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A NEW WORLD ORDER & CHANGING POWER DYNAMICS

The global landscape is marked by dynamic shifts and uncertainty, as traditional geopolitical alliances and power structures undergo significant transformation. This evolving order presents challenges and opportunities, especially for historically marginalised nations seeking a greater voice in global affairs. Departing from established norms offers a chance to create more equitable and inclusive governance, fostering stability and fairness in addressing the complexities of this new era.

THE EXTANT WORLD Order and its institutions including the UN were put in place by the victors of the second world war. It suited and served a bipolar world, which was then dominated by the USA and USSR. This was also the time when colonial powers declined. Later, the breakup of USSR heralded the unipolar era of USA. The power of unipolarity enabled USA to tighten its global grip and virtually run the world as its policeman. It tweaked the world order to suit its interests. It then ushered in the concept and practice of globalisation. The turn of the century witnessed the 'US enabled' rise of China. Over the next decade and a half, China stopped hiding its strength or biding its time to assertively vie for bipolarity and began its attempt to establish an alternate world order. The turn of the century also saw USA getting enmeshed in the war or terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was also the period in which USA was expending its power as other nations like China and India were rising or like Russia were reviving. As they made their presence felt, the world transmuted into multipolarity. The multipolar world is now characterised by USA as the totem pole, challenged by a risen China and populated by lesser but important rising poles like India and Russia some middle powers and the Global South. This multipolarity is here to stay and is defining a new world.

What Constitutes 'The World Order' needs clarity as it is often misunderstood. The term generally refers to the arrangement of power and authority that provides the framework for the conduct of diplomacy and geopolitics on a global scale. Often this framework is referred to as the 'Rules Based Order' which is effected through global institutions like the UN, its affiliates, World Bank, IMF, WTO and others. Many security and economic groupings NATO, OPEC, OIC, EU, ASEAN, BRICS, African Union and others are in some sense derivatives of the 'World Order'. They have taken the essence of the extant order to suit local requirements and realities. These

■ **LT GENERAL P.R. SHANKAR (RETD)** ■

groupings have enabled new security and economic architectures to come up. The 'World Order' as it exists is

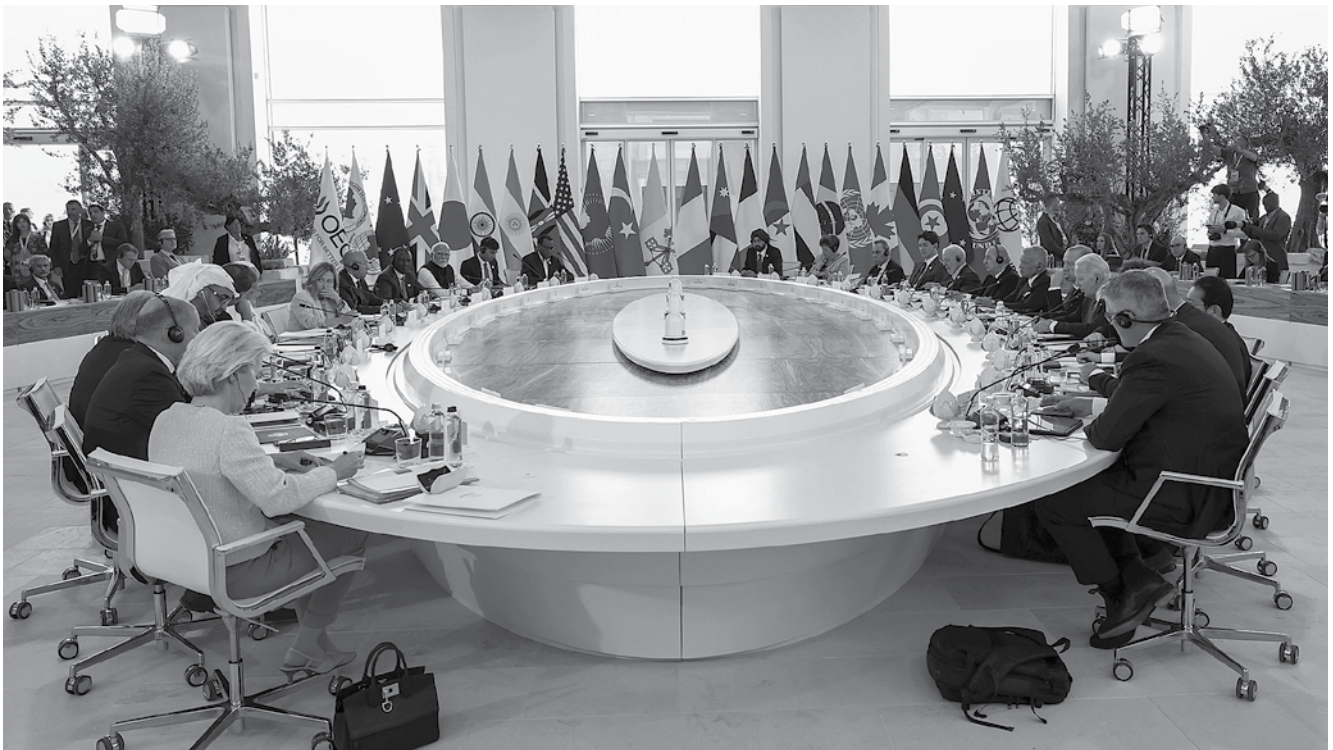
also the global prescription to maintain peace, justice, economic growth, equity, human rights, environmental conditions and sustainability. In essence it is an established global hierarchy in which the well set powerful nations rule the roost. The 'World order' as it exists is changing as a new one is on the horizon.

