



# The Return of the West?

30 Years of the »End of History«

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Thirty years ago, political scientist Francis Fukuyama argued that end of the Cold War, fall of the Berlin Wall, and disintegration of the Soviet Union signaled the victory of Western liberal democracy. The World was witnessing a conceptional »End of History«.



Thirty years on, amidst Russia's war on Ukraine, many question whether the global norms and democratic principles signaled by Fukuyama will be upheld in the emerging multipolar global system. What victory of Western Democracy? Are democratic values not being challenged both from within democracies and from outside? At the same time, the political and military responses to the Russian aggression against Ukraine have given ample rise to speculation whether we are witnessing a potent »Return of the West« as a united geopolitical actor.



The essays in this collection explore questions of quality from different perspectives. The objective is not answers, but rather questions: What kind of »West« has returned? Is »the West« a geographic concept, a historical, or an economic one? Does it comprise all advanced economies? Or is it first and foremost a normative – or even civilizational – concept? And most importantly: What are the repercussions of these conceptional delineations?

For further information on this topic:

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# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION: THE RETURN OF THE WEST?</b>	2
Michael Bröning, Sara Burke and René Cuperus	
<b>THE STRANGE RETURN OF THE WEST</b>	5
Hans Kundnani	
<b>THE HIDDEN VITALITY OF EUROPE</b>	7
Paul Scheffer	
<b>HOW TO RESTORE THE SELF-CONFIDENCE OF THE WEST?</b>	10
René Cuperus	
<b>PUTIN KISSES THE WEST AWAKE</b>	12
Ernst Hillebrand	
<b>IMPERIUM SINE FINE? WHY THERE IS NO END OF HISTORY</b>	15
Michael Sommer	
<b>THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY</b>	17
Marc Saxer	
<b>THE NEW GEOPOLITICS</b>	20
Bruno Maçães	
<b>BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE MYSTERY OF BUILDING THE NEXT WORLD ORDER</b>	23
Nadine Godehardt	
<b>WHAT ABOUT THE GLOBAL SOUTH?</b>	26
Marina Rudyak	
<b>HEGEL ON THE HUDSON: WHY THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY SPELLS TROUBLE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS</b>	28
Michael Bröning	
References	31

# INTRODUCTION: THE RETURN OF THE WEST?

**Michael Bröning, Sara Burke and René Cuperus**

In 1992 Francis Fukuyama advanced an argument in his milestone work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union together represented the endgame of ideological conflict and the victory of Western liberal democracy. In late 2021, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Clingendael International Institute reflected upon the state of these concepts with an eye toward organising an academic debate – thirty years on – of the state of the ideas raised in this influential and controversial publication. In so doing, they noted even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine that Fukuyama's vision of the victory of Western liberal democracy and the cessation of ideological conflict was far from current reality.

Yet Fukuyama saw it as inevitable thirty years ago that Western liberal democracy, the last ideological phase of humanity, would prevail. His reasoning, according to Yasha Mounk (2022): »Only liberal democracy affords individual citizens a great amount of leeway to live life in accordance with their predilections and an ability to determine their collective fate. This is the source of its lasting appeal, and the reason why history ultimately tends toward its triumph.« In predicting the ultimate ideological triumph of the West, a struggle foretold to be won by Western liberal-democratic civilisation, defending universal human rights and the rules-based order alongside a slow but steady trend towards »enlightened« democratic consumerism, Fukuyama was not assuming stasis, that from then onward events would stop occurring. On the contrary, he projected that the conflicts of history would be replaced by »economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands« (Fukuyama, 1989).

The high point of the West's »post-History« euphoria was the military concept of »humanitarian intervention«, whereby Western alliances asserted the right to intervene, their justification partly based on the UN-notion of »Responsibility to Protect«, in countries where human or minority rights were being seriously violated. In the form of a doctrine applied equally by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair – and in many ways also by Barack Obama – this approach to global challenges took shape in numerous operations, from Kosovo to Iraq and from Syria to Afghanistan. Images of the hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan and desperate Afghan »partners«

plunging to their deaths on a bleak day at Kabul Airport have made us all too aware of how this humanitarian intervention ended. What is not so clear is whether the lack of success of these interventions should put an end to interventions altogether or initiate a call for redoubled efforts to intervene more effectively.

However, against the backdrop of tank battles and mortar attacks, not »in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing«, to quote the infamous saying of Neville Chamberlain (1938), but once again raging in the heart of Europe, the question for this symposium was not on the End of History but, instead, on the return of history and what that means for the complex and unsettled nature of what we call – for lack of a better term at present – »the West«.

Thus, in its final form, the symposium »The Return of the West? 30 Years of the End of History«, jointly organized by FES and the Clingendael Institute on June 6th and 7th in New York City, focused on three key questions. Firstly, can global norms and democratic principles be upheld in the emerging multipolar global system – and at times when democratic values are not only challenged from outside forces but, in many cases, also from within democratic societies? Secondly, will »universal values« be strengthened or eclipsed by the war in Ukraine? And finally, is »the West« returning as a geopolitical actor and, if so, in what form(s)?

The notion of the »the Return of the West« in public debate seems, predictably and not unjustifiably, based on the notable revitalisation of NATO. An organization that was previously pronounced »obsolete« (Donald Trump), »brain dead« (Emmanuel Macron) or was simply ignored by key leaders of the alliance (Angela Merkel) is experiencing a remarkable renaissance. Even previously neutral European states, such as Finland and Sweden, are now set to join the club.

Also, the European Union seems to be closing its ranks. In the process, even Central European nations previously ostracised for their rule-of-law obstructions have been increasingly exonerated. The EU is having a moment as a geopolitical entity, offering full membership to Ukraine on an accelerated pathway driven by geopolitical needs. *Zeitenwende* – the turn of the times – has become the keyword, acknowledging the need for new thinking on security and defence due to the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Entirely in the footsteps of this *Zeitenwende*, the war in Ukraine has been instrumental in overturning Germany's fraught relationship with weapons, state violence and armed conflict in general. They say only Nixon could go to China? Only a Social Democrat could invest 100 billion Euros in the military and live to tell the tale. While the Covid crisis pro-

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pelled a Hamiltonian moment in terms of economic EU integration, the Ukraine war has similarly revolutionised thinking and spending on foreign policy and defence – and not only in Germany. However, the war is ongoing. And the repercussions are devastating: the world suffers from inflation and energy scarcity, threatening the livelihoods of billions, in both industrialised and developing countries.

Does this war mark the return of the West? Perhaps, if we see the United States and Europe again acting together in the face of autocratic repression and aggression. But will this last? If the US turns back from its pivot to Asia and restores its protective umbrella over Europe. Perhaps the very notion of a return of the West could work against the concepts and ideas – such as freedom and democracy – that the West has tried to promote.

What if triumphant declarations of the West's return were only to further harden the geopolitical division between East and West, as well as that between North and South? Let us hope we are not witnessing act I of a war that could become more devastating, should it expand to a global scale in act II or III.

Each essay in this publication, in its own way, assesses the geopolitical repercussions of emerging trends and reflects on the consequences, especially for Western actors whose core values are being challenged both from within and from without. The texts gathered in this volume do not attempt to settle once and for all the difficult questions raised in them. As readers will see, contributors to our New York debate were far from ideologically homogenous, and – rather than presenting official positions of FES or the Clingendael Institute – their contributions are instead more like snapshots, written in the fog of the difficult here and now, yet cogently contributing to an urgent debate.

The essay of Hans Kundnani on »The Strange Return of the West« considers the complexity and ambiguity of the term »the West,« posing the question, »what kind of West is it that is back?«. Kundnani argues that the West takes at least five different forms: the geographic, the advanced economies (including Japan and South Korea), the post-WWII alliance and NATO, the normative (human rights and R2P), and the civilisational, based on Judeo-Christian values. The civilisational meaning has become dangerous in the wrong hands, he believes, especially since it has been picked up by the far right in both Europe and the U.S., and that it is furthermore »ill-suited to the challenges that Europe and the United States now face – in particular the China challenge«.

Paul Scheffer writes that the notion »end of history« goes hand in hand with the »end of geography«, as both notions were based on a belief in the ascendancy of Western liberalism. Yet it is precisely in the particularities of the political geography of Europe that he sees a »hidden vitality« for the West, arising from a »a relatively high degree of equality and living standards, a low level of corruption and reasonably well-functioning judicial systems.«

In his essay, our own René Cuperus charges that »the biggest threat to the West is the West itself«, specifically, »a continuation of the technocratic market-society which is destroying post-war middle-class societies; an overly rigidly implemented human-indifferent apocalyptic climate politics; and an identity political »wokeism« that spills over into Western self-hatred, in which the West is merely reduced to the burden and scars of its history (colonialism, racism, sexism).«.

Ernst Hillebrand argues that the »real problem of the West« is its »internal erosion«, marked by growing inequalities, »differences in living conditions and opportunities between winners and losers of globalisation«, a process that is also undermining representative democracy and »the very idea of a »normative community««. Regarding the United Nations vote on sanctions against Russia, he notes, »Two-thirds of humanity have not joined in the sanctions demanded by the West.« It is hardly a surprise that, despite the West's propagation of a grand narrative of universal outrage about Russian military aggression, economically powerful countries such as Brazil, South Africa, India and – not least – China, have refrained from criticising Moscow's aggression in categorical terms. Silence can be deafening. The list of countries mounting an all-out defence of the »universality« of values relating to sovereignty and laws of military engagement is therefore notably short.

Ancient historian Michael Sommer warns that from »the vantage point of a very *longue durée* perspective, ideas and norms which are seemingly supratemporal turn out to be rather short-lived.« He notes that the »end of history« itself is not a new phenomenon and that as long ago as 17 BC »Roman society cast off the dirt, offences and wounds of the civil wars and entered the new *saeculum Augusti* in a purified state: a golden age in which there is no more history«. That is, until history and great power competition started up again.

Noting that such great power competition encompasses a range of scenarios from the benign to the utterly destabilising, both to the West and to the international order in general, Marc Saxer cautions that the »current attempt to save the liberal order by forming an »alliance of democracies« against an »axis of autocracies« is doomed to fail.« Instead, he argues, a »more inclusive platform is needed to secure the support of non-democratic powers«. The »best among bad options« for such a platform would necessitate a »rapprochement with China, e.g., through the recognition of exclusive zones of interest and the adaptation of the multilateral system to reflect the new balance of power«.

Bruno Maçães argues that the emerging international order is like »a kind of operating system« in which states with »root-access« can set and change the rules. »Russia’s war in Ukraine is a revealing moment,« he writes, »The global system was supposed to be a neutral framework of rules, but it has suddenly been exposed as a tool of power,« which is generating »new competition for root access to the global system.« Furthermore, he writes, the Ukraine war has »exposed a fundamental misunderstanding in the way Western democracies think about technology. Far from bringing about an end to state conflict, modern technological development raises the stakes of conflict and is likely to intensify it.«

Nadine Godehardt also sees the present conjuncture as potentially volatile. We are in an »interregnum« of world orders, she writes, with »radical uncertainty« fuelling fears of change. The reality of that fear means that we are faced with only two choices: »Let the fear take over« or »Embrace the fear«. Godehardt argues we must embrace the fear, lest we continue to succumb to a »lack of imagination when it comes to developing ideas or categories that fully comprehend our current state of world politics«.

China expert Marina Rudyak sees the »new Cold War« not as primarily between Russia and the West but between China and the United States. »Chinese leaders speak of China as the proponent of »true multilateralism« based on the Right to Development. »True multilateralism,« according to China, is grounded in »’rules agreed by all countries’, based on bilateral consultations and the balancing of interests«. Faced with Western countries’ ongoing reluctance to implement governance reforms to the post-World War II multilateral system, China has proactively created new multilateral organisations while at the same time remaining a member of the old ones. To China, »the existing multilateral order« is not »fair and just« but instead serves the narrow interests of the West.

Such a perception of the unfairness of the existing international order bodes ill for the United Nations system, which Michael Bröning warns is weakened by twin addictions that produce an »ever-widening gap between ambition and reality«. One such addiction is to modest technical attempts at change – such as the »Liechtenstein Initiative« for a compulsory General Assembly debate upon use of a veto in the Security Council – which Bröning pronounces: »mostly cosmetic«. The other addiction is an enthusiastic rhetorical embrace of new responsibilities, such as a »blissfully ignorant« proposal for the UN to become the universal arbiter of misinformation. Both produce a bleak outlook for Agenda 2030 and the SDGs: »Countries will cut development spending and increase defence budgets, as they grapple with their own economic uncertainties.« In sum, he writes, »the future could look a lot like the past – only worse and more dire as overlapping global crises inevitably require global attention.«

\* We would like to thank all the symposium participants who were able to offer their inputs despite a difficult timeframe. While history has clearly returned, the return of the West as a historical actor is still in flux, and with much at stake. We therefore trust and hope that these texts will be helpful contributions to a conversation that is as difficult as it is crucial.

