Globalisation tells us that the world is 'shrinking' and interdependence is increasing. I will deal with that claim in greater detail below, but for now the point must be made that all of this is based upon an assumption that there is, in the first place, a 'world' or a 'global' system that can be studied politically. In fact, that is a very big claim indeed. World politics is regional politics. The globe is divided into regions (North America, Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, South Asia and East Asia) and sub-regions, and states pay minimal attention to things that happen elsewhere. Only the US is genuinely 'global' because of its military and economic presence. But how many educated Europeans know the name of the Japanese prime minister, or pay attention to Columbian politics? Who would invest Japan with greater significance than France, despite Japan being a much more important country? Very few. And who can really blame them? The problems of those areas remain remote.

David Miliband, when Foreign Secretary, announced that 'power is moving to a global level'. In truth, the idea that there even is a 'global level' is a fallacy. International institutions lack real power, and only have it when the states they consist of can agree to do something; more often than not they are paralysed by those states. The rulings of the United Nations Security Council are mostly gesture, lacking in bite. Anyway, the most effective international bodies – like NATO, the EU or the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation – are regional, not global. Rhetoric aside, regional politics are what matters. Since the Cold War, the major states have continued to negotiate with one another directly and solve problems between themselves, with the most powerful having the most influence. The collapse of the bi-polar framework saw more states become increasingly relevant. What that means, far from offering any support to globalisation, is that the traditional bases of international relations have been reinforced, not weakened.

So why the appeal of 'globalisation' theory, then? The answer has two components and is deceptively simple. First, we, as humans, have an innate desire to search for simple concepts and explanations to order our thinking, to help us grasp complex events and historical periods. The 1980s, for instance, are the Thatcher years. In the international system there was the road to war, the First World War, the inter-war period, the Second World War and the Cold War. Alas, the world is more complex than this. But the point is a powerful one. If faced with a set of confusing problems, find a simple framework, give it a label and the problem is solved. And experts have always been tempted to proclaim that the latest era represents something new and profound. But why do we need a single ordering concept for the current state of affairs? Why can't we just recognise it for what it is – international politics as normal?

Secondly, 'globalisation' is, in fact, a 'meta-narrative' of a fairly standard sort. It is reminiscent of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the most important philosopher of the last two centuries. Hegel created a framework in which others, most notably Karl Marx, operated; and the core of this was the belief that human events have a definite direction and an endpoint – in the case of globalisation, unity and harmony among the people of the world. The Hegelian Francis Fukuyama put forth his famous thesis in 1992's The End of History and The Last Man;

globalisation is a parallel intellectual effort. The real core of the thesis is that it forces international events into a narrative of 'progress'. A belief in progress is deeply encoded in the DNA of most of those who pontificate on international affairs. It contains an assumption – for that is all it is – that humanity can be moulded and improved; and that states do not need to have conflicting interests. Interstate rivalry, according to this way of thinking, is no more than a product of a particular historical system, a mere process – smell the Marxism here, along with elements of Liberalism – which can, and is, being transcended. But trek across the middle of Eurasia and see if that vision survives. The prevalence of 'globalisation' in public debate, and as a concept in the minds of decision makers, thus begins to appear not merely romantic but positively misleading. One leading textbook, The Globalisation of World Politics by John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, holds that 'There is now ... a global culture' and 'most urban areas resemble one another'. One might wonder whether London really resembles Karachi, or if Berlin is comparable to Sau Paolo. 'The world is becoming more homogenous ... A cosmopolitan culture is developing'. These claims are simply impossible to sustain as a statement of global reality. But there is more: 'There is emerging a global polity'.

It is, of course, possible that I have simply missed the news. But it seems to me more likely that globalisation constitutes a fantasy of liberal progress, which would seem nothing short of laughable if presented to, say, a Chinese admiral or in a FARC-controlled region of Columbia. There is an air of desperation about the whole thing. Yet the curious dominance of 'globalisation' in public debate threatens to leave Western governments fatally ill-equipped to understand the brutal realities of a Hobbesian international realm.

If globalisation is transforming the international realm, then its advocates have to explain the continued power – indeed the existence – of states. The notion that some nations are fragmenting offers nothing to support the globalisation theory; weak regimes are a very old problem indeed. And I have yet to see a plan for how states are to go out of existence or world government achieved. Meanwhile, are international institutions really dictating to states? If Iran bends to international opinion, will it be because the United Nations implores it to do so, or the willingness of major states to bring their power to bear? When a British prime minister wrangles with the EU, is he being buffeted by a nebulous 'global' force? Or is he confronted with the leaders of other countries advancing their national interests, or, alternatively, a Brussels bureaucracy concerned with their own promotion struggle? And does any of this genuinely constitute a change in the nature of the international system itself?