A 'Black Swan' Pivot and Two Fundamentals are changing the World Order. The 'Black Swan' Pivot around which the current 'World Order' started turning was undoubtedly the Covid pandemic. The pandemic which existed for two odd years changed the way people and nations exist and behave. It wrought many transformative changes in global behaviour. These transformations have been driving the world into a new order. Besides this, two fundamental factors which have always dominated the 'World Order' need discussion.

The First Fundamental is that traditionally, the 'World Order' has been the fief of rich and powerful nations. These nations derived power from their people, natural resources, industrialisation, economic and military prowess. That constituency is changing now as the erstwhile colonial powers like UK, France and Japan are declining and powers like China, Russia and India are rising to exercise their muscle. The change in the set of nations in the global hierarchy top will also change the 'World Order'.

The Second Fundamental is the will of the people. It may seem strange but people have always guided the fate and direction of nations including those which govern the world. However, this aspect was never prominent till 2024. In this year of mega elections, more than 70 nations and more than half the world's population voted for their governments. 2024 has seen a healthy dose of anti-incumbency with a pronounced shift away from liberalism. People have put leaders and governments in place who have promised





The 2024 G7 Summit in Italy with Prime Minister Modi participating in it

change like Trump in USA, Dissanayake in Sri Lanka or Milei in Argentina. People have also restrained power of their leaders like it has happened in India or have forced change like it is happening in France and Germany. Even in the autocratic world people have enforced change. They have pinned down ambitious leaders like Xi Jinping to the ground by simply refusing to consume or procreate. People's movements have toppled regimes in Syria, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh to set off a new chain of events which will impact the world order. The collective will and behaviour of the people is undoubtedly changing the 'World Order' just by enforcing change in their respective countries.

The Drivers of a New World Order are many and there is no single driver. While there a bevy of drivers only the main ones will be discussed. As issue which must be kept in mind is that many of the drivers affect different nations differently. They tend to have nullifying / skewing / multiplicative effects based on circumstantial factors.

Four Conflicts are shaping the new 'World Order'. The Russia-Ukraine war, the West Asian Conflicts pitting Israel against Iran and its proxies, the conflict in the Western Pacific involving China and its South China Sea rivals plus Taiwan and lastly the Sino Indian conflict along the LAC. An analysis indicates that these conflicts are changing the perceptions of power dynamics and setting a new order. For instance, when the popular narrative has been of US power in decline, it has come out to be the dominant power in Ukraine, West Asia and Western Pacific. The perception that China will displace USA as the supreme power has taken a visible backseat if the outcomes in Syria and its inability to prevail over India are factored in. Add its economic woes and an ineffective China emerges. India's global role will expand with its demonstrated ability of being the only nation to protractedly (over a four year period) lock horns

with and push back an assertive China at its peak. Something no other nation has even dared to do.

Post Covid Deglobalisation has come stay. If the pre-covid mantra was globalisation, the post covid one is about deglobalisation. Countries have become more protectionist and are seeking secure, alternate and diversified supply chains through derisking, decoupling and friend shoring. This is driving change in the economic fortunes of nations while setting new norms for trade, diplomacy and alignments. It has also ushered in new opportunities for some and put at risk others. Consequently, new groupings are evolving. A deglobalised world will have a different order without fail. The inevitable demise of WTO is only the beginning.

