Can we develop an international order that will keep the peace and allow countries to play by agreed rules? That is the question that Henry Kissinger poses in his new book World Order. Unfortunately, it is the wrong question.

Kissinger defines “world order” as a concept of just international arrangements that is “thought to be applicable to the entire world.” Before the advent of the European Union, for example, Europe conceived of world order as a balance of great powers, in which multiple religions and forms of government could coexist.

As a civilization and a religion, Islam envisions the optimal world order very differently – as a caliphate, in which faith and government are united and peace prevails throughout the Dar al-Islam, or house of Islam. That is certainly not the belief of all Muslims or of the governments of Muslim-majority states, but the radicalism espoused by groups like the Islamic State seeks to spread not just codes of conduct but an entire worldview.

In Kissinger’s view, contending conceptions of world order are emerging not only in the Middle East, but also in Asia. China is currently playing by the international rules but is increasingly signaling that it expects to be treated as first among equals in the region (as the US has long insisted with respect to its position in the Americas). But, as China grows stronger and reclaims what it believes to be its historic position in Asia and the world, how long will it wait to insist on reshaping the international rules?

Russia is openly breaking those rules and no longer bothering to justify itself under international law. Instead, it boasts of reclaiming territories once ruled by the Kremlin and threatens to use force to “protect” ethnic Russians from purported threats.

When Russia annexed Crimea last March, Kadri Liik of the European Council on Foreign Relations pointed out the marked difference in the way it handled its invasion of Georgia in 2008. The Russian government essentially provoked Georgia into attacking first and then crafted an elaborate justification aimed at rendering its actions compatible with international law. But this time, Kadri wrote, “Moscow has challenged the whole post-Cold War European order, together with its system of rules.”

Kissinger’s hope is that these countries and rising powers like India and presumably Brazil (he leaves Latin America out of his account of world orders) will be able to forge agreement on a set of rules that all will regard as legitimate, thereby maintaining a stable global balance of power. The Westphalian principle of multiplicity will be critical, he believes, as it will be necessary to allow different countries and civilizations to operate on very different domestic principles.
An effective world order for the twenty-first century, however, must do much more than keep the peace. Kissinger focuses on inter-state relations – on how, from one country’s perspective, to avoid war with other countries while deterring them from aggression or other actions likely to upset a regional or global balance of power. Yet a glance at today’s headlines suggests that what is most likely to kill and displace millions, if not hundreds of millions, of people in the coming decades are global threats such as pandemics, climate change, and terrorist and criminal networks – not inter-state war.

Yes, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to more than 3,000 deaths. But current projections of the spread of the Ebola virus predict a million cases by January. According to the World Health Organization, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has killed 36 million people, roughly ten million higher than the estimated number of military deaths in World War II, with an additional 35 million people infected.

Many of these global threats are closely intertwined with war, but war that is far more likely to be fought within borders than across them. Consider that roughly two-thirds of Syria’s population has been displaced by the country’s civil war, with millions living miserably in refugee camps.

The disastrous state of health care in Liberia and Sierra Leone, where Ebola is raging, reflects decades of horrific civil war in both countries. The ongoing violence in Africa’s Great Lakes region, which has claimed millions of civilian lives, is rooted in the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the resulting flood of Hutu refugees into neighboring states.

The droughts and floods caused by climate change will put millions of people on the move, first into crowded and combustible cities, and then across borders. Russia and Canada may be happy to receive them as vast new tracts of land open up, but many other parts of the world are already crowded, which spells conflict.

Maintaining peace is mostly a matter of restraint or constraint. Effective global cooperation requires much more. Governments must be able to come together, alongside vital actors from both business and civil society, to adopt comprehensive plans of action.

Those plans, in turn, require funding, manpower, collective will, and enforcement capability. Yet today, faced with a virus that kills half of those it infects and the prospect that it could decimate an entire region of Africa, disrupt air travel, and put people around the world in quarantine, the world has delivered only a fraction of the needed financial and material assistance.

We live in a world of global problems and largely national solutions. The need for institutions that can respond swiftly and effectively, as domestic government does in well-governed states, is greater than ever. The post-WWII institutions have become insufficient. It is time to reform them – and to devise new structures and tools designed to address global problems.