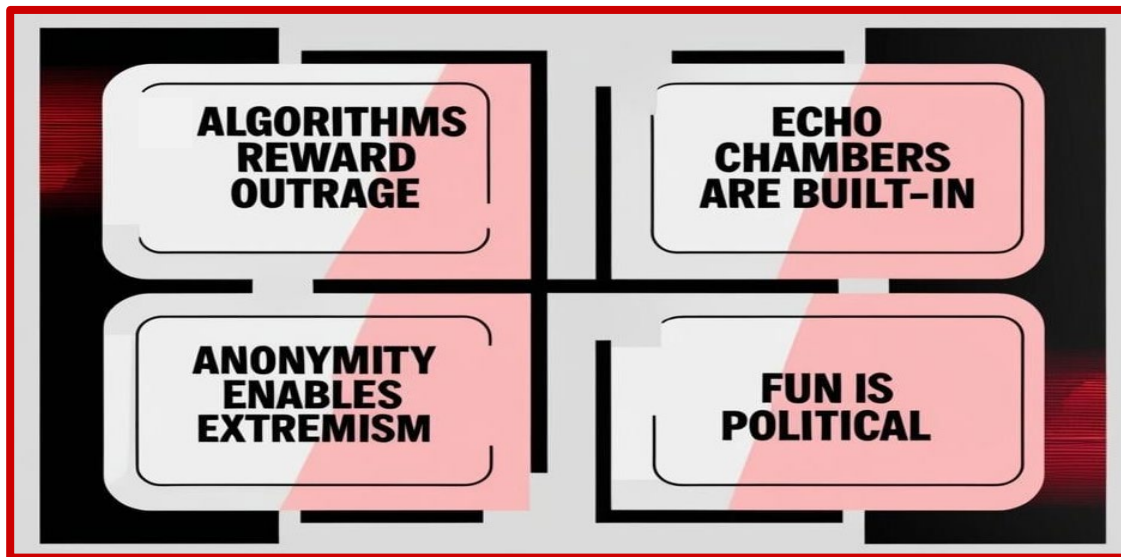
“For thousands of years prophets, poets and politicians have used language to manipulate and reshape society. Now computers are learning how to do it. And they

¹² Owen Jones, M. (2024) Written evidence submitted by Marc Owen Jones (PhD) (SMH0071), available: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/138332/pdf/>

¹³ James, S. (2025) Workshop presentation.

won't need to send killer robots to shoot us. They could manipulate human beings to pull the trigger".¹⁴

Fig 4. Platform features + subcultural tactics = new cognitive, identity, and societal fractures¹⁵



The workshop concluded with a discussion of order and disorder precipitated by cyber operations and conflict. Participants highlighted that cyber-attacks have regularly contributed to order and disorder and been a result of them. From the Stuxnet attacks against Iranian centrifuges) a product of geopolitical order, to the barrage of cyber-attacks levelled against Estonia by Russian hackers in 2007 (resulting in societal disorder in Estonia), cyberspace has presented new mechanisms for the spread of disorder at the geopolitical and societal level. They also present new ways for malign actors to spread disorder across borders and sow political instability within nations. The Russian manipulation of US electoral processes through the dissemination of disinformation but also hack and leak operations was mentioned as another case in point.

Conclusion

The workshop concluded with a discussion around future plans for the research theme. There was a strong consensus in the room that there were important issues to do further research on and an enthusiasm among participants to stay part of the network and plan future collaboration. The immediate aim of the convenors is to work towards a large grant submission on this theme in 2026 based on reassessing the relationship between geopolitical, technological and societal disorder.

We would like to thank all the workshop participants for the excellent contributions and thanks to Security Lancaster for providing the funding and support for the workshop delivery.

Professor Joe Burton and Dr Ashley Fraser (Theme Leads)

¹⁴ Noah Harari, Y. (2025) "Nexus," *Gestion*, 50(1), pp. 112–112. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3917/riges.501.0112>. P. 332

¹⁵ James, S (2025). Presentation at Malcult workshop.