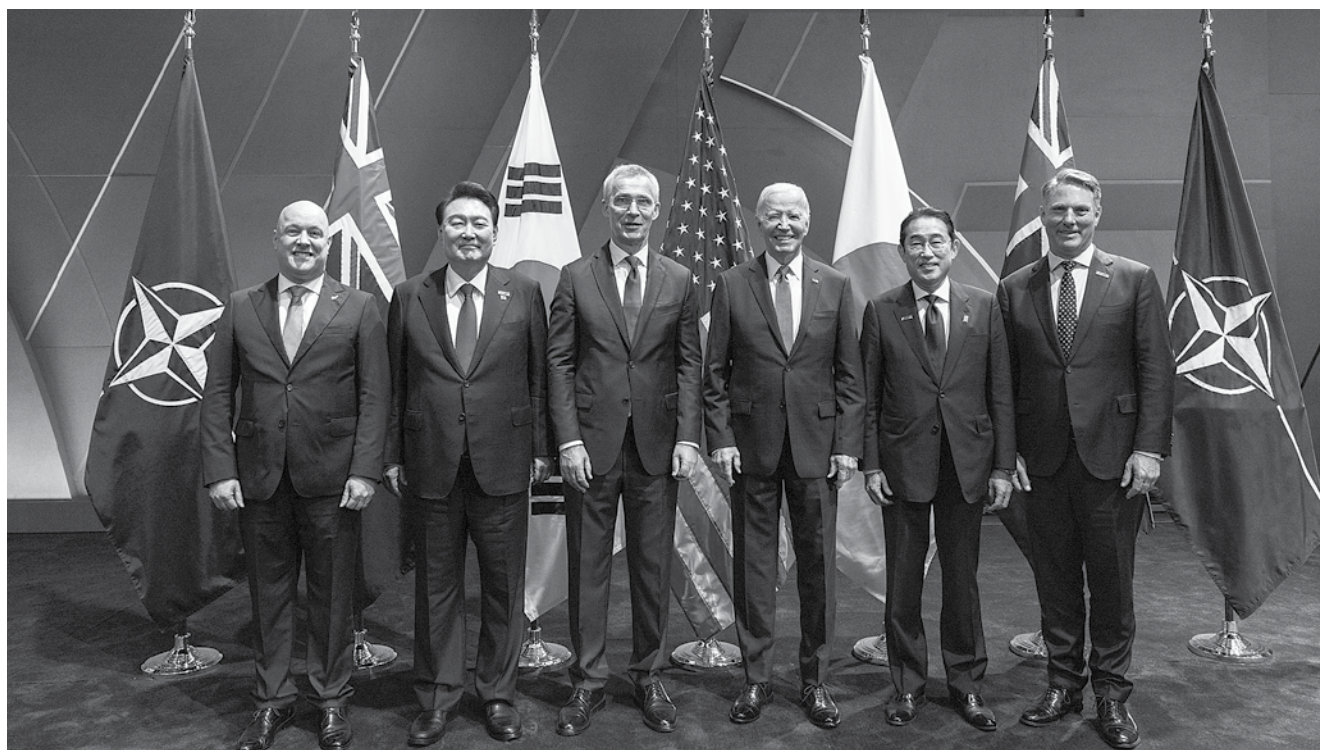
The Advent of New Technologies is changing the global landscape at pace through innovation and intensive competition. A dozen of them will impact global outcomes in the foreseeable future. These include Quantum Computing, AI, Cyber tech, Communication/Networking, Space, Additive manufacturing, Semi-Conductors, Energy, Synthetic Biology, Cloud Memory, Propulsion and Robotics and unmanned systems as tabulated above. These sunrise technologies are not standalone but interdependent and interactive. Most importantly they are dual use. Resultantly these technologies have set off an intense competition among nations. It is axiomatic that those nations which are able to harness these technologies and apply them practically at scale in the civilian and military fields will rule the roost. USA, China, Russia, parts of Europe, Japan and India are part of this mix.

Climate Change is the elephant in the room. There are indications that it has already started manifesting itself in myriad ways. This 'grey rhino' driver is barreling down on us and its outcomes are not yet known. The unknown factor is its magnitude and time.





NATO

**NATO Secretary General, Heads of State and Government of the Indo-Pacific Nations and the President of the United States**

The will of nations and their ability to cope with climate change will trigger a change in the world order. Nations and people willing to adapt will see better outcomes rather than those who stay rigidly in the present. In this context it will be reasonable to state that bigger nations will find it more difficult to cope with climate change due to the magnitude and diversity which will confront them. While cooperation to combat climate change is the requirement for the common good of humanity, the inevitability of competition and self-serving interests will drive to skew the 'World Order'.