# THE STRANGE RETURN OF THE WEST

**Hans Kundhavi**

In order to discuss whether the West is returning or declining as a geopolitical actor, it is necessary first to interrogate the concept of the West – that is, to ask what it means. While the term is used frequently and often without definition or explanation, even in serious newspapers and in policy discussions, its meaning is far from self-explanatory. Moreover, it has a long, problematic history that supporters of the idea of the West often ignore – if, that is, they are even aware of this history.

There are at least five different versions of the West, though we rarely distinguish between them: the geographic West (that is, Europe and North America as distinct from the rest of the world and in particular from the »Global South«); the developmental or technological West (that is, a group of »advanced« or »developed« economies); the strategic West (that is, NATO and more broadly the post-World War II US alliance system); the normative West (that is, a set of values that goes back to the European Enlightenment and the

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Atlantic revolutions of the eighteenth century; and the civilisational West (that is, a particular project based on Christian or »Judeo-Christian« civilization or values). Depending on how one defines the West, different countries are included and excluded.

During the last decade, the concept of the West had made a comeback in Europe and the United States against the background of a perception of a perceived »return of great power politics« (though the extent to which this »return« is real is debatable) and in particular the challenge presented by a rising China and an increasingly aggressive Russia. In this context, the idea of the West is increasingly conflated with the idea of a global struggle between democracies and authoritarian states. But the revival of the idea of the West inevitably includes a civilisational element and, moreover, cannot include many of the countries with which Europe and United States will need to cooperate in dealing with global challenges – in particular the China challenge.

## THE RISE, FALL, AND RETURN OF THE WEST

Until around 2016, the concept of the West had been in a long-term decline in the United States. As Michael Kimmage has shown, the concept became a key organising principle of U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth century and particularly during the Cold War, closely tied to Western Civilisation courses in American universities and a »Columbian identity«. But, beginning in the 1970s, the concept began to lose traction for various reasons, in particular because of its racial, ethnic, religious and cultural baggage, which were incompatible with a multiracial and multicultural society. The Obama administration instead spoke of the »liberal international order« – what Kimmage calls a »a technocrat's idea of the West«.

Meanwhile in Europe, the concept of the West was contested in the context of a wider debate between Atlanticists and what might be called »post-Atlanticists« – that is, those who thought Europeans had shared interests that were distinct from those of the United States and should depend less on the United States for their own security, a policy which would in turn enable them to pursue their own distinct interests more vigorously. This contestation was partly along geographic lines (with Poland at the Atlanticist end of the spectrum, France at the »post-Atlanticist« end, and Germany somewhere in the middle) and partly along ideological or political terms (with the centre right at the Atlanticist end of the spectrum).

The concept of the West was particularly important in Germany, where it was central to a narrative about how the post-war Federal Republic had broken with its *Sonderweg*, or special path, that culminated in Nazism, and finally completed what the historian Heinrich August Winkler called its »long road West«. The concept of the West was associated with the *Westbindung* – that is, West Germany's integration into the West, particularly through its membership of NATO – to which Germany remained committed even though (or perhaps precisely because) it was increasingly accused of free riding in security terms and developing close economic relationships with China and Russia.

In both Europe and the United States, however, the far right was also increasingly talking about the West. The far right believed in a different, more civilisational concept of the West – in other words, it embraced it for the same reason that many in the United States had rejected it. President Donald Trump's speech in Warsaw in 2017 embodied this far-right embrace of the concept of the West. It is important to emphasise that this civilisational version of the West was perfectly compatible with the strategic West: after all, during the twentieth century, they usually went together. Moreover, many European Atlanticists were mostly quite happy to accept a U.S. commitment to European security, even if it came with a civilisational narrative which affirmed their superiority.

At the same time, however, since the election of Trump, there has also been a revival of the idea of the West among his political opponents. Particularly among Democrats, this was also a reaction to Trump's indifference to NATO and hostility towards the European Union and to his perceived support for Putin. Thus in opposing Trump the American foreign policy establishment and even much of the American centre-left also re-embraced an idea of the West that has deep civilisationalist roots. After agonising about »Westlessness« and its implications, during the Trump administration, European Atlanticists have by and large welcomed this bipartisan return of the West in U.S. foreign policy, a return which the war in Ukraine has further strengthened. The question is: what kind of West is it that is back?

## THE CHINA CHALLENGE AND THE NON-WEST

The war in Ukraine makes it particularly tempting to revert to the idea of the West, in particular the strategic concept of the West embodied by NATO. But apart from the civilisational element that inevitably creeps into the concept of the West, it is also ill-suited to the challenges that Europe and the United States now face – in particular the China challenge. There has been much focus on a joint transatlantic approach to China, and many think China and Russia are becoming closer and merging into one single challenge for the West. But the reality is that the coalition of countries that will need to be assembled to contain Chinese ambitions in the Indo-Pacific will have to include countries that cannot be included in, or mobilised by, the concept of the West – above all India.

Precisely because the concept of the West is so problematic, it is tempting to think of the China challenge as being part of a wider struggle between democracies and authoritarian states. But while the discourse today is largely around democracy protection (what Jan-Werner Müller calls the »democracy defence industry«) rather than democracy promotion, it nevertheless risks identification with the neoconservative tendency to think in excessively binary terms about international politics and idealise our own democracies. Worse, we tend to elide the two different ways of framing – that is, the idea of the West and the idea of a »community of democracies« – as if we in the West had a monopoly on defining the interests of democracies around the world.



# THE HIDDEN VITALITY OF EUROPE

**Paul Scheffer\***

I

More than a quarter of a century after the fall of communism the world has changed almost beyond recognition. Little is left of the euphoria of that time. Democracy has not gone from strength to strength; on the contrary, in many places we see the lure of authoritarianism. The effect was not immediately apparent, but the end of the Cold War turned out to herald the end of American supremacy, in fact it would not be going too far to say that we are experiencing the end of the Western world as we know it. As a consequence, the future of liberal democracy is at stake.

The world looked very different in the latter years of the Cold War. From the 1970s onwards, across four continents, one dictatorship after another was toppled. From Portugal to Chile, from Hungary to South Africa and from Estonia to Indonesia, authoritarian regimes, whether of the left or the right, collapsed. Was this pure coincidence, or were these democratic revolutions in some way connected? Were we on our way to a total victory of liberal democracy? Had we reached the end of the history of ideas?

The claims after »1989« about the »end of history« were accompanied by the notion of the »end of geography«, a sense that distances would evaporate in the global village. Neither proved well-founded: democracy is not shaping our world, and we all live in worlds that are in many respects still confined. Research shows that the lived experience of many people is tied more firmly to specific places than we tend to think. This becomes clear in more detail if we look at the Global Connectedness Index, commissioned by the German postal service (Ghemawat and Altman, 2011).

History is, first of all, geography, wrote nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet (1861). We rarely stop to think about it, but in everyday speech we use countless images that involve space: the political landscape, left and right, the opening up of a horizon, the path to the future, the centre ground. Terms like marketplace, battlefield, fault line and domain are more than merely specifications of place, and we sometimes describe grief as a journey, or troubled periods in

our personal lives as an uphill struggle. Space pervades our language.

History is all about things that come after each other, whereas geography is about things that are side by side. One stresses the sequentiality of events, the other their simultaneity. According to German essayist Karl Schlögel (2003), history slowly drove out geography from the late nineteenth century onwards. The desire for a story prevailed, and ever since we have paid insufficient attention to the jumble of events that shape everyday reality. He wants to restore the significance of space.

»The end of history« and »the end of geography« were based on the same assumption: liberalism is the future for all humankind. Now, more than three decades after 1989, that outlook seems a distant memory. Populism, with its criticism of globalisation and the liberal order, has gained in influence in Western democracies, and the rise of explicitly authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Jair Bolsonaro and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan shows that the dissemination of democratic principles across the world cannot be taken for granted.

In these new circumstances it is no surprise to hear everyone suddenly talking about »the return of geopolitics«. British philosopher John Gray takes a sombre pleasure in puncturing a quarter of a century of liberal illusions: »Tyranny and anarchy will be as common as liberal and illiberal democracies. Ethnic nationalism will be a persistent force, while clan loyalties and hatreds become more politically important, in some countries, than nationality.« He concludes that »geopolitical struggles will intensify« (Gray, 2015).

Recent history has proven him right. The world undoubtedly became more peaceful in the post-war period, but recent decades have seen a revival of violence. After years of war in countries including Ukraine, Syria and Iraq – symbolised in the Netherlands above all by the shooting down of a commercial airliner, flight MH17 – the unrest of the time before 1989 seems to have returned (Brink, 2015). Globalisation does not by itself produce a more peaceful world, far from it. The crisis of the liberal paradigm, in which the disappearance of borders and the dissemination of the market economy were central, marks a transition to new relationships in the world.

\* This text is based on the last chapters of my book *Freedom of the Border* (Polity 2021)

## II

Great changes are underway in the global economy and in culture worldwide, but it is important to bear in mind that the shifts in power are relative. China may have caught up with the United States as the world's largest economy, but its average income per head is still no more than a quarter of the figure for America. Because the Chinese population is four times as large, its GDP can keep pace with that of the US, but the difference in development is considerable.

When I started examining this question in depth several years ago – a research project that took me to cities including Delhi, São Paulo and Beijing – I was convinced that we were at a turning point in international relations. Now, after many meetings in many cities, and after studying a great deal that has been written on the subject, I am inclined to see the change in relationships rather differently. As regards both hard power, or the ability to compel other countries to do things, and soft power, or the ability to persuade other countries, China, India, Brazil and other emerging forces in the world still have a long way to go.

Soft power is crucial. Without the ability to attract, the exercise of power is extremely costly and never lasting. The centralisation of power under Xi Jinping, who is in a position to remain president for many years to come, hardly betokens self-confidence. The repression of dissident voices is damaging China's image internationally. All this leads expert David Shambaugh (2013) to a cautious assessment of the cultural impact of China on the world. Chinese will not quickly surpass English as the world's lingua franca.

The loss of power on the part of the Western world, including Europe, is relative if we take into account the problems of the BRIC countries. The Human Development Index, a ranking introduced by the United Nations, gives an initial impression. The top five countries are Norway, Australia, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark, in that order. The Netherlands is in seventh place, the United Kingdom at number 16 and France at number 21. The United States occupies tenth place. The BRIC countries are quite some distance behind, with Russia at 49, Brazil at 79, China at 90 and India way down the list at number 131.

Another indication is the list of the top 200 universities in the world, published by the Times Higher Education Supplement. The rankings for 2018 include five Chinese universities, with Peking University at number 27, Tsinghua at 30 and Fudan at 116. There are no Indian or Brazilian universities on the list. Russia doesn't score particularly well either, with one university at number 196. No fewer than 62 American and 100 European universities are included in the top two hundred. Britain has 31, Germany 20, the Netherlands 13, Switzerland 7, France 6 and Sweden 6. This gives an idea of the head start the West currently has. It also shows, incidentally, how great an impact the departure of the British from the European Union has had.

The corruption perception index confirms the picture. Western countries, although certainly not free of abuses, are doing far better than the BRIC countries. To take a few figures from 2016: on a list of 176 countries, Brazil, China and India happen to share 79th place, while Russia is at number 131. This indicates weaknesses in the rule of law, and the culture of corruption that accompanies such failings. The situation in Western countries is not ideal, but it is very different. The United States is at 18th place in this ranking, while Germany and the United Kingdom share 10th place and France is at number 23.

Finally, it is worth looking at the Gini-coefficient, a measurement of inequality, in the BRIC countries. The survey of the World Bank gives an indication of developments in this area. Despite their differences, inequality has been a significant problem in each of the countries, even considering the poverty-shattering growth rates of India and China. Every BRIC country has a Gini coefficient indicating higher inequality than in Europe.

So we discover step by step the hidden vitality of most European societies: a relatively high degree of equality and living standards, a low level of corruption and reasonably well-functioning judicial systems. On this basis it's easy to recognise Europe's specific social model, one that is hard to replicate. It's clear that forming a stable state under the rule of law, creating relatively open cities or developing a university culture, is a lengthy and difficult process.

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In years past we quite often saw predictions that other powers would catch up with the Western world. In the 1950s and 1960s there was a belief that the United States and the Soviet Union would soon reach equivalence. It was known at the time as the convergence theory. In the 1980s the idea took hold that Japan was on the point of catching up with the United States. It's quite strange to see a new convergence theory now coming into being without any account being taken of the discrediting of two earlier versions.

