

THE WORLD POWERS IN HISTORY WILL CHINA BECOME THE NEW LEADING POWER?

1. The state system at the beginning of the modern era

Since the beginning of the modern era, the world powers that have determined the international order have always replaced each other. All those questions that are regulated domestically by a constitution are determined internationally within the framework of a world order; i.e. who has what competences; how power is divided; what rules there are; and who determines these rules. It is obvious that the great powers set the goals in this process. It is also interesting that fundamental decisions were usually not made in accordance with international law, but rather that power-political results were decisive for what is considered international law.

Time and again, wars have determined the position of states, including their respective world power, to a very decisive extent. Foreign policy was power politics. Power was above all military power. This in turn was related to the number of a country's population, its economic strength, its resources and the state of its technology. In this sense, Wolfgang Windelband wrote that the independence of states, the struggle between them, was the basis on which the European system of states was created (1)

From the very beginning, one can trace by whom and for whom international law was and is created. If every law is to some extent a balance of interests, then international law is to a very decisive extent an expression of power relations, from the formation of the "sovereignty of states" to the decisions of the United Nations Security Council. Time and again, powerful states have established new rules for themselves. In this sense, the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, also declared before the last General Assembly of the organisation: "The international financial system was created by the rich for their own interests"(2). Institutions of international law have usually prevailed only after the realpolitik facts had already been created.

In the Middle Ages, European Christianity believed in universal monarchy. The emperor and the pope were the representatives of God on earth and had to be

recognised as such by princes and subjects. In this sense, Charles V (died 1558) still saw himself as a universal ruler. In fact, he created an empire "in which the sun never set", but his rule was already challenged in numerous wars, especially by the French King Francis I.

Jean Bodin (died 1596) took this development as the basis for his doctrine of the "sovereignty of states". According to this, any ruler could exercise supreme power within his borders. All states were also equal and no longer subject to any superior power. This was a very significant difference from the Middle Ages, when only the emperor and the pope were the highest authority.

In the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the 30 Years' War in 1648, this development was also enshrined in law. Within the Holy Roman Empire, a myriad of sovereign principalities was created that could form alliances and wage wars on their own. War was thus, in the sense of Carl von Clausewitz, "the extension of politics by other means".

In the 30 Years' War, other characteristics of international relations, such as *realpolitik* and reasons of state, came to the fore. Although this war was to a decisive extent a struggle of the Protestants against the Catholics under the leadership of the Habsburg Emperor, France, ruled by the Catholic Cardinal Richelieu, fought on the side of the Protestants. In terms of reasons of state, it was national interests that determined foreign policy, not faith. And when it came to the interests of the state, its own laws applied: killing became a heroic deed and destroying an essential part of a victory. In the realm of *realpolitik*, a reversal of values is taking place: Behaviour that is condemned in the strongest terms in the private sphere attains the highest honour when it serves the power of the state. Even if these behaviours already appeared in the heroic epics of antiquity, the now emerging international law codified them at the beginning of the modern era.

Another principle of international law that emerged at that time was also based on power politics: the right of "free navigation", which Hugo Grotius enshrined in his book "Mare Liberum" in 1609. According to this, the sea was an international territory open to every nation. Englishmen and Dutchmen were now to have free access to

trade on the oceans, not only Spaniards and Portuguese, between whom the Pope had previously divided the world in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494).

2. Seven major wars each create a new world order

In the last 300 years there have been seven decisive wars, some of which have already been fought as world wars on three or more continents: The War of the Spanish Succession; the Great Northern War; the Seven Years' War; the Napoleonic Wars; the First World War; the Second World War; and the Cold War.

There were various reasons for these wars: when a state's claim to power could no longer be enforced diplomatically; when a ruler tried to take over supremacy in the region or over the entire community of states; when revisionist forces rose up against the existing balance. Peace conferences followed the wars. A new international order anchored a new balance of power between states. Soldiers and diplomats replaced each other in shaping the balance of power.

As long as realpolitik and equilibrium thinking shaped the wars and the subsequent conferences, a balance was sought between the parties, between victors and vanquished. Wars were also the "game of kings". The French Revolution replaced the king with the people as sovereign. This gave the wars, which were now supported by nationalism, an ideological dimension. Now every warring nation made the greatest effort to destroy its opponent. It became much more difficult to find a settlement after a war. Compromise is no longer possible with the mortal enemy, the absolute evil.

