

# Mutually Assured Disruption

Five forces that are making  
global security “liquid”  
By Mark Leonard

As the liberal order frays and geopolitical competition returns, it is natural that people turn to Henry Kissinger. No one has a more finely grained understanding of power politics, and his latest treatise, *World Order*, sits on the bedside tables of many global leaders, even if few have actually read it. But Kissinger’s ideas of order represent an impossible aspiration in the world of the Islamic State and fake news. They are designed for a slower world with powerful states, rather than our age of permanent uncertainty, rapid change and disruption. Many traditional concepts – even well-tested ones – have been overtaken by events. Deterrence, alliances and even diplomacy seem out of fashion; old certainties are gone. Kissinger’s order was based on two pillars: legitimacy and balance of power. The defining moment of his world view is the Peace of Westphalia. He laments the disappearance of the split between domestic and foreign policy. But, in spite of the return of power politics, the world is not Kissingerian any more. Unfortunately, the person best-equipped to explain the new world died in early January of this year: Zygmunt Bauman. Few have done more to help us make sense of the world we live



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in today than the Polish-British sociologist who developed the concept of “liquid modernity.” In Bauman’s liquid modernity, many previously solid things have become fluid – jobs, sexual orientation, relationships, places of residence. Society is no longer held together by a collective project that offers the individual a sense of cohesion and direction. Bauman was mostly interested in the “liquid modern” man and the individual’s role in society. But the new man has also given shape to a world and a nation of security that is defined by liquidity rather than order. There are five forces that are leading to “liquid security”:

1. Distinctions between foreign and domestic policy are no longer valid. Challenges like terrorism, cyber warfare, climate change and refugee flows have removed the distinction between internal and external, between domestic and foreign. This also changes our ideas of legitimacy, as foreign policy is no longer a prerogative of the state, but a central realm of domestic politics – one that is ripe for manipulation by outside powers.
2. There is no longer a clear divide between war and peace. It has been many years since countries have formally declared war on one another.

In the physical realm, many are trying out new kinds of coercion that fall short of conventional warfare: “little green men,” coast guards impinging on international waters, or proxy wars through rebel groups. This is supplemented by a perpetual conflict between countries in the online world, which ranges from hacking and leaking to the destruction of nuclear facilities. The era of mutually assured destruction has given way to one of mutually assured disruption.

3. What brought the world together is now tearing it apart. Connectivity, heralded as the path to peace among nations – trade partners don’t wage war against countries they have supply chains in – is now being weaponized. Dispersed networks used to be a safeguard against volatility, and international links a way to ensure good relations, if not cooperation, with everyone. Today, whether it is with sanctions or migration flows, countries are like spiders caught in their own net, constantly threatened by enemies cutting away at the ends.

4. The time of firm security alliances is over. NATO has been declared obsolete by the new US president, a statement that follows years of debates about the institution’s usefulness. The EU is losing a member and is weakened by internal disputes. In the age of Trump and Erdoğan, alliances will need to be built in different ways and around domestic politics on every single

issue, rather than being taken for granted because of treaties and institutions. But unlike the coalitions of the willing we have seen in the past, they will rely much less on values and far more on narrow, short-term interests.

5. The world is no longer chiefly defined by great power balances. A teenager in her bedroom can bring down companies and plunge societies into chaos by hacking into their systems. Whistleblowers and leaks pose disproportionate risks. A terrorist group can draw a state into open-ended wars. A tech company can determine what people see, and thus what they believe. A reality TV star can seduce the electorate and end up commanding the most powerful armed forces in the world. Play-

the domestic context of policing, anti-corruption efforts, intelligence, cyber defense and sanctions. It must have a deep wealth of regional expertise, yet a lens wide enough to incorporate the more modern dangers of connectivity and new technologies. It must understand the business models of the private sector actors that control the connections in the global economy.

In Kissinger’s old framework, legitimacy was defined by great powers. Today’s legitimacy stems from deliberation and national politics, so we need to find ways of knitting alliances together by framing issues in ways that appeal to citizens in the new environment. The ideal of international order has become an impossible aspiration. Flexibility, speed and

the table. In today’s world we need to develop norms for the internet, for economic warfare and for new technologies – if not to achieve order, then at least to hem in the chaos and save the world from implosion.

In terms the EU’s specific needs, new mechanisms of collaboration and alliances are at the top of the list. In this ever more dangerous world, 500 million Europeans can no longer rely on 300 million Americans for their security. They will need to invest in their security, and to transform their thinking. The EU must break out of the compartmentalized frameworks of its past, when criminal, terrorist, economic and military threats were viewed as separate challenges to be dealt with by separate and often competing agencies, each drawing on separate expertise.

The rationale for EU action must be grounded in the diverse domestic politics of its key member states, rather than in the complex decision-making machinery of the European Union. EU institutions must find ways of empowering and bolstering the ministers and governments of their member states. New, more flexible arrangements are necessary to engage with post-Brexit Britain, Turkey, China and other powers. For its citizens to feel more in control in an era of uncertainty, the EU must liquefy, rather than pursue impossible ideals of order. Maintaining this delicate balance will be the task of today’s statesmen and stateswomen. ■

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ers we do not yet know may soon be deciding the fates of nations. If security has become liquid, Europe’s response must become more fluid as well. Traditional military analysis must be supplemented with an understanding of

resilience will not be enough to live in a disorderly world without risking Armageddon. As frightening as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was during the Cold War, it helped take a particularly deadly option off

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