We will have to temper not only our expectations of economic convergence but of cultural convergence too. Important differences will continue to exist between the West and, for example, India and China. Think of the caste system in India, or the oppression of ethnic minorities in China. Swedish researcher Björn Wittrock (2002) has put it rather well: there's no reason to assume that we'll grow in the direction of a worldwide civilisation. He speaks of a »plural modernity«, one example being highly developed Japan, which has produced a very different kind of society from those of the West.

## III

My first conclusion is that a new justification for integration can be found only if the European Union offers protection as well as openness. The importance of a common external border has been emphasised from the start, but 20 years passed before it was given institutional form in Frontex, a name derived from the French term for external borders: *frontiers extérieures*. The agency was at last set up in 2004, a sign that after 9/11 Europe did not have as strong an urge for ›homeland security‹ as critics of Fortress Europe have often suggested (Neal, 2009). Even then, Frontex was merely a form of collaboration whose problematic character is plainly expressed in its longwinded official description: European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union.

What tends to be presented as an impossibility – protecting the borders in the south and east in particular is often seen as a hopeless task – is more than anything the outcome of ill-conceived integration. After all, why would the guarding of a common external border not be easier than in years past, when both the external borders and the internal borders had to be guarded and technology was less advanced – in short, when there were fewer tools and more borders?

The success of Europe as a community of freedom makes the step towards becoming a security community unavoidable. That is my second conclusion. Economic Europe falls short and the Union will inevitably need to take on more of a role in power politics. Many may want to cling to the status quo, but history teaches us that staying in one place usually means falling behind. There is no reason to assume that the world of the future will reward those who choose to stand aside.

It's often said that integration was a precondition of Europe's long period of peace. Arguably the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union was the result of a one-sided view of history because the fact that the European Community was always able to keep well away from major power politics has been an essential element of its success. Without the American security guarantee, its focus on politics within Europe – the free exchange of goods, for example, or the common agricultural policy – would not have been possible. Even during the civil war in former Yugoslavia, Europe was a powerless bystander, to say nothing of its divisions at the time of the Iraq war.

For a long time the lack of a proper capital of Europe contributed to its integration. American dominance compensated meanwhile for Europe's weakness in world politics. Now Europe is fully exposed to this ›compulsion to engage in grand politics‹. But any attempt to give the Union a role in the outside world might easily lead to an increase in internal tensions. It would be a big step forward if a security policy were to take shape that focused on the external borders and on the countries that lie just outside those borders.

Although after 1989 Europe celebrated the end of geopolitics, at the edges of the continent violence spreads. Although

it cannot escape those conflicts, a relapse into *realpolitik* would not provide any lasting orientation in a disorderly world. John Gray (2014), whose prediction about the return of geopolitics I addressed earlier, recognises that the liberal way of looking offers something that ›realist thinking cannot supply – a story, or myth, in which they can shape the future of humankind‹.

A third conclusion is that Europe must not fall back into the geopolitical realism of the years before 1989. Europe wants to remain a community of values that gives great weight to human rights, but its challenge now is to become a community that provides security. How can power and morality be brought together? How can Europe find its own way in the midst of the power politics of China, the United States and Russia?

The lesson of the ›velvet revolutions‹ in Eastern Europe is that human rights need to be given due weight in foreign policy. Moralists Havel ultimately saw reality more clearly than realist Kissinger. Even though he was not an optimist, he never abandoned hope of change. Now too – although the rise of nationalism in Russia and China, and of fundamentalism in the Arab world, seem to point in the opposite direction – it would be short-sighted to repudiate democratic aspirations in other parts of the world. Think of the Arab Spring, or the student revolts in Tiananmen Square and in Hong Kong, or of demonstrations against Putin.

A meaningful political role in the world is not possible without a clear idea about the perimeter of the European Union. My fourth and final conclusion regarding the borders of Europe therefore concerns enlargement. Having started out with six member states, it is now a community of 27. Former dictatorships in the south and east are once again part of Europe. The question is: how far can its expansion go?

The fact that the border now lies so far to the east and south is the Union's biggest contribution to peace in Europe. It's difficult to imagine counterfactuals, but one example concerns the problems surrounding Hungarian minorities in Romania, which could easily have got out of hand after the Eastern Bloc fell apart. The transition from communism to democracy has been largely peaceful, and there can be no doubt that European integration had a large part to play in that outcome.

The expansion of the Union is a great achievement, despite obvious problems in Poland and Hungary. The issue that ought to be on everyone's mind concerns future new member states. If we now take stock, it seems clear that the limits of expansion have been reached. Neither Turkey nor the republics that used to be part of the Soviet Union, such as Georgia and Ukraine, should be encouraged to think they might become members within the next 20 years. If the Union wants to create a degree of stability at the external border, then it should declare a moratorium on enlargement. This will require a diplomatic approach to those neighbouring countries that find themselves outside the Union for the foreseeable future.

# HOW TO RESTORE THE SELF-CONFIDENCE OF THE WEST?

**René Cuperus**

Putin has revived »the West« and united it more strongly. The Transatlantic partnership is alive and kicking again after the horrific frozen relations under Donald Trump and the »brain-dead NATO« and »European strategic autonomy« diversions of President Macron.

The idea of a European *Alleingang* – of a European Union going it alone without a close partnership with the United States – has proved to be not only historically risky, but also very naïve from a security policy point of view. Post-historical Europe is in a geopolitical state of shock after the invasion of Ukraine (see the »in slow motion« *Zeitenwende* in Germany) and is still completely underdeveloped in terms of strategic culture and deterrence.

More seriously, in a world where the West is besieged and challenged by authoritarian regimes, which are less concerned with »the freedom and dignity of the individual citizen« – what the German historian Heinrich August Winkler has called »the normative project of the West« – we cannot afford any estrangement in relations between America and Europe.

The West is falling back on itself for two reasons: 1. Western universalism has run up against its limits in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq; and 2. Russia and China are definitely not becoming »like us«. *Wandel durch Handel* (»reform through trade«) has failed. Both reasons constitute the hangover from Fukuyama's idea of the »universalisation of Western liberal democracy«.

The West (broadly understood as including democracies such as Japan, India, South Korea and Taiwan) is redefining itself in the face of successful, assertive autocracies. It unites, under American leadership, in the Alliance of Democracies, although Germany and France in particular oppose ending up in a new bipolar world order, a new Cold War. After the invasion of Ukraine, it remains to be seen whether such a Cold War, between democracies and autocracies, can be prevented. China's role in the further course of developments is crucial.

The corona crisis and the Ukraine war have made it clear how strategically vulnerable global value and supply chains have become. Face masks and medicines from China, oil and gas from Russia, Swift as a sanctions weapon: this geo-economic

interdependence encourages countries and companies to operate more strategically autonomously. According to various observers, the return of great power competition leads to a process of deglobalisation and strategic decoupling. The IMF warns that the global economy could disintegrate into geopolitical blocs, each with its own technological standards, payment systems and reserve currencies. U.S. Treasury Secretary Yellen is already talking about »friend-shoring«, limiting supply chains to friendly countries.

The West is also back in terms of reflecting on its core values. The biggest threat to the West is the West itself. The pervasive rising up of populism shows that *The West's greatest strength has always been a combination of self-criticism, intellectual doubt and an optimistic belief in progress.* In recent neoliberal decades the West has been unfaithful to its own ideals of optimal life chances and equal respect and has created a risky gap between globalisation winners and globalisation losers. »Without openness the West cannot thrive, without equality the West cannot last« (Emmott, 2017).

The West's greatest strength has always been a combination of self-criticism, intellectual doubt and an optimistic belief in progress. The biggest »internal« threats to these strengths at the moment are a continuation of the technocratic market-society which is destroying post-war middle-class societies; an overly rigidly implemented human-indifferent apocalyptic climate politics; and an identity political »wokeism« that spills over into Western self-hatred, in which the West is merely reduced to the burden and scars of its history (colonialism, racism, sexism).

## THE END OF HISTORY JUBILEE

This year, we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of Fukuyama's End of History-claim, which is commonly misunderstood as the triumphant declaration of the final and eternal victory of Western liberal democracy. In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) Fukuyama sees the end of the Cold-War (1945-1991), the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union as together marking the end of ideological conflict. The unchallenged establishment of Western liberal democracy represents the final ideological

stage of human evolution: liberalism is the future for all mankind. »Only liberal democracy affords individual citizens a great amount of leeway to live life in accordance with their predilections and an ability to determine their collective fate. This is the source of its lasting appeal, and the reason why history ultimately tends toward its triumph« (Mouk, 2020).

The context of this anniversary is tough. At the moment, the West is under attack from authoritarian pressures. Both the US and the European Union are in defensive mode against Putin's attempt to rewrite the post-war security order by invading Ukraine.

Putin's authoritarian challenge to the resilience of the »Westernised« rules-based world order is symbolic of what is going on in the world at large. The Western model of liberal democracy is not only under attack from the outside (from China and Russia), but also from within. Many national liberal democracies are plagued by divisions and polarisation. Anti-establishment resentments are turning into right-wing populist, anti-pluralistic voices, intensified by the Covid and climate crisis. In the perception of large parts of the population, the post-war social contract of liberal democracy and the welfare state is no longer delivering social justice and cultural security. In meritocratic neoliberal societies, unequal citizenship has again become a problem. We witness a crisis of middle class-society and a fragmentation of the political centre.

The USA is polarised into Schmittean friend- and foe-camps, which destroys free public debate and deliberation. Within the EU, technocracy tends to produce populist counter-reactions, two sides of the same coin, well noted by Wolfgang Streeck in his thinking on »technopopulism« (2022). How to analyse the double attack on the Western liberal democratic model, both from authoritarian adversaries and from those involved in the internal revolt of discontent and distrust? How to rethink modern liberal democracy and restore the idea of progress of the Western model? How to restore its sexiness and attraction? How to reinvent (social) democratic energy?

## SPRIT OF 1989 OR SPRIT OF TRUMP?

»A Russian defeat will make possible a »new birth of freedom« and get us out of our funk about the declining state of global democracy. The spirit of 1989 will live on, thanks to a bunch of brave Ukrainians«.

*Francis Fukuyama, Preparing for Defeat, American Purpose, March 10, 2022*

»America's power is declining relatively, China is on the rise, and the serious ills that brought American society Trump's populism – demographic decline, economic disappointment, and one of drugs, depression and suicide-unravelling social fabric – have not suddenly disappeared because the Russian military is failing outside Kiev«.

*Ross Douthat, »Will the Ukraine War end the Age of Populism?«, New York Times, March 16, 2022*

Who is right, Francis Fukuyama or Ross Douthat? Is the Ukraine War the (unintended) renaissance of the Western universalist idea of global democracy, or are the problems the West is facing (the successful rise of China and the erosion of democracy and social stability) immune to the effects of the Ukraine War?

Putin's Revenge of Tsarist and Soviet History has somehow mirrored a return of history on the other side: the cautious renaissance of the concept of the Free World, the return of some sense of Western (Trans-Atlantic) identity and common destiny. Not the planned Versailles EU Summit, but Kiev has become the cradle of the geopolitical awakening of Europe. Kiev has also reanimated »brain-dead« NATO.

Although, it is far too early to make any stable analysis of the fall-out and effects of the Ukraine War (we have no idea how it will evolve or when and how it will end), this might be a new momentum for the liberal world, both for the EU and the USA. A momentum to defend and strengthen the idea of the free democratic society both internationally and domestically. But therefore, we have to overcome some of the actual tensions and contradictions within the Western world.

Francis Fukuyama recently had a good feel for this: »Really the important choices are within what we've understood to be the liberal tradition, and I think that's true on both the Right and the Left.« We need boldness to fight authoritarian powers and to fight »the excesses of liberalism«, both of the Right (neoliberalism, technocracy, materialism) and the Left (wokeism, post-national illusions, radical individualism beyond community).

How to find new political energy against both the authoritarian and populist threats? How to deal with the (leftist) self-hatred of the West, in terms of an overexposure of colonialism, racism, sexism, climate apocalypse? How to restore pride and self-assertiveness about the welfare state and egalitarian middle-class societies?

The (conceptual) West has to be restored, both internationally and domestically. Overcoming the new societal divides between academics and non-academics, »anywheres and somewheres«, globalisation winners and globalisation losers, center and periphery, as the new basis for a robust and solid Western democracy, which can stand the heat of this authoritarian century.