Space is The Final Arbitrator of the 'World Order' irrespective of what a country does elsewhere. Increasingly everything we do in day to life is now space dependent. The ubiquity of space is evident even in mob phones which empower any and everyone who owns a reasonable handset with navigation capability, information, international communication, weather forecasts and vision capability on fingertips in one go. As the world's reserves of fossil fuels deplete and the requirement of energy increases manifold, there is a scramble in space for energy. Hence exploitation and militarisation of space is progressing in geometrically. It has triggered a multibillion space economy which is growing at about 10 per cent annually. Resultantly countries which can harness space technology and exploit its capabilities will be the future global powers and set the world order. The handful of them are USA, ESA, China, Russia and India.

There are many narratives and perceptions of Power Dynamics which are being spun. It all depends upon where one stands and from where one sees the whole thing. However, one thing is certain. The emergence of China and its desire to set up its own set of institutions to establish a Sinocentric world order is challenging the existing US-led paradigm. Resultantly, the world is inexorably mutating

into two camps. One consists of the United States and its traditional allies, mostly liberal democracies (also known as the West). On the other side are China, Russia, North Korea and Iran. Intense competition exists between the major powers and their camps to shape the emerging 'World Order' according to their visions.

USA the Pre-eminent Power is set to remain so despite predictions of decline and the challenge from China. It keeps reinventing itself to recover from setbacks. It has always warded off competition to emerge bigger. It derives power from its huge population, continental-sized resource-rich territory located on two oceans and unassailability. A proven multi domain track record backed by strong armed forces gives it the ability to set and control the global agenda. It maintains global reach through continental theatre commands spread over 516 military installations in 41 countries around the world, including 42 large or medium-size bases. It controls all world's major sea routes and choke points. It has created extensive alliances pacts and including the NATO, Anzus Pact, QUAD and AUKUS to name a few. It has strong bilateral military agreements with Japan and South Korea, and the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance with UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It has important strategic partnerships with India and Saudi Arabia. Economically it remains strong and has the largest GDP. Its currency is the reserve currency of the world. It has the trust of most rich and affluent nations. Its power is non-finite and non-territorial. USA has leveraged technology in every walk of life as a currency of power. Its forays into space, nuclear and information spaces are pioneering. Technology turned it from an energy neutral to an energy surplus nation. It wields enormous soft power which it projects it through its culture, educational system, political affiliations, aid programs, overseas bases, Hollywood and its huge network of





Prime Minister Modi of India, President Putin of Russia and President Xi Jinping of China with leaders of growing economies at the BRICS Summit, 2024

MNCs. It bankrolls and dominates most global institutions like UN, IMF and World Bank. Its proven economic, military, diplomatic and technological capabilities have created global dependencies as the US dollar remains the world's reserve currency. It is still the major player in the Russia Ukraine War, West Asia and the Indo Pacific. The issue to appreciate is that US power has not diminished but that of others has increased. It is a matter of relativity.

China's Ambition is to establish a Sino centric world order through its four initiatives – The Belt and Road Initiative, The Global Security Initiative, The Global Developmental Initiative and The Global Civilisational Initiative. The BRI is its primary gambit to control international trade, expand its economic footprint, develop dependencies and achieve world domination. A combination of these initiatives, its manufacturing capability as the world's factory and its expanding presence in some global institutions cement its position in the world order. That won't change. However further expansion of Chinese power and influence is debatable. China had put immense faith on its economy which has stalled due to a combination of factors. Primarily the Covid (the pivotal driver) paralysed the BRI and its investment driven export oriented economy. A sick property sector now weighs heavily on 30 per cent of its economy without a solution in sight. Its effort to displace the USD with the Yuan as the reserve currency has serious trust cum acceptability issues. Finally, its aging population is declining irrevocably as unemployment has spiked and wages have fallen. Resultantly its people simply do not consume. Hence it does not have huge revenues internally to guarantee prosperity to people in return for sacrificed freedoms. It is increasingly beset with internal issues. This will also not change. Hence China has changed track. It is now betting big on its military and technology to offset its economic