Let us briefly look at other trends held to be important by globalisation advocates. What impact does the internet actually have on geopolitics? It might provide a means for terrorists to plot attacks via email rather than letter or telephone; and people may see things that upset them. But they could still plan attacks without the internet, and would still come across offending material in other media. The instantaneous nature of the internet doesn't change these essentials. Those who think that YouTube has geopolitical ramifications need to explain the case precisely, rather than merely asserting it. The internet is arguably less revolutionary in this respect than the book, the newspaper, or the television; the World Wide Web built on pre-existing phenomena.

Meanwhile the profusion of 'information' has not yielded a better informed public – on foreign or

domestic matters, as the bankruptcy of the recent general election demonstrated. Meanwhile cheap air travel, allowing people to holiday across the globe, is not a political phenomenon. Again, those who believe that RyanAir has measurable political implications must demonstrate how that is so. And in what ways does the fact that I eat Indian food, or wear a t-shirt stitched in Indonesia, change anything? Diseases, meanwhile, have always spread rapidly. Corporations are not polities, and whatever influence they may have with a specific government is not a new state of affairs. The first President Bush's 'New World Order' was feel-good rhetoric and gesture; what exactly was done to advance it? And haven't statesmen always spoken enthusiastically of 'world peace'?

On global trade, it was often remarked that economic interdependence was too great to allow major war before 1914; and look how that turned out. Many economists hold that, in some respects, the relative volume of economic interdependence isn't all that much greater now than it was a hundred years ago. Financial crises have always had ripple effects on other nations, advanced and otherwise. What's new there? Anyway, the proportion of trade that a state has with any other given nation is almost always a relatively small proportion of its total trade; hence, in the case of a breakdown in relations, adjustments can be made in a few years at the most. The notion that trade neutralises security competition is not borne out by the historical record. By conflating all of these trends, we are in danger of forgetting the truly important point about the post-Cold War world: the American protectorate and the willingness of other states to accept this, for the moment at least. That explains far more of the global security situation and the lack of major wars than trade or the internet.

Globalisation is thus the ultimate intellectual conceit – the effort to explain everything with a single theory. Like similar attempts, it falls flat on its face. What we are left with, then, is an arbitrary and unsubstantiated attempt to link different trends, many of which have no measurable political content. The 9/11 attacks are often held up to exemplify the globalised nature of the world. Hardly. What happened was that a group of terrorists with millenial ambitions had been trying for some years to strike at the US, the guardian of their Muslim enemies. They succeeded. The end. This does not constitute a fundamental change in the nature of international politics. In the The Globalisation of World Politics, it was asserted that because the images of the World Trade Centre attack were 'immediately' seen across the world this itself amounted to something significant. How? The fact that Bin Laden struck inside one country in pursuit of objectives elsewhere is not particularly novel. The IRA bombed mainland Britain. Ethnic groups in Africa routinely terrorise across state boundaries. Nor is Al-Qaeda 'a truly globalised organisation', because it has a multinational membership. If anything, far from being a move towards globalisation, it is a shift in the direction of the basic urges of man; which, in the Middle East, mean tribe and sect. It might be an international network requiring an international response, but that is subtly different from taking this to mean that the problem constitutes a real change. Local events have always had international consequences. Nineteenth century anarchists and socialists operated in a similar fashion across Europe. Suppressing them generated international tensions. States used subversives as proxies. War was threatened. Intelligence played a key role. Sound familiar?

Thus, while claims about integration, unity, homogeneity and cosmopolitanism continue to be made, the evidence on the ground is very thin. It is hard to support the argument that humanity

is becoming more harmonious, or that international organisations rather than states are directing the traffic along the highways of the international system. Globalisation offers little guidance as to how different interests are to be reconciled, and ignores the fact that 'world' politics is a falsehood. The theory holds that states are interdependent; but, as I have suggested, only to a point, and to a limited extent with any other single state.

Globalisation implies a vision of the world which might more closely reflect how some would like it to be, rather than as it actually is. In reality, the geopolitical phenomenon that facilitates this theory in the first place is wholly conventional – American strength and the balance of power between rival states in different regions, with the result that most are happy to rely on the US to underpin stability rather than bear the costs of doing it themselves. China is the best example of this. Put another way, it is a result of the power of a state – the two traditional driving forces of international relations. America is deeply ambivalent about this expansive role, and as its relative power diminishes, and Washington focuses on a narrower set of truly vital national interests, one suspects that the validity of 'globalisation' will become unsustainable along with it. Of course, when that does happen, commentators - needful as ever of overarching explanations – will inevitably announce that we are in a new era of 'chaos'. Just watch.

Robert Crowcroft is a specialist on British politics and defence.