# PUTIN KISSES THE WEST AWAKE

*Ernst Hillebrand*

Following in the footsteps of Peter the Great, Vladimir Putin wanted to make Russia »great again« – or at least greater. The opposite has been achieved: Putin has weakened Russia and consolidated Ukraine. And, last but not least, he has revived the »West«, Russia's old opponent. The doubts, the feelings of weakness and powerlessness that had beset the Western world in recent years have been wiped away. Forgotten the Kabul shock, when the Afghan army simply refused to fight for »Western values«, letting the façade of a »pro-western« state collapse within days. For decades to come, it was assumed at the time, the role of the USA and the Western alliance would remain weakened by the disaster in the Hindu Kush. Forgotten also the Covid shock, when mortality rates and economic recession were far higher in the industrialised countries of the Western world (and not least in its leading power, the USA) than in East Asia. And forgotten the Trump shock, when not only the transatlantic defence community, but also the supposed world of common western values were subjected to a massive populist stress test.

The war in Ukraine and its course have blown all this away: The soldiers and volunteers in Ukraine show that the Western model is still so attractive that people are actually willing to die for it. And the West was able to show that it is capable of decisive and common action – simply to show that it still really exists. This is garnished with the pleasant feeling of moral superiority – a feeling that had been badly damaged in recent time by post-colonial ideology and identity debates, the suspicion that the Iraq and Libyan wars had perhaps not quite lived up to the ideals of international law and, last but not least, the self-reproaches associated with climate change. Since February 24th, all this has changed: the West is back, the Atlantic is a bridge and NATO is no longer »brain-dead« but so indispensable that even Sweden and Finland decided to join.

## THE GOOD OLD DAYS ARE BACK!?

Ironically, a not insignificant part of this revitalisation of the West arises from factors that have rather little to do with the zeitgeist of the post-modern West. From the latter's perspective, the Ukrainians' will to actually fight is an atavism based on concepts and values that do not have any place in the post-nationalist and post-heroic world of Netflix cosmo-

politanism and progressive neoliberalism. It is funny to see how liberal media, for whom the adjective »nationalist« is usually a maximum reproach, get excited about the birth of a Ukrainian »national identity«.

And yet the fact remains that the events in Ukraine have revived the »West« both as an ideological construct and as a community of action. How long will and can this last? The guess would be: for a while. At the moment, the order created by the Ukrainian war is strikingly similar to the post-war order after 1945: a transatlantic »West« that is ideologically defined and politically held together by its opposition to an external enemy – Russia, and potentially also China – despite all internal conflicts of interest. The USA is the undisputed leader of this alliance, which no one considers obsolete any more. Without the nuclear umbrella of the USA, the European members of NATO cannot feel safe: »Europe« and the EU are no real players in this world of the militarily fittest. And Germany, the second largest economy in the transatlantic West, is once again playing a reduced political role, punching again below her weight. With Putin's aggression against Ukraine, the notions of Germany as the »reluctant hegemon« (or even »half-hegemon«) of Europe have been put to rest for now (Kundnani, 2014). The country is paying a price for many political illusions and self-delusions, not least in questions of military security. A few years ago, a Polish military analyst summed up the difference between the German and the Polish (or other Eastern European) view of military challenges: »When we talk about security threats, we talk about medium-range missiles. When the Germans talk about security threats, they talk about bee mortality.«

This is about to change. In hardly any other country are the political collateral effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as great as they are in Germany. The war has called into question some of the basic convictions of German politics: The massive dependence on Russian natural gas for the energy supply of a nation of 80 million people with a high industrial energy demand, created under the primacy of the »energy turnaround«; the long-standing neglect of hard military capabilities (particularly accentuated under the most recent CDU defence ministers); the hope that as a »big Switzerland« Germany could keep out of many problems of international politics. And last but not least, the strong fixation on »European solutions«, shared by almost all segments of the German political elite, with its hope of

ultimately achieving, via a steadily advancing integration, a »sovereign« »Europe« capable of acting in global politics without the USA and ultimately NATO.

In the post-Ukraine world, much of this will not work, at least not in the short and medium term. The nuclear deterrent of the USA has proved to be still indispensable for European security. The primacy of the anti-CO<sub>2</sub>-fixated energy policy will have to give way, at least temporarily, to a rapid search for safe energy supplies, including fossil fuels. The subordination of all policy areas to the primacy of »climate policy«--the dominant leitmotif of the political thinking of the bulk of Germany's political and media elites – will not be sustainable for some time. Military spending will be increased significantly and there will be a political consensus for this not only in Berlin, but also among a majority of the German population. In recent decades, the Berlin bubble has repeatedly cut its teeth on the deep-seated anti-militarism of a majority of the population in their attempts to persuade Germans to assume greater »global responsibility«. This is likely to change now, at least as far as the fundamental assessment of defence efforts is concerned. Whether this will lead to a more offensive approach also to out-of-area missions of the Bundeswehr is still questionable, however. The Afghanistan shock has been forgotten for the moment, but the images of Kabul airport will probably be remembered again, and not only in Germany. And we will also have to postpone »European sovereignty« for the time being – in many areas, not only in the military.

In terms of foreign and European policy, Germany will have to reassert itself: What role does the country want to play in the future? That of a militarily strong co-leading power of a »West« defined essentially by opposition to Putin's Russia, in closer cooperation with the USA, but also with the eastern neighbours such as Poland and the Baltic states? Or that of a »mediator« between these countries and a Southern and Western European part of the EU/NATO, which most probably will lose interest in a »frozen conflict« in Ukraine relatively quickly? If Berlin decides in favour of the former, this will not remain without consequences for European policy. The current EU policy of »isolation« of states like Poland, which are sceptical of the idea of an »ever closer union«, would have to take a back seat to the imperatives of securing the eastern flank of NATO/EU and the »reconstruction« of Ukraine. It would be no small irony if, of all things, a Red-Green-led German government were to enter into a new brotherhood in arms with a PiS-led Polish government.

## A DIFFERENT WORLD

At the same time, of course, today's world is a completely different one than it was in 1945. The Ukraine war is reinvigorating the West internally, but not necessarily externally. The global power shift that characterises the world of the 21st century will not come to a halt as a result of the Ukraine crisis. The world will remain multipolar, the shift of the centre of the world economy (and of technological capacities) to the Pacific basin will continue. The world will not allow itself

to be drawn into an East-West conflict, unlike after 1945. This was a global systemic conflict that diffused into almost every society on earth through domestic social and political conflict constellations. Today's East-West conflict is different: it is essentially an inner-European territorial conflict that also has a political-ideological dimension, at least for some of the actors. The vote in the UN on sanctions against Russia clearly showed this limitation of the conflict, just as did the unapologetic matter-of-factness with which the BRICs leaders welcomed Russia into their circle at the end of June. Two-thirds of humanity have not joined in the sanctions demanded by the West. For these two-thirds of humanity, the Ukraine war is a European affair, in which they are neither particularly interested (except insofar as they may suffer its economic consequences) nor emotionally engaged. And as long as these two-thirds of humanity want to continue doing business with Russia, Moscow's commodity capitalism is weakened but not really endangered. The »Zeitenwende« – if it is one – is a European domestic matter, not a global one.

*The »Zeitenwende« – if it is one – is a European domestic matter, not a global one.*

## THE INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS REMAIN

All this raises the question of the West's ability to translate this moment of affirmation of its values and institutions into a lasting strengthening of its internal social and political identity. Scepticism is definitely called for in this respect. The Western morosity before February 2022 was exaggerated, but not without reason. The German historian Heinrich August Winkler defines the West as a »normative project« in which central values of the European Enlightenment were cast in the form of institutions and norms: human rights, secularity, sovereignty, representative democracy, separation of powers, civil liberties and the rule of law. In recent years, the problem with this normative project has not so much been the external challenges posed by authoritarian rivals or the rise of new non-Western actors on the world stage. Nor has the formulation of illiberal concepts of democracy by marginal conservative actors within the EU such as Victor Orbán or Jaroslaw Kaczyński really mattered. The real problem of the »West« was (and is) its internal erosion. The growing differences in living conditions and opportunities between winners and losers of globalisation make the very idea of a »normative community« seem more and more artificial to many people. Representative democracy is losing its social representativeness and political agency; the secularisation of Western societies, the equality of men and women and the right to individual self-determination are being normatively and practically called into question in the multicultural reality of Western societies with a strong influx of immigrants from non-western cultures. From a subjective perspective, for many people freedom of expression and civil liberties have come under pressure from intolerant ideological and intellectual dogmas. All these factors did not disappear on 24 February. They only faded into the background.

So a specific danger of this historical moment lies in the self-delusion of the Western world. Its internal social, political and cultural contradictions will not diminish, its international weight will slowly but surely continue to decline. The West will be able to successfully contain Russia as a violent geopolitical actor – but its power to shape world politics will nevertheless continue to diminish, and its lead in prosperity and quality of life will become even more relative. We should be grateful to the Ukrainians for fighting their battle against an authoritarian kleptocracy, for their right to a life in a country without gulags, political prisoners and poison attacks. We should indeed open the way to the »West« – that is, to the EU – for them. But from a left-wing perspective, we should also try not to forget the contradictory nature of the »real existing« West. The much-invoked »rules-based international order« was not really discernible in the Iraq war. The civilian death toll of the American-British invasion and occupation of Iraq after 2003 is estimated, depending on the source, to be as high as 650,00 people. Joe Biden voted for this war as a senator, as did Boris Johnson as a member of the House of Commons. We should not completely forget such things when we pat each other on the back within our rediscovered »Western community of values«.



# IMPERIUM SINE FINE? WHY THERE IS NO END OF HISTORY

**Michael Sommer**

When I was in high school, we told each other a joke that was only funny in English: »A dictator is a man who wants peace. A piece of England, a piece of France, a piece of Germany...« The game with homophones worked quite well in the 1980s. For us high school students in Bremen, who saw ourselves as bourgeois and centre-right and had little to do with either socialism or the peace movement, the world was divided into two halves: a good, free, Western one and an evil, unfree Eastern one. The East was a reserve of dictatorships ruled by men like Honecker, Jaruzelski and Ceauşescu, who wanted to get at us and were certainly not interested in reaching peace. The fact that in the meantime Michael Gorbachev was in charge in Moscow and that the West was sponsoring dictators like Pinochet and Stroessner only marginally disturbed the beautiful harmony of the picture, if at all. Democracies did not wage wars; at most, they took up arms to defend themselves.

That is why when I saw the images of the opening up of the Berlin Wall on television on November 9, 1989, the first thought that crossed my mind was: »This is it. Everything will be all right.« On that day I was at the Naval School in Flensburg Mürwik, where the German Navy was training me to be a reserve officer. Suddenly, the war games that we practised over and over again seemed pointless. What did Germany need a navy for when there were only friends? The West, I was sure, had won the Cold War. There would never be another war now. Pieces were for dictators, peace was for democracies.

I might have heard the name Francis Fukuyama at the time, but I certainly had not read his essay that had just been published in *The National Interest*. Had I done so, I would have emphatically agreed with most of his ideas on that chilly November day in 1989. Yes, ideologies were a thing of the past. The radiance of liberal democracy would finally illuminate even the darkest corner of this world. And the global future belonged to the pursuit of happiness as a universal promise of prosperity and freedom. A new, history-free age would begin. An age in which what Heinrich August Winkler has called the »project of the West« would become, if not a global reality, then at least globally unrivalled: a project based, in Winkler's words, on »the ideas of inalienable human rights, the rule of law, the separation of powers, popular sovereignty and representative democracy« (2019).

As I said, I would not have had the slightest doubt about any of this on November 9, 1989. I then became a historian, and an ancient historian at that. As a historian, I soon lost faith in the goal to which history was leading. As much fascination as the great philosophical concepts of history, from Hegel to Marx to Spengler, might have, I was only ever convinced by stories that left room for contingency. As an ancient historian, normative projects rapidly lost credibility for me. After all, such projects had also been pursued by the societies of classical antiquity (I will come back to this in a moment). And where had these projects

led the Greeks and the Romans? To the almost complete and irreversible collapse of all civilisation

*Against the colossal panorama of 3,000 years, the modern West and liberal democracy lose some of their historical street credibility.*

at the end of antiquity, in the chaos of the migration period, including the total unravelling of the Roman Empire in the West. Whoever surveys with Goethe's *dreitausend Jahren* the approximately 1,700 years of ancient Mediterranean history between the two Dark Ages of 1200 BC and 500 AD, is painfully aware of the fragility of civilisation. From the vantage point of a very *longue durée* perspective, ideas and norms which are seemingly supratemporal inevitably turn out to be rather short-lived. Against the colossal panorama of 3,000 years, the modern West and liberal democracy lose some of their historical street credibility.

