

# INTERNATIONAL ORDER

## Definitions, Dimensions, Divisions

### I. WHAT IS ORDER?

According to Tang (2016), order “is the degree of predictability (or regularity) of what is going on within a social system,” while Allan (2018) similarly sees orders as “stable patterns of behavior and relations among states and other international associations.” Cooley and Nexon (2020) define order as “relatively stable patterns of relations and practices in world politics,” and Lascurettes (2020) likewise views the phenomenon as “a pattern of equilibrium-perpetuating behavior among the units of a system.” Together, these definitions establish a useful baseline: ***order implies some level of regularity, leading to at least a basic sense of predictability.***

### II. HOW CAN ORDERS VARY?

There are (at least) four major fault lines at which scholars of international order fundamentally disagree about its nature and content. Rather than viewing these fault lines as debates that must be definitively settled, however, it may be more fruitful to treat them as dimensions along which order can vary.

**Regional vs. Global: How geographically vast must order be?** *Regional orders* are restricted to a subset of the international system in a coherent and definable way (geography, religion, culture, etc.). This includes orders confined to a particular hemisphere, or in some cases multiple regions, but that fall short of universal membership across the entire international system. *Global orders*, by contrast, encompass all, or nearly all, actors in the system.

**General vs. Issue-specific: How all-encompassing must order be?** *General orders* govern a wide range of behaviors and issue areas at once. This may include particular rules and procedures for how problems should be addressed, yet without being anchored to any single issue in particular. *Issue-specific orders* fall on the other side of the spectrum. The specific issues these orders are premised on can run the gamut from security to trade, human rights, finance, monetary policy, the environment, information sharing, and political development.

**Thin vs. Thick: Must order contain explicit rules?** This third distinction—between what some have called “thin” and “thick” orders—centers around the necessity of explicit common principles for “order” to exist. The former—*thin order*—entails some measure of predictability in how actors behave but with few if any common rules, norms, or institutions between them. The latter—*thick order*—represents systems populated by dense networks of institutions, codified legal rules, or a variety of shared norms that govern members’ interactions, perhaps even specifying who qualifies as an order member in the first place.

**Position centered vs. Rule centered: What is the primary organizing mechanism of order?** If “order” denotes some sense of regularity, then the organizing mechanism is the main content or substance which makes regularity possible. The two most widely employed organizing mechanisms are those premised on a certain positioning of the order’s actors relative to each other (position centered) and those that are based around adherence to a particular set of principles (rule centered). *Rule-centered orders* focus less on actors’ relative positions and more on the content of whatever principles govern their relations. *Position-centered orders* are often focused on material power differentials between the actors (e.g. polarity, hegemony, hierarchy). Yet they can also highlight social differentiation/stratification (an “established-outsider dynamic,” for example) or even network dynamics.

### III. HOW ARE ORDERS FORMED AND MAINTAINED?

What forces are most responsible for bringing a system of actors into a state of order? Explanations in the extant literature can be differentiated and categorized according to two fundamental criteria.

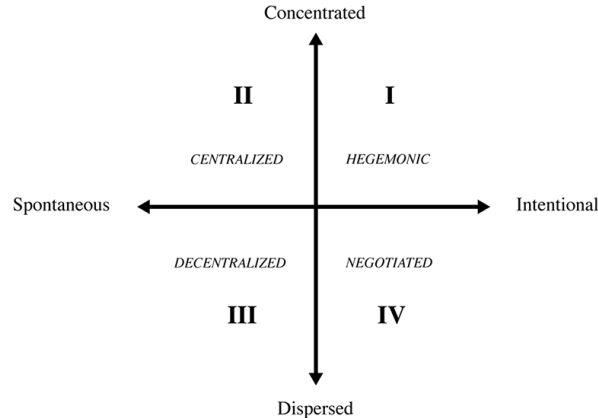
First, are orders produced by a single actor (or a very select subset of actors) who are particularly privileged and/or powerful? Or are they created by many actors that are roughly equal and undifferentiated in capabilities and status? The former can be called “concentrated” accounts and the latter, “dispersed” explanations. Second, do orders come about from purposive behavior, the product of at least one actor’s deliberate intent to create them? Or are they the aggregated result of many actors’

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interactions, producing an outcome that no single one of them intended or anticipated? The former offer “intentional” explanations, while the latter focus on the “spontaneous” emergence of orders.

Bringing these dimensions together produces four ideal types of explanation for where international orders come from.



The most prominent type of order explanations today are those that combine the concentrated and intentional elements (**quadrant I**). These are *hegemonic* accounts because they posit that it takes a dominant actor with both the capacity and the will (i.e., a true hegemon) to intentionally impose order over subordinates.

The next most prominent category combines intentionality with the dispersion of capability and influence rather than its concentration (**quadrant IV**). These are *negotiated* accounts because they emphasize the importance of numerous actors coming together to agree on common expectations for regularity.

Opposite hegemonic accounts are those positing that orders come about via dispersed and spontaneous elements (**quadrant III**). These are *decentralized* order explanations because they depend neither on actor intentionality nor on the concentration of power or authority.

Finally, perhaps the least populated quadrant of order explanation combines the concentrated and spontaneous or unintentional elements (**quadrant II**). In these accounts, *centralized* orders are derived from and premised on the concentration of power or influence in a privileged actor or small set of actors. Whatever influence these actors have, however, they do not exercise it out of a conscious desire to establish or sustain the resulting order.

### IV. HOW DO ORDERS CHANGE AND FALL APART?

Finally, scholarship is divided over the rapidity at which orders transform or break down.

**Revolutionary order change** follows the “punctuated equilibrium” evolutionary model whereby conditions “of relative tranquility are interrupted by sudden and dramatic changes” (Spruyt, 1994). Orders in revolutionary accounts transform only sporadically. When they do, however, they shift or break apart rapidly and dramatically, often in response to some massive shock to or displacement in the system. Short periods of radical upheaval are typically preceded and followed by longer periods of stasis/stability.

**Evolutionary order change** occurs more gradually, and follows what Gilpin (1981) describes as “continuous incremental adjustments within the framework of the existing system.” Orders in evolutionary accounts continuously evolve and change over time, yet do so in minute and often even imperceptible ways. These accounts focus on slower moving forces and more granular processes that accumulate over time, inducing more consistent but subtle changes (in the case of order transformation) or more gradual erosion and decay (in the case of order collapse).