stall to achieve its ambitions. Its military though strong and still growing has limitations due to multiple factors. Firstly, it is inexperienced, riddled with corruption and purges. Secondly its military must defend the nation, prop the Party up, parry competitors while controlling international choke points and gates. Thirdly its military doctrine and equipment are not battle proven. Fourthly despite possessing multidomain capabilities, the PLA has not ventured abroad to project power. Its global outreach lies threatened and exposed as evinced by the attacks on the CPEC in Pakistan. Lastly, China's unfavourable military geography – continental size, poor resources, multiple fronts/disputes (Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, South China Sea and India) with constricted ocean access constrains it. On the other hand, China has made great strides technologically. It has focussed on all sunrise technologies with considerable success and combined its manufacturing prowess to create favourable trade balances with all countries in the world. This will enable it to maintain its importance in the world order. China has other limiting factors. It displays wolf warriorism, does not respect 'Global Commons' or the 'rules based order', lacks trust internationally and has few friends barring Pakistan and North Korea. Its 'no limit pact' with Russia is at best transactional. Its geopolitical limitations have come to light in recent conflicts especially after the fall of Syria where it has been left on the sidelines. Overall, the high ambitions of a 'peaking' China, makes it a troublesome heavyweight in the world order. Its persistent effort to establish an alternate Sino centric world order will continue to create global turbulence.

Russian Revival in the world order has been remarkable. It is often forgotten that Russia, the successor to USSR has inherited and retains its global influence. It remains huge and difficult to knock out as Napoleon and Hitler once discovered. It is expansive and



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ASEAN Leaders with Prime Minister Modi at the
ASEAN-India Summit in 2024

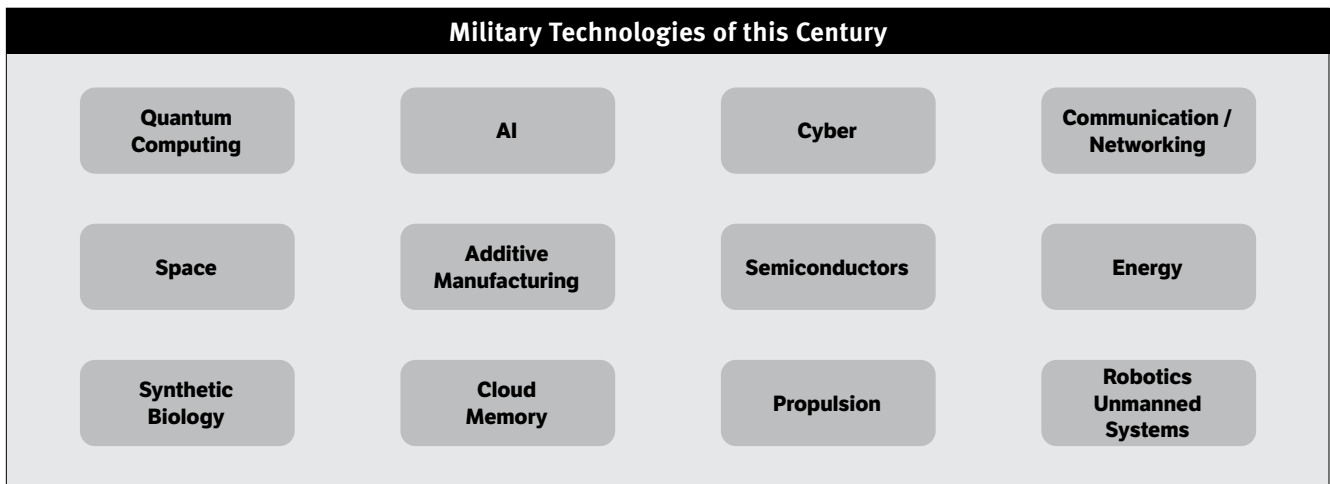
resource surplus. It fulfils Mackinder's Heartland Theory – whoever controls the Eurasian heart land controls Eurasia and thus the world. It still rivals USA militarily and technologically. It has proven multidomain capabilities. Three years of Ukraine War has shown that Russia has the stamina to take on the West militarily and economically despite all sanctions and yet retain its global influence. It is a space power since long. Importantly it dominates the Arctic Channels. As climate change opens them up these new sea routes will be an important factor in any future order. Russia also proves the point that a high GDP is not a prerequisite to be a global power. Despite its modest GDP, it has all round capability and experience to be a significant contributor to global affairs and that will endure.