Like ourselves, many people in the first two centuries of our era were convinced that they were living in the best of all possible worlds. In 146 BC, after the Roman Republic had ended the last of its three wars against Carthage with a total victory, which was crowned by the equally total destruction of its Carthaginian rival, Polybios, a Greek, was full of optimism when he looked at the things to come. The Roman conquests, the historian from Megalopolis declared, had prepared the ground for a new view of the world, which could now be travelled safely. The absence of war and the peace guaranteed by Rome freed up resources that allowed explorers to »gain a better and truer knowledge of lands previously unknown.« For Polybios the peace dividend consisted in the scientification of his contemporaries' world view.

A world without war seemed to have come true 300 years later. Polybios' compatriot Aelius Aristides, an orator from Asia Minor, delivered a panegyric to Rome in the middle

of the second century AD. He had come to the Tiber especially for this purpose and showered the masters of the empire with praise. Of course, the genre gives direction to the text, but even a professional orator could not over-egg the pudding if he wanted people to believe him. Aristides emphasises the civilising achievements that distinguish Rome from all the previous great powers: the citizenship allowing former subjects to participate in its rule; the infrastructure shrinking immense distances to manageable ones; the peace guaranteed by Rome's legions from the Firth of Forth to the cataracts of the Nile. The power of the Empire was without competition. If barbarians dared to challenge it, they would be crushed.

At the end of the speech, Aristides turns an established historical image of antiquity upside down: Hesiod's theory of the ages, according to which a golden generation had lived like the gods at the beginning of history. This was followed by a silver, then a bronze and finally, as the most miserable and decrepit variant of human existence, an iron race. Had Hesiod foreseen the Roman Empire, he would have relegated the golden race to the end of history, Aristides concludes. »He would therefore have pitied those who were born before your time.«

For Aristides there was no doubt that the blessings of Roman civilization would last forever: »Always [*âci*] your precious creations will endure.« The figure of a time without history that had come with Roman rule gained great popularity under Augustus. After about 100 years of civil war with sometimes extreme eruptions of violence, Augustus succeeded in unifying Roman society under his leadership and establishing a new internal peace after his victory over Mark Antony. The Augustan peace, *pax Augusta*, became the key message the ruler hammered into Roman heads through all kinds of media. The national epic of the Romans, the Aeneid, written by the poet Virgil on Augustus' behalf, makes Roman history converge on the reign of the prince of peace as if it were a vanishing point. Right at the beginning, Virgil has *Iuppiter*, the father of the gods, say that he grants the Romans a rule that is boundless in time and space.

To mark the totally new beginning for all to see, Augustus held »secular games«, *ludi saeculares*, in 17 BC. The ruler had been firmly in the saddle for around ten years. With a religious ceremony, the chapter of the civil wars was now formally closed. By means of a *lustrum*, Roman society cast off the dirt, offences and wounds of the civil wars and entered the new *saeculum Augusti* in a purified state: a golden age in which there is no more history, but only the eternal succession of the ever-same under the sign of Pax (peace), Tellus (the earth goddess as embodiment of prosperity) and the cardinal virtues Virtus (manly probatation), Pudor (modesty), Pietas (loyalty) and Honos (respectability). The soundtrack to this particular end of history was composed by Horace, the second great poet of the age, who praised the new era in his *carmen saeculare*.

The Augustan *saeculum* was a normative project of enormous radiance, not so dissimilar from liberal democracy. As a project, it was enormously successful, at least in terms of its temporal scope. Roman emperors ruled over the entire Mediterranean basin for almost 500 years after the death of Augustus, and over the East with Constantinople for another almost 1,000 years. Of course, the project underwent several transformations along the way. Precisely through this, it showed its strength. Until the fifth century, the Empire kept convincing people that it made sense to invest considerable resources in its preservation. It always kept ahead of competing polities, such as the Persian Empire and, for a long time, the Germanic tribes. Only when the costs began to exceed the benefits did the empire collapse in the West.

The Roman Empire went the way of all things earthly, but it took its time. The project of the modern West has just about 250 years under its belt since the two Atlantic Revolutions. That it will prevail against competing projects for another 100, 200 or 300 years is conceivable, but anything but assured. Only one thing is certain: history is not over.

# THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY

**Marc Saxer**

*The ultimate prize of the current intense great power competition is a new world order. Five different scenarios are conceivable. First, there might be a continuation of the liberal world order after the end of the unipolar American moment. Second, a series of wars and revolutions could lead to the total collapse of order. Third, a great power concert could bring relative stability in a multi-polar world but would fail to tackle the great challenges facing humanity. Fourth, a new cold war may partly block the rule-based multilateral system, but still allow for limited cooperation over questions of common interest. And finally, an illiberal order with Chinese characteristics may emerge.*

*The current attempt to save the liberal order by forming an »alliance of democracies« against an »axis of autocracies« is doomed to fail. A more inclusive platform is needed to secure the support of non-democratic powers. A rapprochement with China, e.g., through the recognition of exclusive zones of interest and the adaptation of the multilateral system to reflect the new balance of power, could pave the way to the best among bad options: limited cooperation within a rule-based order with the United Nations at its core.*

With the invasion of Ukraine, Russia effectively destroyed the European peace order. Now Europe needs to find ways to contain its aggressive neighbour. This task, however, becomes impossible when China and Russia are driven into each other's arms. If anything, the key to ending the war in Ukraine lies in Beijing. China hesitates to be dragged into this European war, because for the emerging superpower, bigger questions are at stake. Will the new silk road be wrecked by a new Iron Curtain? Should it stick to its »limitless alliance« with Russia? But also, China remains concerned about preserving the territorial integrity of sovereign states. In short: for China, it is about the world order.

The war in Ukraine marks the end of the Pax Americana. Russia and China are openly challenging American hegemony. Russia may have proven to be a giant with feet of clay and may inadvertently have strengthened the unity of the West. But the shift of the global balance of power to East Asia is far from over. In China, the United States has encountered a worthy rival for global predominance. But Moscow, Delhi and Brussels also aspire to become power hubs in the coming multipolar order. The unipolar moment after the triumph of the West in the cold war is over.

So, we are witnessing the end of the end of history. What comes next? To better understand how world orders emerge and erode, a quick look back into history can be helpful. Over the past two centuries, the world has seen three orders and one great disorder.

## WHAT IS ON THE MENU?

Over most of the 19th century, a *great power concert* provided stability in a multipolar world. Given the nascent state of international law and multilateral institutions, congresses were needed to carefully calibrate the balance between different spheres of interest. The relative peace within Europe, of course, was dearly bought by the aggressive outward expansion of colonial powers.

This order was shattered at the beginning of the First World War. What followed were three decades of *disorder* rocked by wars and revolutions. Not unlike today, the conflicting interests of great powers collided without any buffer, while morbid domestic institutions could not mitigate the devastating social cost of the Great Transformation.

With the founding of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the foundations of a liberal order were laid after the end of World War II. However, with the onset of the cold war, this experiment quickly ran into a quagmire. Pinched between two antagonistic blocs, the United Nations was in a deadlock for decades (*constrained multilateralism*). From the Hungarian Revolution over the Prague Spring to the Cuban missile crisis, peace between the nuclear powers was maintained through the recognition of exclusive zones of influence.

After the triumph of the West in the cold war, the American hyperpower quickly declared a new order for a now unipolar world. In this *liberal world order*, rule breaking was sanctioned by the world's policeman. Proponents of the liberal world order pointed to the rapid diffusion of democracy and human rights around the globe. Critics see imperial motifs at work behind the humanitarian interventions. But even progressives place great hopes in the expansion of international law and multilateral cooperation.

Now that the West is mired in crises, global cooperation is again paralysed by systemic rivalry. From the war in Georgia over the annexation of Crimea to the crackdown in Hong Kong, the recognition of exclusive zones of influence is back in the toolbox of international politics.

*China has begun to lay the foundations of an illiberal multilateral architecture.*

After a short heyday, the liberal elements of the world order are jammed again. China has begun to lay the foundations of an *illiberal multilateral* architecture.

## HOW WILL GREAT POWER COMPETITION PLAY OUT?

Where do we go from here? In the coming decade, rivalries between great powers are likely to continue with undiminished vigour. How can we prevent these conflicts from spiralling into a great war? How can we ensure a minimum of cooperation to tackle the great challenges of humankind? How much of the multilateral framework for the competition and cooperation between sovereign states can be saved? And will there be a central power that advocates democracy and human rights?

Many believe that democracy and human rights need to be promoted more assertively. However, after the fall of Kabul, even liberal centrists like Joe Biden and Emmanuel Macron have declared the era of humanitarian interventions to be over. Should another isolationist nationalist like Trump or others of his ilk come to power in Washington, London or Paris, the defence of the *liberal world order* would once and for all be off the agenda. Berlin is in danger of running out of allies for its new values-based foreign policy.

There are, however, wide majorities across the ideological spectrum of all Western capitals that seek to up the ante in the systemic rivalry with China and Russia. The global reaction to the Russian invasion shows, however, that the rest of the world has very little appetite for a new bloc confrontation between democracies and autocracies. The support for Russia's attack on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine – values especially smaller countries unwaveringly adhere to – should not be read as sympathy for a Russian- or Chinese-led order, but as deep frustration over the US empire. Seen from the Global South, the »liberal« world order was mostly a pretext for military interventions, structural adjustment programs and moral grandstanding. Now the West comes to realise that in order to prevail geopolitically, it needs the cooperation of undemocratic powers across the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East. The high-minded rhetoric of the systemic rivalry between democracies against autocracies is prone to alienate these much-needed potential allies. But if even the West were to give up on universalism of democracy and human rights, what would be left of the liberal world order? What does the erosion of the liberal order mean for the war in Ukraine? In Germany, there are calls to charge Vladimir Putin with war crimes at the International Criminal Court. Few seem to notice that neither Russia and

China nor the United States recognise this keystone of the liberal world order.

From the right of self-determination, many deduce the right of Ukraine to unilaterally determine the scope of its war efforts. This again overlooks the fact that the United States has clearly indicated that it would not support overreaching goals like the reconquest of Crimea. Similarly, many supporters are willing to fast-track Ukraine's accession to the European Union to show their solidarity with Ukraine. Pointing to the imperative of survival of the European community, President Macron has already cautioned that the accession process is likely to take decades. In the German public debate, such realist balancing of interests is often misunderstood as a betrayal of universal values. The President of Ukraine, on the other hand, shows that he has a very clear understanding of international power dynamics when he insists that the war can only be ended through a peace deal with Russia.

Are the great power rivalries that play out in the background of the war in Ukraine, the coups in Western Africa and the protests in Hong Kong only the beginning of a new period of wars, coups and revolutions? The ancient Greek philosopher Thucydides already knew that the competition between rising and declining great powers can beget great wars. So, are we entering a new period of *disorder*?

Not only in Moscow and Beijing, but also in Washington, there are thinkers that seek to mitigate these destructive dynamics of the multipolar world through a new *concert of great powers*. The coordination of great power interests in fora from the G7 to the G20 could be the starting point for this new form of club governance. The recognition of exclusive zones of influence can help to mitigate conflict. However, there is reason for concern that democracy and human rights will be the first victims of such high-powered horse-trading. This form of minimal cooperation may also be inadequate to tackle the many challenges humankind is facing from climate change to pandemics to mass migration. The European Union, an entity based on the rule of law and the permanent harmonisation of interests, may have a particularly hard time to thrive in such a dog-eat-dog world.

Not only in Moscow, some fantasise about a revival of imperialism that negates the right to self-determination of smaller nations. This dystopian mix of technologically supercharged surveillance state on the inside and never-ending proxy wars on the outside is eerily reminiscent of George Orwell's »1984«. One can only hope that this *illiberal neo-imperialism* is shattered in the war in Ukraine. A decisive victory of Ukraine, on the other hand, could give a new boost to democratisation around the world.

The Russian recognition of separatist provinces of a sovereign state have rung alarm bells in Beijing. After all, what if Taiwan follows this model and declares its independence? At least rhetorically, Beijing has returned to its traditional line of supporting national sovereignty and condemning colonialist meddling in internal affairs. There are heated debates in Beijing about whether China should really side with a weakened

pariah state and retreat behind a new iron curtain or would benefit more from an open and rules-based global order.

So, what is this »Chinese Multilateralism« promoted by the latter school of thought? On the one hand a commitment to international law and cooperation to tackle the great challenges facing humankind, from climate change to securing trade routes to peacekeeping. However, China is only willing to accept any framework for cooperation if it is on an equal footing with the United States. This is why Beijing takes the United Nations Security Council seriously but tries to replace the International Monetary Fund with its own institutions, e.g., the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. If Chinese calls for equal footing are rejected, Beijing can still form its own geopolitical bloc with allies across Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America.