The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) was the model of a war to maintain balance in Europe. While this equilibrium was being established on the continent, the expansion of England as a naval power and its position of world power was taking place. What was it all about? With the death of Charles II in 1700, the Spanish line of the Habsburgs died out. The Emperor in Vienna, Leopold I, now wanted his son Charles to take over the Spanish inheritance, while his son Joseph was to take over the Austrian. Louis XIV advocated his grandson Philip of Anjou as the new Spanish king.

England and Holland initially supported the Habsburgs against France, whereby the funds for the war were expressly approved in the English parliament "to maintain the

European balance". The aim was to prevent the further expansion of France's supremacy on the continent.

But then the following happened: Leopold I died in 1705 and, as planned, his son Joseph I took over his Austrian inheritance. But when he died in 1711, a completely new situation arose. Now Spain and the Austrian hereditary lands under Charles would have been in one hand. This new situation was unacceptable to England, which now changed sides and supported France. With the Peace of Utrecht (1713), the French candidate Philip V became King of Spain; however, Spain was no longer a great power and had to cede supremacy on the oceans to England. A characteristic of English foreign policy became clear: the fight was always for values and ideals. After the Battle of Höchstätt (1704), the victorious English commander, John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, declared, "We did it for the Liberty of Europe". After the war, however, the English also gained a monopoly over the transatlantic slave trade.

The Great Northern War (1700-1721) saw Sweden replaced by Russia as the major power in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States. The war was also a personal conflict between the Swedish King Charles XII and Tsar Peter I. After initial Russian losses, the Tsar won the decisive battle of Poltava in 1709. The hybrid position Ukraine occupied in this battle was still evident in the 1990s. In front of the museum built on the battlefield, the larger-than-life statue of the tsar who had won the battle dominated. During the guided tour in the museum, however, Mazepa was the hero, the leader of the Cossacks who had fought with his men on the side of the Swedes. The extent to which this war shaped living conditions in Russia can be seen from the fact that 82% of the state's income was spent on the war at the time. Reforms carried out by the Tsar were decisively aimed at increasing the military power of his country.

In the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), Austria and France fought on one side against England and Prussia on the other. The peace treaties of Hubertusburg and Paris led to a decisive shift of power in Central Europe and North America. Prussia gained Silesia and rose to become a great power; France, on the other hand, lost all its possessions in Canada. England owed its victory to the superiority of its fleet on the seas; Austria lost 303,000 men and 82,000 horses in this war. Both in North America and in Europe, the course was set for a new world order.

After the Revolutionary Wars and Napoleon's wars, the Congress of Vienna (1814/15) brought about a reordering of Europe. First, the French Revolution had led to unexpected victories. The new self-confidence of the citizens strongly strengthened national consciousness and led the French armies to unexpected victories. The "wars of kings" became wars between nations. Then Napoleon thoroughly shook the European balance. He succeeded in turning the French army, which in 1789 consisted of only 180,000 men, into an army of over 1 million soldiers.

At the Congress of Vienna, under the leadership of the Austrian statesman Clemens von Metternich, it was agreed to restore the European balance, which then lasted until the Crimean War in 1853, but ultimately until the First World War. Moreover, Metternich succeeded in establishing Austria as the leading power both in the German Confederation and in Italy. What he did not succeed in doing was to bring the world to a standstill with the help of the "Holy Alliance". Democracy movements were to be crushed wherever they arose. The revolutions of 1848/49 demonstrated that these efforts had failed.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, most of those involved, entrenched in old patterns of thinking, believed that the war would solve the problems at hand. The Entente powers mobilised mass armies of 40.7 million soldiers, the Central Powers 25.1 million. On both sides, warfare, shaped by the nationalist zeitgeist, was geared towards the destruction of the enemy.

In 1916, the American president Woodrow Wilson conducted his election campaign under the slogan that he wanted to keep the USA out of the war in Europe. But when the repayment of war loans granted to England appeared to be endangered by German victories, the USA entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1917. Officially, however, this was not because of the endangered loans, but "to end all wars" and "to make the world safe for democracy". The English and the Americans always fight for values, for good against evil.

