

# [Column] Today's diverging paths of human virtue, hegemony and tyranny

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The old order is dying, but the new order has yet to take shape



US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping depart after their summit in Osaka on June 29, 2019, on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit there. (Reuters/Yonhap)



**By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University**

We're living in chaotic times. The old order is dying, but the new order has yet to take shape.

The potential outcomes discussed by theorists range from the preservation of the US-centered unipolar order to a US-China bipolar order with a multipolar substrate; a tripolar system with a US-led Western Hemisphere, Russia-led Europe and China-led Asia; and a multipolar order.

Chinese writer Hui Huang offers an intriguing take on this debate in an article titled "Welcome to the New Warring States," published in US-based Noema Magazine.

In the article, Huang compares the decades between World War II and the Trump administration to the Spring and Autumn period of ancient China, and the period since Trump returned to the White House to China's Warring States period.

“In the Spring and Autumn period,” Huang explained, “warfare was ritualized, legitimacy symbolically upheld by the Zhou king.”

He went on: “States adhered to formal hierarchies and codes of conduct to preserve a fragile peace amid recurrent armed clashes.”

In the years after World War II, the international laws and norms crafted by the United States, as well as the United Nations and other international bodies governing trade relationships and monetary policy, allowed the great powers to avoid conflict and maintain stability in the international system. Huang sees those tendencies as offering a parallel with the Spring and Autumn period.

But now, Huang argues, the world is moving out of this Spring and Autumn period and into a Warring States period.

In China's historical Warring States period, the Zhou king's authority evaporated while respect for ritual atrophied. It was a time when the strong devoured the weak — when every state's actions were governed by power dynamics and naked self-interest.

At least for Huang, the current world order is not much different. Multilateralism and international norms are retreating, anarchy is accelerating, and cracks are forming in the US-led system of alliances.

Huang describes our modern-day “seven warring states” as follows:

The US and China are akin to Qin, the rising hegemon; the European countries represent the fragmented north-central states of Han, Zhao and Wei; Japan stands in for the eastern power of Qi; the Islamic world represents the southern state of Chu; and the rising “middle powers” of India, Canada, Australia, Korea and Vietnam are comparable to Yan.

Conflict and competition between these “seven states” will determine the future of the world order, Huang argues.

Which of these modern-day warring states will arise to lead the international order, and how will they achieve that dominance?

In his master work “Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers” (Princeton University Press, 2019), Tsinghua University professor Yan Xuetong describes four types of leadership drawn from the writings of Xunzi, a Chinese philosopher from (you guessed it) the Warring States period: human virtue, hegemony, anemocracy and tyranny.

Leaders following the principle of human virtue seek to create stability in international affairs through morals and norms, to build international trust through laws and principles, and to acquire international respect and legitimacy by providing public goods.

The second leadership style of hegemony carves out a sphere of influence through superior force, maintaining rules-based and trusting relationships with allies while applying the law of the jungle to enemies. While strategic stability can be maintained inside the network of alliances through fidelity and the rule of law, a hegemonic state will struggle to avoid clashes with other hegemonic states.

The third leadership style of anemocracy refers to the classic self-serving leadership style that is untrustworthy, irresponsible, hypocritical and characterized by bullying the weak and bowing before the powerful. Anemocracy (which literally means “government by the wind”) is obsessed with short-term gains and disregards international norms, undermining any chance of dominating a sphere of influence.

Finally, tyranny represents the worst kind of leadership, the kind about which Xunzi was most concerned. This is the leadership style that resorts to schemes, threats and violence, that values the leader’s appetite and position above the people’s interests, and that maintains itself through power alone. While it may appear robust from the outside, tyranny leads to national ruin when the leader loses the hearts of the people.

Let’s reexamine today’s global order through the lens of Yan’s four leadership types. The US rose to its leading global position through human virtue, but is now devolving into the “predatory hegemon” described by Stephen Walt, as well as the leadership styles of anemocracy and tyranny.

As the US’ weaponization of tariffs and recent raid on Venezuela and threats toward Greenland demonstrate, Trump’s America is neutering international law and norms.

Trump has announced the US’ withdrawal from 66 international organizations and treaties and has set up the ad hoc Board of Peace in a bid to replace the UN. The US is in arrears — to the tune of US\$3.1 billion — in its dues to the UN and other international organizations, jeopardizing their fiscal viability. Furthermore, the US has squandered the strategic trust placed in it by NATO and other allies.

In contrast, China has recently moved away from its past tyrannical behavior — such as “wolf warrior diplomacy” and aggressive border conflicts — and shifted toward multilateralism based on global development, security, cultural and governance initiatives and the establishment of a mutually beneficial “community with a shared future for mankind.”

China seems to seek a future of “human virtue” exhibited by the US in its past, while the US seems to be reverting to China’s own past — a contrast of great historical irony.

Please direct questions or comments to [[english@hani.co.kr](mailto:english@hani.co.kr)]