## HARD CHOICES: WHAT SHOULD WE STRIVE FOR?

Alas, with a view to containing an aggressive Russia, a rapprochement with China may have its merits. For many in the West, this would require an about-face. After all, the recently fired German admiral Schönbach was not the only one who wanted to enlist Russia as an ally for a new cold war with China. Even if Americans and Chinese would bury the hatchet, a post-liberal world order would pose real a predicament for Western societies. Is the price for peace really the right to self-determination of peoples? Is cooperation to tackle the great challenges facing humankind contingent on the rebuttal of the universality of human rights? Or is there still a Responsibility to Protect, even when the atrocities are committed in the exclusive zone of influence of a great power rival? These questions go right to the normative foundation of the West.

Which order will prevail in the end will be determined by fierce great power competition. However, who is willing to rally around the banner of each different model differs significantly. Only a narrow coalition of Western states and a handful of Indo-Pacific value partners will come to the defence of democracy and human rights. If this Western-led alliance of democracies loses the power struggle against the so-called axis of autocracies, the outcome could well be an illiberal world order with Chinese characteristics. Contrary to this, the defence of international law, especially the inviolability of borders and the right to self-defence, are generally speaking in the interest of democratic and authoritarian powers alike. An alliance for multilateral cooperation with the United Nations at its core would find support across the ideological spectrum. Thus, it would not be surprising if the

United States were to replace its »alliance of democracies« with a more inclusive coalition platform.

Politically, Germany can only survive within the framework of a united Europe. Economically, it can only prosper in open world markets. For both, a rules-based, multilateral order is indispensable. Given the intensity of today's systemic rivalry, some may doubt the feasibility of such a rules-based order.

However, it is worth remembering that even in the heyday of the cold war, within the framework of a constrained multilateralism, cooperation based on common interests did occur. From arms control to the ban of the ozone-killer CFC to the Helsinki Accords, the balance sheet of this limited multilateralism was not too bad. In view of the challenges facing humankind, from climate change to pandemics to famines, this limited multilateralism may just be the best among bad options. For what is at stake is the securing of the very foundations of peace, freedom, unity, and prosperity in Europe.

# THE NEW GEOPOLITICS

**Bruno Mações**

Although Russia's brazen challenge to the Western-led international order has not gone as planned, it nonetheless has demonstrated the malleability of global politics. A common set of neutral rules is giving way to a new competition for root access to the global system.

Recent crises highlight the need for fresh thinking about geopolitics, especially in the West, and nowhere more so than in Europe. Above all, the war in Ukraine exposed a fundamental misunderstanding in the way Western democracies think about technology. Far from bringing about an end to state conflict, modern technological development raises the stakes of conflict and is likely to intensify it.

The European Union is so fundamentally modern that its political essence can be described as technological. We often call the EU technocratic, which tends to carry the same meaning. Read any legislative text coming out of Brussels and you will find ample references to the latest economic and scientific research on the matter at hand. At the heart of the European project is the belief that politics is about finding the most efficient means of reaching socially desirable goals.

Politics as technique should not be depressing or uninspiring. There is nothing wrong with elevating the promotion of knowledge and the exchange of ideas as the primary means and goals of political life, both domestically and globally.

But with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it became clear that the EU had ignored the geopolitical nature of technology. It was a mistake to assume that technology necessarily reduces inter-state conflict by creating mutual dependencies and bringing about material abundance through ever-greater efficiency.

## AFTER NATURE

More broadly, as technological power increasingly promises to replace our natural environment with new artificial worlds, the question of who will build and control these worlds will become more acute. In a technological world, geopolitics is the struggle not to control territory but to create it.

In an age of climate change and biodiversity loss, the artificial could take on a literal meaning, given the potential of terra-

forming. But it can also be understood more metaphorically. The pandemic revealed new possibilities for achieving radical emancipation from the natural world, both by moving to online, virtual experiences and by developing vaccines and other biotechnologies for conquering – or at least managing – disease.

It was not so long ago that the natural world remained outside our control, serving as an arbiter between geopolitical powers. The Cold War was a conflict rooted in humankind's mastery over the atom; but even then, a transformed nature was still consistent with ground rules that kept the conflict contained within certain limits.

Faced with the realities of what nuclear war would mean, the United States and the Soviet Union both appealed to the impartial judgment of history. Both asked the same basic questions – »Do we have the right beliefs and institutions to grow stronger over time, extending our control over the material forces of historical development?« – and both shared the same basic conviction that a higher authority, whether divine or dialectic, would ultimately decide.

The situation is fundamentally different in a fully human-built world, because there is no recourse to an external authority. Computing, financial, and monetary power set the rules in advance and confer ever more political power on a select few. For everyone else, the new environment is inescapable and thus seemingly natural.

We are living »after nature,« and this changes the terms of geopolitical rivalry. What matters most in today's world are the seemingly abstract networks of money, intellectual property, data, and technology. When your opponent is building a fully artificial or technological world that could eventually redefine your own reality, geopolitics becomes existential.

## A NEW GAME

Listening to American officials over the past few years, one can detect a growing awareness of this threat. Public messaging still stresses the universal validity of liberal principles, with officials (Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman is a good example) calling on everyone to play by the rules – meaning the liberal rules governing the international order.

Yet accompanying these exhortations is a new anxiety that the rules are not as firmly established as the US wants them to be.

There is a great contest under way to determine which rules will govern the world and which superpower will be in a position to set them.

*There is a great contest under way to determine which rules will govern the world and which superpower will be in a position to set them.*

»We need to be aligned with the other democracies, another 25% or more, so that we can set the rules of the road instead of having China and others dictate outcomes because they are the only game in town.«

Faced with this reality, democracies would do well to drop the pablum about »playing by the rules.« Enforcing established rules is no longer what world politics is about. The rules are not given and the forces driving the ascendancy of states are not neutral. The game is considerably more complex than one in which the main players compete under a common set of rules.

The system is open to change. Choices made by different participants can influence and reshape the rules, potentially tilting the entire system in favor of some powers rather than others. This represents a sharp break from the universalism of the previous order, where common rules governing trade and other matters were said to create a neutral playing field.

With liberalism having lost its ability to impress the truth of its principles upon a recalcitrant world, we have moved dangerously close to a new world of »might makes right.« Russian President Vladimir Putin has made clear that he will no longer accept the rules under which the world operates. He wants a new system in which Russia is recognized as a great power with its own expanded sphere of influence.

The Kremlin most likely has not thought through all the changes its preferred new system would entail; but it has made some of its positions known. Ukraine must disappear as a state, and preferably also as a nation; and Russia must be brought back into all important decisions about the European continent. As a former Russian intelligence official once put it to me, tiny Malta, with its seat on the European Council and the Council of Ministers, has a greater say in European affairs than Russia does. Such a world cannot be allowed to stand.

To be sure, Putin had mused that a new system could follow from a grand bargain with the US, echoing the 1945 Yalta Conference settlement by which the US, the Soviet Union, and Britain established the basic shape of the postwar European order. But this was no more than a suggestion, left purposefully vague by the Kremlin. Sensing an opening, Putin decided to try to impose a new system by force.

He did so because he had already convinced himself that Russia was a great power, and that the only thing left to do was to secure recognition of that fact. A swift, successful war in Ukraine would be tantamount to a revolutionary moment, when a downtrodden class suddenly emerges as the true holder of power.

Contrary to popular impressions, the most important asset for the revolutionaries in Moscow was not Russia's nuclear arsenal but Russian energy. Putin and his advisers assumed that Russian oil and gas were so indispensable to the normal functioning of Europe's economy that Russia had nothing to worry about if Putin decided to start a war. Russia, they had concluded, could dictate its own rules. By placing energy flows and trade firmly in the service of Russia's war aims, the Kremlin has effectively abandoned the system of global economic liberalism. Its preferred alternative would deserve to be called »war economy.«

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL ORDER

If one thinks of the international order as a kind of operating system, those who can change the rules are like system administrators. A state with »root access« – like the US – can execute any command or modify the system itself. By contrast, the Kremlin believed it had a back door to the system – a way to penetrate its defenses in ways that would be impossible for the administrators to counter. The goal to reprogram the system, at least partially.

The great advantage of being a global system administrator is that you can crack down on offenders and pursue your other aims by toggling the system itself, rather than through more direct means. This approach characterizes the Western response to Putin's aggression. Rather than going to war themselves, Western democracies have adopted a set of targeted economic tools designed to reduce the Russian threat to the existing system. In the cybernetic model adopted in this essay, they might be compared to antivirus software or perhaps even the villains in *The Matrix* – programs (»agents«) designed to terminate intruders. Weapons and technology transfers to Ukraine demonstrated the system's ability to deploy its resources across the full line of defense.

The sanctions on Russia's central bank were meant to be a coup de grace, because foreign-exchange reserves were the tool the Kremlin had planned to use to protect the ruble and shield itself from other Western measures. To take away that tool was tantamount to accessing »god mode« in a video game. The system administrator hoped that it could simply switch off Russia's controls and leave it fully exposed to devastating bank runs, inflation, and capital flight.

But those scenarios did not materialize, and it is easy to surmise why: The world is still hungry for Russia's hydrocarbons. At current prices, a year's worth of energy exports would be enough to make up for its frozen reserves.

The West's near-unprecedented sanctions also raise unsettling questions about its own future. Will countries continue to accumulate dollar-denominated reserves that can be frozen or seized with the tap of a button? As long as the Russian central bank's reserves are held at foreign central banks, they are a form of »inside money«: liabilities accepted by a counterparty and registered as such in their computers. That means they can be unilaterally revoked. By contrast, gold or Bitcoin would be »outside money« that cannot be revoked, because a direct relationship between the asset and the asset holder removes the need for a corresponding liability.

It is unclear how this game will play out. Sanctioning central-bank reserves on such a scale is unprecedented; but to move away from the dollar, Russia would need a viable alternative. No matter how much the dollar is weaponized, an alternative to it cannot simply be created by fiat. Rather, it would have to emerge gradually as a result of changes in the structure of global trade and finance. Generally, to replace the original system administrator, one must replace the entire system.

## NEW RULEMAKING

Russia's war in Ukraine is a revealing moment. The global system was supposed to be a neutral framework of rules, but it has suddenly been exposed as a tool of power. This revelation carries some danger, because any number of state actors in the developing world may now decide to stop playing by the existing rules, or even to start looking for alternative systems.

Whatever happens, we can already distill three main lessons from the crisis. First, we have entered a new period of geopolitical rivalry, where the stakes will be much higher than they were before. The competition between Western democracies and China will increasingly be seen as a decisive historical contest to determine who will build the artificial worlds of the future, who will craft the rules that govern them, and who will have root access to the operating system.

Second, the power to make the rules matters much more than what the rules are at any given moment. Such relativism may be unpalatable to liberal sensitivities, but recent crises have consistently demonstrated the truth of it.

Finally, it matters which powers have root access to the global system. Preventing intruders from gaining access to the deepest layer of the system must be a top priority. Europe's dangerous dependence on Russian energy is both a vulnerability and a warning.

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# BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE MYSTERY OF BUILDING THE NEXT WORLD ORDER

**Nadine Godehardt**

*Looking at the world from Berlin, we are witnessing a period of great change in world politics. Already before the Covid-19 pandemic or Russia's aggression against Ukraine, European politics were shaped by all kinds of crises that were laying open fractures within the established rules-based international order. Starting with the financial crisis of 2007/08, the following years have extended to a situation where policymakers are faced with often parallel-happening events, an incredible number of facts surrounding these incidents and pressure to make decisions without always having all the necessary information. These moments of crisis are situations that require policymakers to immediately articulate their preferred choice of action. Crises are thus crucial moments of decision, in which underlying principles, values and norms are challenged, and, at the same time, are in great need of being recreated. The sole focus of European governments on crises management in recent years has accelerated the meaning of the present (Gegenwart) in politics. This imprisonment of European politics in »presentness«, however, prevents necessary debates about more fundamental challenges of the future, above all about the outline of the next world order.*

In this already decade-long time of crises, academic debates in the discipline of international relations that deal with disruptions of the established liberal international order have steadily increased. These discussions go hand in hand with analyses about the decline of the United States (or »the West«) and the simultaneous rise of Asia, especially China. General doubts about the success of globalisation have been proposed as well as disbelief in Francis Fukuyama's well-known hypothesis that liberal democracy and market economy would finally prevail globally after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These uncertainties are also reflected in a certain lack of imagination when it comes to developing ideas or categories that enable us to fully comprehend our current state of world politics. Rather, a recourse to past ideas of classic geopolitics can be observed. This applies, for example, to the rhetoric of the »new Cold War«, which first manifested itself in the confrontation between major powers, i.e. the USA and China. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine it then quickly shifted to a narrative emphasising the global fight of »democracies vs. autocracies«.