India's Rise is beyond being most populous with the fifth largest and fastest growing economy. It is based on surmounting odds of internal churn of caste, creed, race, religion, ethnicities, ideologies, identities, language, politics and diversities. It is of surviving threats, vagaries and ravages of weather, elements and gods. It is of warding a predatory China, a toxic Pakistan and the dismissive disdain of a disparaging West. It has grown through famine, hunger, poverty alleviation, nonalignment, self-isolation, political upheavals and economic reform. In this context, India's non-alignment experience enables it to handle multi-sided engagements neutrally. It is a friend to both East, West and Global South. It is a key member of China's chosen platforms for global leadership - BRICS and the SCO. It is also a critical partner in the QUAD, the Indo-Pacific construct, I2U2 and IMEC. It has strategic partnerships with the Russia, US, France, Australia, Japan, UAE and Israel. India's neighbours once thought lost to Chinese influence, are coming back into balance. The Middle East increasingly looks at India to diversify its strategic options. ASEAN and other Asian nations seek India

to counterbalance China. India's centrality in the world order has grown since the Covid. The world trusts a reliable India despite its drawbacks. Its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean Region, economic strength, military capability, response during mega disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis, soft power, and diasporic strength make it a power which can no more be ignored. On most metrics, India is the only alternative in scale and strength to a declining China. Whichever side India weighs in will be the heavier one. India is therefore emerging as the 'bridge and balancing' pole in the world order. Despite all its shortfalls, the world knows what to expect from India and is comfortable with it.

Middle Powers will be important denominators of the new world order. Fully developed large economies like the UK, France, Germany, and Japan, developed nations like Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland, and South Korea, oil economies like Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, large developing nations like Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa, Mexico, Turkey, and Vietnam are all part of the middle power category. Some of these countries have niche prowess in technologies, resources, military and economic strength, diplomatic capabilities, demographic strengths, geostrategic location, or leadership capabilities/track record/credentials. They have also been the balancing voices of sanity to enforce a stable global order and enable running of international institutions. They have traditionally relied on trade and diplomacy and have largely pursued multilateralism. They have deep engagements with global powers with adequate leverage to shape international events, alter big-power behaviour and cater to the Global South. Global powers need the middle-of-the-road approach and support of middle powers which provide the trust quotient in international affairs. They will continue to be important players in the new 'World Order'.





Small But Important Players like Singapore, Switzerland, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates will remain significant in the Global order. Their strong economies and functionality as international intermediaries and bankers will remain in relevance. They are far too important for the global financial system to be tampered with.

The Mavericks of the World Order are North Korea and Pakistan. These nuclear powers with large populations and weak economies are the jokers in the global pack. One is a dynastic dictatorship and the other alternates between military rule and hybridity. Both countries are largely dictatorial in nature. They consider themselves to be strategically consequential and align themselves to the power which favours them the most at any given time. Both these countries currently are aligned closely with China. From time to time these mavericks will keep throwing spokes in the global wheel. They will also be battlefields in which superpower contestation will take place.

The Global South is made up of countries with weak economies, large populations, and unstable governments in Africa, South Asia and South America. It is often in turmoil like in Myanmar and Sudan. It is fertile ground for big powers to exploit them - mainly for their resources. Big and erstwhile colonial powers still retain their influence in these nations. These nations will be the proxy battlefields of big power contestation in the new world order. However, the global south like the middle powers does not want to be part of this contestation. It is more keen on protecting its populations and battling the elements and day-to-day vagaries rather than getting caught in big power politics. Its aspirations are simple. These countries are largely distrustful of the West who they see as having

exploited them. In this milieu, China has made deep inroads into the Global South with its BRI, cheque book diplomacy and debt trapping techniques. Swathes of the Global South is falling prey to Chinese methods despite well-established examples like Sri Lanka. Significantly, in large parts of the Global South, India is trusted. Also, Russia has influence in many pockets of the Global South. Western nations, middle powers and India will play a huge role to meet the aspirations of the South in competition with an exploitative China. While it is a reality that the global south does not have the strength to influence the 'World Order' it is a part of the global system and can no more be ignored or left out.

There is little doubt that USA, China, Russia and India will dominate the world order. These powers will be assisted/resisted by the middle powers. Together their power dynamics will set the new world order. The small significant players, the global south and the mavericks will create pulls and pushes on the order. That is only to be expected. Despite China's hyped up attempt to establish a Sino centric order, it will not be successful. It will become evident as time passes. However Chinese ambitions, even if unsuccessful, will be a source of global friction. The World Order will keep evolving as the drivers come into prominence and fade with time. It will also evolve as various countries cope with the drivers one way or the other. Lastly India's role in the world order is generally clear. It will increasingly be the global balancer as its economy grows. India needs to have the strategic confidence and patience to assume its place in the comity of nations. The rest of the world will have to accept it. There is no choice! ■