The First World War shook the world order that had existed until then: Europe was severely weakened; the centre of Europe was destroyed. In contrast to the Congress of Vienna, the losers were no longer included in the peace negotiations. The bad guy was to be punished and not sit at the negotiating table. This meant that the system of collective security established within the framework of the League of Nations could not function either. This would have presupposed that everyone would participate

and bear a corresponding responsibility. At that time, John Maynard Keynes already posed the critical question of how successful conferences can be in the media age, when they are primarily concerned with propaganda, short-term interests and the next elections.

The current world order goes back in essential outlines to the end of the Second World War, where the Allies, led by the USA, were able to set new goals. In a very inspiring atmosphere at Dumbarton Oaks, a posh country estate in the Georgetown mansion district of Washington D.C., people thought about how peace could be secured in the world in the future. After the experiences of the "New Deal", which showed how to overcome an economic crisis, not only an organisation to secure peace was created with the United Nations, but also institutions to serve economic development with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In addition, the GATT was to regulate international trade relations. In 1948, after the moral shock caused by the atrocities of the Second World War, the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" was adopted by the United Nations.

The United States of America produced 60% of the world's economic output at that time; the dollar became the reserve currency for the whole world. For us in the West, this system brought prosperity and enabled reconstruction; it gave the USA the advantage of being able to print the money it needed . However, it soon became apparent that the ideals set out in the United Nations Charter could not be implemented in this form. This led to the Cold War, the division of Europe into East and West; NATO was founded in 1949.

3. The New World Order after the Cold War

The USA totally won the Cold War: in 1989 the Berlin Wall fell; in 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed; the victory of the West was absolute. Frances Fukuyama spoke of the end of history because Western values of democracy and market economy had prevailed everywhere. In this sense, President Bush (father) proclaimed a "new world order" in which the USA set the rules and determined the laws of action. This was not only about shaping international relations, but also about how the internal relations of states should be shaped. With various initiatives regarding "regime change" and "nation building", a country's internal affairs could now also lead to military interventions.

Then two opposing developments occurred that are still determining today: With globalisation, new centres of power emerged. Countries that previously played only a subordinate role became stronger. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the BRICS countries, stand for this development. At the same time, the neo-conservatives in the USA asserted themselves as the determining force in American foreign policy. Their central demand was and is that the USA must do everything to assert sole leadership in the world, including by military means.

But why should the newly emerging states cling to a world order that, as the composition of the Security Council shows, was formed at a time when India was still a British colony and all of North Africa was occupied by France? At that time, China produced just 2% of the world's economic output, today 20%. And at the end of 2022, the economic output of the BRICS countries, at 32.7 % of world production, was already higher than that of the G7, i.e. the seven largest Western industrialised countries. And while New York, London and Paris were the largest metropolises in the world after the Second World War, today no American or European city appears among the 10 largest cities in the world.

4. Is China becoming the new leading power?

In the issue of 12 May this year, the "Economist" asks whether China has already reached the peak of its development and at the same time revises predictions of past years according to which the "Middle Kingdom" would overtake the USA, especially economically, in the next few years. Whatever one thinks of this new assessment of China, the fact is that the country has experienced an impressive upswing over the last four decades. Even though the USA and Europe have also grown strongly economically during the same period, they have fallen behind China in relative terms. This dramatic rise is based on economic development, but also affects military strength and spending on research and development. It is also significant that Beijing has an extremely power-conscious president in Xi Jinping, who is also General Secretary of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. His power consciousness is also expressed by the fact that the previous rule that a president could only be re-elected once has been abolished. Xi declared at the 20th CP Party Congress that China should become the leading power in the world by 2049.

China's economic rise can be easily illustrated with figures: Only 20 years ago, its share of world production was a mere 3.6 %, today it is 20 %. The development of exports has been correspondingly dramatic. In 2000, these amounted to \$ 253 billion, in 2021 already \$ 3553 billion. China replaced Germany and the USA as the world's leading exporter and also became the European Union's most important trading partner in 2021. The impact of economic development within China was also dramatic. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty; in 2000, the average annual income of a Chinese person working for an international corporation was 3% of that of an American in a comparable job; in 2019, it was 16%.

Chinese companies are already market leaders in key areas such as e-commerce, solar energy and electric cars, and are very strong in robots and artificial intelligence. This new economic strength of China is expressed in the gigantic project of the "New Silk Road", the "One Belt, One Road Initiative". Through gigantic investments in infrastructure, in railways and roads, in the expansion of ports, China is to be connected to large parts of the world via sea routes and roads. It is also about stronger economic cooperation with more than 100 countries, a reduction of customs barriers and a coordination of economic policy. Some even see this project as Beijing's attempt to build its own world empire. Even if such a gigantic project must be associated with setbacks, for example if countries involved cannot pay their debts, one must nevertheless reckon that the dynamics triggered by the "New Silk Road" will open up a new dimension of international economic relations for China.