In a nutshell, it has become clear that things are no longer the way they used to be – without it being clear how things will be one day. This situation can be characterised as an

»interregnum« between world orders in which, as Antonio Gramsci famously put it, »the old dies and the new cannot be born«. It is, however, not a state of disorder, but a consolidated semi-structured order in which the old power structures still exist but can no longer ensure sufficient stability and security; thus they are no longer unchallenged. Moreover, the current »interregnum« of world orders increases the feeling of »radical uncertainty« as a pattern of international politics which then fuels great fears about whether the next world order is one Europeans can still identify with. From an academic point of view, two broad outcomes are probable:

First, we let the fear take over. Then the »interregnum« of world orders paired with radical uncertainty feeds into a world of distrust, insecurity and power accumulation, resulting in a long and painful road to anarchy. In this scenario, the fear that we simply do not know how what we decide today impacts the world of tomorrow is unbearable and thus the question about the future structure of world order is rather pressed into the clearcut frame of a puzzle. If things get too complex, puzzles are a way of reducing complexity. Consequently, the debate about the »return of the West« in the light of the joint reactions of Europe and the US towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the reference to it as a potential »new« structure of world politics (Western coalition vs. Russia/China) is understandable, but misses the detail that, for instance, most countries in the world do not want to choose between the two sides. Reducing a very complex problem to a puzzle obviously limits it to certain, in politics, often binary solutions.

Second, we embrace the fear. This means that we accept the ambiguous state of the »interregnum« between world orders and the radical uncertainty underlying international politics. In this scenario, building world orders is a mystery. Mysteries, however, have no definite answers or objectively correct solutions. The world is full of mysteries; ordering the world is probably one of the biggest ones. In this sense – and particularly if we do not want to end up in a Hobbesian state of nature or anarchy, building world orders in our age is an attempt to define ambiguities. This has its limits, but it might just take a lot of the pressure off academia and politics to have all answers ready right away. Identifying and building productive structures of order in which core European values and ideas are still inherent needs time and, even more so, courage to overcome the current short-term nature of politics.

## RADICAL UNCERTAINTIES IN THE »INTERREGNUM« OF WORLD ORDERS

From a European perspective, the »interregnum« between world orders comprises very different types of radical uncertainties, all having in common that we simply do not know how that interregnum will lead us into the next world order. A prominent example is that, contrary to Fukuyama's (1989) claim that we are witnessing »the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government«, we are instead lost in a competition of conflicting political ideologies. Two developments further expose the level of uncertainty dominating European (and US) politics in particular regarding the difficulties that we experience in trying to imagine the next world order.

The first development highlights a shift in the dominant political mode, direction and orientation in Western politics from progress to crisis, that is, from planning the future to exclusively managing the present. As Jordhheim and Wigen (2018) emphasize, »If . . . crisis is about to replace progress as the main tool for temporal ordering, for synchronization, as the main »synchronizer«, if you like, holds true, the West and large parts of global society are using a new and very different temporal framework, linked to experiences of standstill, presentism, and of a world that is fundamentally »out of sync.« This contrasts the centuries-old self-image of Europe – and even more so of the United States – as the global engine of political, socio-cultural and economic progress. In its place come contemporary experiences of crisis, stagnation and a world decidedly out of balance. It also facilitates others, prominently a China under Xi Jinping's leadership, to present themselves as new standard bearers of progress. Thus the shift of temporality goes along with a shift of geography, placing Asia, and mainly China, at the centre of global progress.

The second development features the tension between connectivity and geopolitics. The COVID-19 pandemic made it finally visible to everyone that connections make persons and states vulnerable. The dependencies on specific commodities such as masks

*The COVID-19 pandemic made it finally visible to everyone that connections make persons and states vulnerable.*

or medical gear, the impact of wide-ranged lockdowns on global supply chains or the fact that a virus instantly changed our understanding of human interaction are just a few examples. Moreover, the pandemic has further accelerated the competition for connectivity among governments by trying to weaponise nearly every linkage. Connectivity emerges as a strategy with geopolitical implications and in this way it ultimately reshapes the geography of world politics. This new play of connectivity geopolitics causes an uncertainty about global spatial distributions that can be disturbing. Even though the war in Ukraine brought back classical geopolitics in which power capabilities are determined by territory, world politics is about so much more. The effects of the war on the world economy, food security,

or even climate highlight again that geopolitics do not simply trump connectivity, but also that geopolitics and connectivity are intertwined and contested at the same time.

## SPELLING OUT THE LOGIC OF THE NEXT WORLD ORDER

The mystery of the next world order poses a question with no definite answer. Nevertheless, the mystery can be framed by identifying a specific set of logics followed by an analysis of how these logics have worked in the past and how they are likely to interact in the future. Three logics are of interest that might help us to get a glimpse of the future, while bearing in mind that our understanding of the next world order might still remain only partial.

### THE LOGIC OF CONNECTIVITY

Connections are the fundament of society. The practice of connectivity is thus as old as human interactions. Even after experiencing global disruptions because of the COVID-19 pandemic, up to the point of realising that international liberalism does not promote unconditional globalisation or witnessing the most revisionist aggression on European soil in a long time, people, governments and things will continue to be connected. Connectedness is unavoidable. What needs to be discussed, however, is how one defines connectivity, normatively or not. How connectivity impacts geopolitics, whether it is a common good and how we facilitate but also how we limit connectivity – and on what grounds – are key questions for building the next world order.

### THE LOGIC OF COEXISTENCE

Coexistence characterises the situation of existence between people, states and things at the same time in the same space or on the same planet. To reach this status is actually another mystery, since coexistence is much more than a static relationship status between countries or blocs in what we now often call a »multipolar world«. On the contrary, coexisting includes the possibility of disconnection without ultimate decoupling. Agreeing to coexist might even create diplomatic space to discuss new rules for global and regional collaboration. In addition, coexistence is the necessary condition in world politics that might still guarantee a future for the relationship between humans and the planet's climate and ecosystem. Thus, politically organised coexistence implies the need for governments to work together even when they disagree on fundamental understandings of the world. This is even more pressing since we are already living in the geological era of the Anthropocene, in which humanity shapes the environment and not the other way around. Organizing coexistence in world politics and doing so particularly against the background of the Anthropocene may turn out to be the greatest challenge ahead.

## THE LOGIC OF DIFFERENCE

People, political systems and ideas differ from each other. The processes of differentiation can be based on the contrast with other political systems, global norms, cultures and things (external others) as well as with previous policies, principles or values (internal others). We need to define differences to know ourselves. Differences are inherent in the identities of people, political communities or cultures; they are inside and outside at the same time. For quite some time now, however, European politics have been mostly about highlighting what it is not, or presenting arguments against a very diminishing spectrum of external others (this may refer to Russia, China or the Belt and Road Initiative). In addition, European politics are less and less about self-reflection. In trying to imagine what will be the next world order, politics are in desperate need of positive instead of negative definitions, in other words, it is crucial to redefine what key ideas, values and norms mean to Europeans and European politics. These have been taken for granted much too long. Moreover, it is crucial to start listening to a wider range of external others (the Global South) and to undergo a deep soul-searching process to identify what will be the productive structures of the next world order.

## WHAT ABOUT THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

To respond to China's alternative visions of multilateralism and universal values, the West needs to radically shift how it thinks about development

**Marina Rudyak**

»The Return of the West?« – with a question mark. This was the title of the event for which the initial version of this brief was originally written. »Was it ever gone?« is what some of the people I talked about it replied to me. »Oh, really, has it returned?« was the reaction of others. How one reacts to this question seems to depend on one's positioning, academic discipline and the discursive bubble to which one belongs. When Francis Fukuyama wrote his essay about »The end of history« in 1989, there was a widespread euphoria about the end of the Cold War and the belief that democracies had won. Once and for all. Autocracies had failed or were, at the very least, on a path to failure. In 2022, history is back. And many wonder whether the new Cold War, this time with the United States and China as the opposing superpowers, is still to come or whether we are already in the midst of it.

China failed to fail. Since Deng Xiaoping's »Reform and Opening«, and despite the Tiananmen massacre, there was hope in the West that with more trade and increasing prosperity, China would liberalise. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would either cease to exist or become a milder Singapore-style version of authoritarian democracy. However, while China's economic liberalisation for a long time offered Western companies favourable production conditions and a rapidly growing sales market, the hopes for political liberalisation did not materialise. On the contrary, under the tenure of Xi Jinping, many of the liberalisations of earlier leaderships have been rolled back.

Internationally, Beijing has used the crises of democratic societies – from the financial and the refugee crisis to right-wing populism, from the Covid pandemic to popular uprisings in the heart of the West – to present its model as the better alternative. It now

*Chinese leaders frequently describe the existing multilateral order as not »fair and just« but »serving the narrow interests of a group« of Western states.*

claims to (co-)determine the rules and the terms of the 21st century and offers alternative visions and concepts. Chinese leaders frequently describe the existing multilateral order as not »fair and just« but »serving the narrow interests of a group« of Western states. In the Global South, those large parts of the world that were formerly colonised by Europe, such claims receive approval. China is presenting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an alternative to the existing

multilateral system. It is a vision of multilateralism that is not based on generally applicable rules (reminder: rules made up by the West!) but on »rules agreed by all countries«, based on bilateral consultations and the balancing of interests. The underlying philosophy is qitong cunyi 求同存异, »seek common ground, maintain differences«. Increasingly, Chinese leaders speak of China as the proponent of »true multilateralism« (zhengzhengde duobianzhuyi 真正的多边主义). Like multilateralism, China seeks to infuse other core terms of international relations with Chinese characteristics. For example, the universality of human rights is countered with a hierarchy of human rights that sees the Right to Development, to which everything else should be subordinated, as supreme. Backed by the votes of the countries of the Global South, China was successful in establishing this by resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The four years of US self-dismantling under Donald Trump and his withdrawal from important global agreements, as well as the West's failure to adequately support the Global South in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, have widened the space for China's actions and influence. China used it to portray itself as a responsible great power: as a partner and development model in South-South cooperation, as a guarantor of urgently needed investments, as a development-oriented supporter in adapting to climate change, and as a helper in the fight against the Covid pandemic. The latter was at a time when the EU, the UK, and the USA were (entirely justified) criticised for having bought up 70 per cent of globally available vaccines.

Yet, the Global South is notably absent on the maps of debates about the future of the »West«. This is true on both sides of the Atlantic. If developing countries are mentioned at all, it is mainly as victims of China's »hunger for resources« or »debt-trap diplomacy«. The latter has become synonymous with China's global engagement in Western discourse, even though the accusation of a »debt trap« strategy has been refuted in research. Even the case of Sri Lanka, still widely cited as proof of how countries can lose strategic assets if they are unable to pay back Chinese loans, is not suitable as proof: When Sri Lanka leased to China the Hambantota Port, it was not defaulting, and the revenues were not used to pay off Chinese debt but for upcoming repayments of Eurobonds, which were more expensive than the Chinese loans. This is in no way to deny other problems related to

Chinese lending. In particular, the fragmentation of Chinese development finance carries a degree of non-transparency that poses risks of over-indebtedness for partner countries and costly loan defaults for China. However, reducing China's presence in the Global South to the resource grab and debt trap narratives and portraying those who cooperate with China either as victims of coercion or as corrupt is highly problematic. It wrongly denies the Global South self-determination and agency and turns a blind eye to the fact that problematic aspects of Chinese projects are a reflection of wider systemic issues.

Individually and collectively, actors on both sides of the Atlantic have tried to respond to the BRI, and China's engagement with the Global South with a number of initiatives: the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy of 2015, the Blue Dot Network launched by the US in 2019, the G7's »Build Back Better World« (B3W) proposed in 2021, or the EU's new »Global Gateway« strategy, also proposed in 2021. However, the problem with all these initiatives is that they seem to be more about addressing the West's China problem than seeing the global connectivity gap as a common problem and common development challenge that needs to be addressed jointly.

This is also how many in the Global South perceive the Western responses to the BRI. For example, the Former Liberian Minister of Public Works W. Gyude Moore, has argued that the EU completely lacked imagination in terms of cooperation with Africa – until China came along. No one is that close to Africa, he says. Yet, there was never a European plan for transcontinental infrastructure, let alone a look at Africa as a potential economic partner. Even if China fails with the BRI, the initiative is an incredible innovation in thinking about development and how to connect the world's poorest countries with the richest.

