



SOS! Since 2015, organisers at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) have prefaced the event with a report offering a synoptic survey of the global security scenario. This year's report — titled 'To the Brink — and Back?' — presented the issue as a question REUTERS/MICHAEL REHLE

STATES OF MATTER

Maximum insecurity

Verdict from Munich Security Conference: world order on the brink, way back uncertain



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Munich has hosted an annual meeting of global strategic experts since 1963, a long enough period for the event to become a barometer of the changing times. Since 2015, organisers at the Munich Security Conference (MSC) have prefaced the event with a report offering asynoptic survey of the global security scenario. This year's report, evocatively titled as always, presented the issue as a question of just where world order is headed: 'To the Brink — and Back?'

That the world has to step back from the brink is a survival imperative since few want to risk a plunge into the abyss. But the interrogatory tone sums up the uncertainty of it all. A way back from the brink has to be found, but nobody is sure of the contours along which it would lie. More accurately, nobody can be sure that a pathway exists back to the order now unravelling.

The Munich Security Report (MSR) 2018 points to ominous signals such as the rise of China and Russia's return to an influential role on the world stage. The US was where partisans of the liberal democratic order looked to, to guard the ramparts every time a threat emerged. But today that state is seen as intent "to sabotage the order it created". A "hostile revisionist power" has indeed arrived on the world stage, says one noted strategic thinker quoted in the MSR, "but it sits in the Oval Office, the beating heart of the free world".

That bleak reading has been met with the riposte from partisans of the new US posture, that a measure of fatigue is inevitable when one country serves as "the main guardian of the international order while (others) ... are mostly free-riders". But this is quite clearly a misreading of the popular mood in the US, which tilts towards unilateralism rather than isolationism. Weariness arises not from the

unrewarding nobility of its pursuit, but from the recalcitrance of the world to accept its diktat.

MSR 2015 looked back to the early months of the year before, to a world getting used to growing disorder, though unprepared for the near cataclysmic events that followed. Early in 2014, a bunch of Islamic warriors was known to have exploited the collapse of the Iraqi state since the US invasion, to carve out a niche in a few minor cities there. There had also been early rumblings of civil unrest in Ukraine, that pitted one ethnicity against another, without seeming to endanger the power-sharing compact that sustained the seeming transition to democracy since the Soviet collapse.

By the middle of the year, the Islamic State (IS) militia had swept over a wide swathe of Iraqi territory, capturing its second largest city and threatening to obliterate the border with Syria. And rather than back off, Russia had responded forcefully to provocations in its neighbourhood, annexing all of Crimea with its seeming consent and muddying the waters of transition to a pro-Western regime in Ukraine.

'Collapsing Order, Reluctant Guardians' was the title of the MSR 2015, effectively summing up the dilemma faced by the US as it saw the foundations of the global order it had created over two decades giving way. The following year's title was even more explicit. The US was no longer the global arbiter held back by reluctance, but by helplessness: 'Boundless Crises, Reckless Spoilers, Helpless Guardians', it said. In Iraq, Syria and Ukraine, the US had laid down clear red lines but only deepened the chaos with its interventions.

In 2017, the MSR chose the interrogatory

tone, asking if the world was moving towards a post-Western equilibrium that also meant a post-fact and post-order milieu. It took care to place a question mark at the end of its title — 'Post-West, Post-Fact, Post-Order?' — but several speakers chose to dispense with that hedge against an uncertain future. All that remained, they said, was a formal acknowledgement and for the US and its allies to gracefully exit centre stage.

Yet the title of MSR 2017 suggests a stubborn conceit that refuses to be dispelled: that the Western architecture of the world order was also founded on a universally acknowledged domain of fact. In reality, it was the power to create facts on the ground that created the unchallenged hegemony.

It was at Munich in 2003 that the German foreign minister turned on US participants in a rare display of public rancour at the obscene haste to wage war on Iraq. The fact that the rush to war was based on false pretexts would easily have been forgotten, had sheer military power been adequate to create new realities. That indeed was the

strategy. And as the world struggled to keep pace with the changing world of fact, the US would just go ahead and create a few more.

The unravelling of that strategy triggered a headlong flight from the world of fact. Today, with a fabulist ensconced in the White House, there is no greater willingness to reckon with the world of fact, only a determination to create these from behind secure fortifications. A recipe for global chaos has been garnished with the wilful fantasies of a man-child.

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