As far as the country's military strength is concerned, China has rearmed strongly in recent years. While its military spending of \$300 billion a year is still far below the \$800 billion of the US military budget, it demonstrates a willingness to take on military challenges. And there are a few of them. That the mainland and Taiwan form a state unit is not a communist invention. After his defeat in the civil war, Chiang Kai Chek fled to the island and insisted that the whole country still be represented in the parliament in Taipei. The seat at the United Nations was also linked to the claim that Taiwan represents the whole of China.

Since Washington recognised the government in Beijing in 1971, several developments have taken place: Taiwan increasingly developed into a country with greater independence, more national consciousness and impressive economic strength. The USA encourages this development. But at the same time, Chinese

President Xi stresses that he seeks full reunification, indeed that the full incorporation of Taiwan is a national priority. It is unclear how far the military support of the USA goes; it is very clear, however, that the dispute over Taiwan is a very decisive event in the development towards a new world order.

The dispute in the South China Sea is about the use of islands as military bases, but above all it is about sovereignty over the sea surrounding an island. An arbitral award made a few years ago was decided against Beijing on the grounds that the disputed Spratley Islands are not islands at all. This raises the question, at what point can a strip of land be called an island? An international law expert explained that this question can be answered quite simply: "My rock in the water is an island, yours is just a pile of stones". Legal disputes in the region and the associated tensions are therefore guaranteed for the future.

Since President Barack Obama proclaimed his "turn to Asia policy", political and military interest in the entire Indo-Pacific region has increased enormously. While military spending in Asia and the Pacific was just 17.5% of global military spending in 2000, it had risen to 27.7% by 2021, and that's without including North Korea. For its part, the USA has responded with military alliances together with the Quad states and within the framework of AUCIS. In any case, the reorganisation of the world will also take place to a very decisive extent in the Indo-Pacific region.

Just how hard the technology war is being fought could be read recently in the New York Times under the headline "The tech cold war is upending wireless carriers" (3). There one could read that in the USA a "rip and replace" programme was decided, according to which the "Federal Communication Commission" was given the task of monitoring that mobile phone providers in the telecommunications sector everywhere remove Chinese products and replace them with others. However, the \$1.9 billion made available for this purpose is nowhere near enough, causing this operation to be significantly delayed. It is perhaps coincidental that on the same page, under the headline "In China, another consulting firm raided", it is reported that the Chinese government is making it more difficult for foreign companies to store data. This, of course, is also for security reasons.

Overall, it can be said that the USA is still the strongest power in the world today, politically, militarily and economically. Without America, the world's problems cannot be decided and cannot be solved. But on the other hand, in our multipolar world, the

USA is no longer able to solve all problems alone. Nevertheless, one has the impression time and again that they insist on this sole claim to leadership. This is also expressed time and again by the language used when talking about the "international community" where Americans and Europeans make decisions. In fact, however, they only make up 10% of the world's population. The crucial question now is how long other states will continue to accept this domination.

For Europe, the question is to what extent our countries should participate in the US war against China. After America was able to achieve long sought-after goals through the war in Ukraine, such as stopping energy imports from Russia, voices are already being raised to apply the same approach to China. Taiwan is being rearmed, military bases around China are being reinforced, and at the same time Europeans are being urged to reduce economic ties with China "for security reasons". Professor Stephen Kotkin of Princeton University is one of the spokesmen for this policy, which is gaining support in the US. Indeed, in the past, the transition from one world order to another has always been marked by wars and conflicts. The crucial question, therefore, is whether we are also facing a major war now.

Notes:

- (1) Wolfgang Windelband; The Foreign Policy of the Great Powers in Modern Times (1494-1919) Berlin 1925
- (2) Le Monde diplomatique; Qui fabrique le droit international ?; May 2023
- (3) The New York Times ; May 11 2023

(*) Dr. Wendelin Ettmayer; former Member of the National Council; former Austrian Ambassador to Finland & Estonia; Canada & Jamaica; at the Council of Europe; author; www.wendelinettmayer.at