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it certainly did not help that African students who wanted to flee Ukraine were stopped at the border to Poland by both Ukrainian and Polish border guards with the argument that the EU takes in only refugees with a Ukrainian passport. The videos and images of African students circulated widely on African social media. So, if African countries refused to condemn the war in the UN, it is not because of Chinese influence but because they see the war in Ukraine as a »Western problem«. One could also say, »we« as »the West« are being held accountable for our sins here.

There is another dimension to the Global South blind spot, too. Transatlantic debates tend to ascribe binary values to China's engagement with the Global South, particularly in Africa, and separate China's behaviour from that of the West. Although it is hard to deny China's role as a component and driver of the growing integration of the global economy over the past 20 years, China is treated as a fundamentally different »other« that somehow exists outside the world and

can be explained in isolation. Yet much of China's »hunt« for natural resources in the Global South, be it forestry or rare earths, is fuelled by US and European consumers' demands for cheap Chinese products or new smartphones. A major proportion of Chinese-invested manufactured goods goes to US and EU markets. On the other hand, the reason why impoverished developing countries take Chinese loans is that often these are the only ones they can get. The biggest threat is not Chinese development finance or »China«; it is global inequalities.

Whether we are witnessing a decline or a return of the West will depend on whether the West will be able to present solutions to the global challenges to whose existence it – unfortunately – itself contributed, including economic inequalities and climate change. This process will have to start by recognising the significance of »development« for the Global South. The West needs to present an alternative to China's »Community of Shared Future for Mankind«, which addresses the global connectivity gap and the development needs of the Global South not as a question of aid but as a common challenge. This would require the West to radically shift the way how it thinks about development. Development is not about »them«; it is about »us«.

# HEGEL ON THE HUDSON: WHY THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY SPELLS TROUBLE FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

**Michael Bröning**

*Figuratively speaking, every shell fired at Ukraine explodes twice. Once in the villages and towns of the Kharkiv and once at the heart of the rules-based international order. While the military outcome of the war remains difficult to predict and its impact on the global order is ultimately dependent on the relative success (or failure) of Russia's aggression, the consequences for the United Nations are already plain to see: The UN's future is likely to be one of increasing dysfunctionality and an ever-widening gap between rhetoric and realpolitik.*

## HOW MANY DIVISIONS DOES THE UN HAVE?

While it always remained doubtful whether the world organisation would play a decisive role in stopping the war, at least some meaningful contribution appeared at first plausible.

The Security Council met in all-night emergency sessions; the General Assembly even re-activated a »Uniting for Peace« formula not used in 40 years as a forum for widespread condemnation of Russian aggression. For a short moment at least, the UN captured global diplomatic aspirations.

As the war grinds on, however, even the busiest corridors in New York cannot conceal the harsh reality that the United Nations' ability to act in response to great power confrontation is and has always been limited. How many divisions does the UN have? Once again, it seems, too few and too many at the same time.

A long overdue visit of the Secretary General to Ukraine brought about little more than an additional round of shelling. And while UN agencies on the ground have engaged in life-saving humanitarian assistance, the few political contacts to speak of have taken place under the aegis of the Turkish autocrat Erdogan and the government of Israel. It is rather telling that the absence of the Good Offices of the UN Secretary-General from the short list of diplomatic initiatives has barely raised an eyebrow. While it is certainly laudable that the highest echelons of UN power try hard to alleviate the looming food crisis, one wonders if a more comprehensive engagement is not called for.

In response and frustration, activist voices (encouraged by Kyiv) and voices in the media and the academy have openly

called for altering Russia's status at the UN, taking aim at the country's position as a permanent member of the Security Council or – most recently – at the Russian role in the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Against the backdrop of Russia's exit from the Council of Europe, its suspension from the Human Rights Council and (Russian) talk of leaving the WTO and the WHO, such drastic notions as those regarding its Security Council role are gaining more traction than might have otherwise been expected.

As history recalls, even the hapless League of Nations managed to expel the Soviet Union after its aggression against Finland in 1939.

But as understandable as such considerations may be, they are unrealistic – at least when speaking about the Security Council. As a permanent member, Russia must agree to any fundamental change. Therefore, attempts to radically alter the rules of the game are as improbable today as they have been for decades.

Modest and more technical attempts at change – such as the recently adopted Liechtenstein Initiative to force an automatic General Assembly debate whenever a veto is used in the Security Council – remain possible (Donaldson, 2022). However, they have the distinct disadvantage of being mostly cosmetic.

It is often lamented that the UN – contrary to the example of fictional German Baron of Lies Karl Friedrich von Münchhausen – remains incapable of pulling itself out of the swamp by its own hair. Proponents of drastic change, however, should be careful what they wish for.

Since its inception, the Security Council and the veto have served to prevent a direct confrontation between the world's largest powers and have guaranteed that great powers do not simply opt out of the UN-system when their core interests are challenged.

Against this backdrop, it seems doubtful that a UN largely cleansed of authoritarian member states would be in a better position to do that. Would punishing Russia not necessitate similar actions of moral purification regarding North Korea, Iran or Saudi Arabia? Such exclusions would give rise to the

question of what is of the purpose of a global organisation that is global in name only.

## THE FUTURE? JUST LIKE THE PAST – ONLY WORSE

Confronted with the escalating war and the UN's apparent inability to bring about a lasting solution to the conflict, disappointment swiftly transforms into contempt. Does the latest Russian veto with regards to the referenda in X and Z not provide us with ample reason to »give up on the UN?«, as one observer puts it (Cunliffe, 2022)?

This, however, would be a premature and overblown response.

A realistic scenario for the future of the United Nations seems to be a return to structural blockades analogous to those

*Thus, the future could look a lot like the past – only worse and more dire as overlapping global crises inevitably require global attention.*

lapping global crises inevitably require global attention.

In practice, such an outcome is likely to be translated into sporadic cooperation on questions of common concern and attempts to use the UN as a court of world opinion.

While some of this may sound eerily familiar, the actual balance of cooperation and dysfunctionality will ultimately depend on whether Russia will play a disruptive role outside of Ukraine and on the stance China will take in this constellation.

The consequences will be anything but abstract. On the operational level, a list of peacekeeping operations and diplomatic missions in conflict hotspots from Libya to Syria, and Iran to North Korea depend on this question.

More optimistic UN-watchers rightly point out that in the last decade – as during the Cold War – the UN has regularly succeeded in cooperating on individual issues despite existing tensions (Gowan, 2022).

If the past is a reliable guide – so the argument goes – such a compartmentalising approach remains possible and would suggest the continuation of cooperation on overarching goals, certain peacekeeping operations, and perhaps even a modest diplomatic role for the UN in managing second-rate conflicts. While all of this seems possible, it is unclear whether it will be likely in a world where relations between Security Council members border on active military confrontation. After all, successful compartmentalising at the UN has historically been more of an exception than a rule.

As a consequence, unless a somewhat miraculous grand bargain brings Russia back into the global community, the UN

will have to relegate itself to a role as the world's emergency response team, waiting for the powers that be to grant (or refuse) access to scenes of humanitarian disasters.

In the process of carving out a meaningful future role for the UN beyond humanitarianism, leading voices from within the organisation have recently suggested new responsibilities. In a world seemingly ridden with ubiquitous »misinformation« such ideas have included suggestions for the UN to embrace a role as international arbiter of truth. In this vision, the UN's focus would shift from the prevention of wars to the arbiter of info-wars.

UN Secretary-General Guterres has personally and repeatedly warned of an »epidemic of misinformation« (Guterres, 2022). While encouraging social media users to check the source of sharable information is a step forward, as recently promoted by a prominent UN campaign, »Verified«, there are reasons to curb the enthusiastic enlisting of the organisation in the comprehensive struggle against misinformation (United Nations, 2022).

Data and facts – including the scientific consensus – are often more multifaceted and less monolithic than intergovernmental boards or official communiqués can allow for. And this is not to mention the problem that those who propose establishing the UN as an adjudicator of objectivity seem to be blissfully ignorant of the scandalous positions taken by an organisation that is inherently incapable of insulating itself from political contestation.

## GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND THE END OF HISTORY

While one could argue that the emerging »UN-lite« is not too different from the one originally envisioned in the UN Charter, it certainly differs from the role that the UN has played since the end of the Cold War.

US political scientist Francis Fukuyama's »End of History«, inspired by Hegelian notions of dialectical progress, was after all not an end for the United Nations, but a beginning. In the 1990s, it seemed that rational progress was not only possible but also ideologically inevitable. For the UN there was finally light at the end of the tunnel.

It is no coincidence that the United Nations' most comprehensive engagement with global challenges such as climate change and poverty took shape in the period immediately after the end of the Cold War.

In June 1992, the Rio Summit adopted the first comprehensive action plan for sustainable development. In 2000, the Millennium Declaration proclaimed eight development goals as a common guideline for global action. Finally, in 2015, under the aegis of the UN, the global community agreed on the »2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development«: 17 development goals and an impressive 169 sub-goals – from groundwater protection to the primary education of school

children – were launched to steer the actions of the global community onto one common path.

Ever since the formulation of this impressive agenda, the UN's focus on global governance has only further increased and today encompasses virtually every aspect of the complex net of overlaying global – and regional – challenges (at least in rhetoric).

Many progressives – particularly in Western democracies – consider the 2030 agenda an almost self-evident global expression of enlightened reason. And given that the SDGs were unanimously adopted by all 193 UN member states, they certainly do carry moral and strategic weight. This, however, does not separate them from historical contingency.

Viewing political projects such as the 2030 agenda as virtuously disconnected from power structures and the conditions that brought them into existence is a rather ahistorical reading of how global standards are being set. And, even more concerning, such a perspective does not prepare advocates of the agenda for the struggles that lie ahead.

Despite the universalist language and its determination to look ahead, the 2030 development agenda is surely also a political manifestation of the unique unipolar moment of Western triumphalism of the past. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the political momentum was strong enough to put these aspirations on paper. But will this momentum be sufficient at the end of the end of history?

The current drastic global disruptions have clearly stifled calls to action. While the Covid pandemic certainly hampered the possibility of achieving these goals, the Ukraine war makes implementation even more unlikely. Countries will cut development spending and increase defence budgets as they grapple with their own economic uncertainties. And irrespective of public pronouncements, precious and limited political capital is likely to be diverted from long-term development questions to acute economic and military crisis management – last but not least regarding the emerging food crisis.

Despite this, and perhaps inevitably, the UN leadership and its ideological sounding board have remained committed to – or trapped in – the organisation's bold rhetoric.

Last year, Secretary-General Guterres presented an 85-page vision of the UN's future. Under the programmatic title *Our Common Agenda*, the document invokes the idea of cooperation »as a global family«. The vision calls for a »global immunisation plan«, »bold steps to address climate degradation«, a »new social contract between governments and their citizens«, the »transformation of education, skills development and lifelong learning«, a »multi-stakeholder dialogue on outer space«, and a »global digital compact« – to name but a few of the far-reaching goals (United Nations, 2021).

To further promote this agenda, Guterres recently announced the establishment of a »High level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism« (United Nations, 2022). This new board is charged with elaborating further ideas for global governance »from climate protection to sustainable development, the international financial architecture to the interests of future generations«.

Obviously, ambitious goals are legitimate and, in many ways, the discrepancy between the normative framework of the UN's founding documents and the real world is as old as the organisation itself. But it is increasingly unclear how global governance ambitions can be squared with a fragmenting political reality and without losing the UN in the ever-widening gap between ambition and reality.

The United Nations was founded to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war (United Nations, 2017). In the words of its second Secretary-General – proudly displayed on the walls of the Secretariat in New York to this day – it »was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell«.

Today, as the world faces a unique escalation of violence, we are much closer to that hell than any of us would like. In response, in numerous Western capitals, the conclusions of this turning point (*Zeitenwende*) are being spelled out. Taboos are questioned – also and especially in progressive circles. In the context of the United Nations, however, the reaction to the disruption so far seems to mostly culminate in ever louder calls to stay the course.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote his philosophy of history a good two centuries ago, and Francis Fukuyama wrote his thesis on the end of history two decades ago.

But even today, in the strongholds of progressive multilateralism between the Hudson and the East River of New York a palpable universalist idealism reminiscent of Hegelian progressive thought seems to linger on as a guiding principle. While this is certainly legitimate, as a response to drastic disruptions, this is too much and too little at the same time. Whatever »returns« we are currently witnessing – be it »the West«, geopolitics or great power conflict, they clearly do not include a political comeback of the United Nations as a unifying force. The sad truth is: For the United Nations at the end of history there is no longer any light at the end of the tunnel but rather a tunnel at the end of the light.



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