

THE REALIGNMENT OF GLOBAL POWER STRUCTURES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Since the beginning of this century, there have been enormous tectonic shifts in the international order. The political balance of power in the world has shifted; economic development has strengthened some countries and weakened others, which has also had an impact on cultural self-confidence. The old order, shaped by the Cold War, has an impact on the new one, which is why I would like to begin with this era.

1. The Cold War

The Cold War was a global ideological, power-political and, in some parts of the world, military conflict between the "West" led by the United States and the Eastern Bloc dominated by the Soviet Union. There were very dangerous moments, such as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, but also periods of détente. The West defended its system of democracy and market economy, while Moscow propagated the ideology of communism based on Karl Marx and supported liberation movements in the "Third World". There was a race between the systems, but also in specific areas such as space travel and technology. Western culture, shaped by Hollywood, was promoted as an attractive lifestyle, especially for young people.

Henry Kissinger can be seen as a formative thought leader of this period. As a Harvard professor, he was a theorist of international relations, but as American Secretary of State, he was also very much a shaper of them. Like his role model Metternich, he sought international security and stability in the balance of power. Kissinger believed that politics and diplomacy should be understood as an art rather than an exact science. According to this view, a foreign policy is successful when it manages to achieve a balance between the powers. On this basis, Kissinger found an ideal counterpart in Anatoly Dobrynin, the long-standing Soviet ambassador to Washington.

The outcome of the Cold War remained uncertain for a long time. When Paul Kennedy published his bestseller "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" in 1987, many believed that the reasons cited for the decline of a great power, namely overstretching of power claims and excessive debt, would primarily affect the United States. But things turned out differently. The economic difficulties of the Soviet Union and the illusory nature of its political system led to the implosion of the country and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc.

2. The victory of the USA in the Cold War

The victory of the USA in the Cold War realigned the existing world order. Whereas the order established after the Second World War was very strongly dominated by two superpowers, there was now talk of a "unipolar moment", of

the sole supremacy of the USA. Stanford political scientist Francis Fukuyama found worldwide approval when he proclaimed the "end of history". After the failure of communism, democracy and capitalism had prevailed worldwide. And that was how it should remain, under American leadership. In the USA, the neoconservatives became a dominant force, convinced of "American exceptionalism". According to this doctrine, the USA is a chosen nation, destined to lead the world.

New rules were established for this purpose, which were now to form the basis of American foreign policy and the "rules-based international order": a right of intervention under the motto of "democracy building" or "nation building"; and the right of the US to impose sanctions on friends and foes alike. Whereas previously countries had been judged in international relations on the basis of whether they could contribute to peace and security, now the internal affairs of a state could also become a reason for intervention. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the result.

It is not insignificant that countries such as China and the Global South adhere to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity as laid down in the United Nations Charter. And while Hillary Clinton declared that "the era of spheres of interest is over" – a somewhat peculiar statement for the foreign minister of a country that maintains 800 military bases around the world – Russia and China insist that every country can have legitimate security interests.

It is understandable that, after its great victory in the Cold War, the US sought to expand its dominance in the world. An influential theorist of that period was Zbigniew Brzezinski, who predicted that the most important arena for conflict in the coming decades would be Eurasia, i.e. the area between Lisbon and Vladivostok. This is where it would be decided which country would lead the world in the future. Supremacy over Ukraine was considered to be of crucial importance. Therefore, everything must be done to prevent Russia's dominance over Ukraine.

Brzezinski can therefore certainly be regarded as a pioneer of the war in Ukraine, although he also stated openly in his "Grand Strategy" from 1997: Without Ukraine, Russia is no longer a superpower.

In fact, Russia faced existential difficulties in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The standard of living of many people fell to a subsistence level; the country was in danger of falling apart. It was Vladimir Putin who, as president, succeeded in overcoming this existential crisis. Many of his compatriots therefore regarded him as the saviour of the country.

3. Globalisation – From cooperation to confrontation

Globalisation was a tremendous upheaval that shaped the new world order after the Cold War. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the policies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher broke down international trade barriers and made international financial transactions much easier. International trade intensified significantly, and new technologies opened up new possibilities for communication.

China opened up and was integrated into the capitalist economic system. The result was a realignment of the economic balance of power in the world. While China accounted for less than one per cent of global economic output after the Second World War, it now accounts for almost 20 per cent, and the US, which at that time generated 60 per cent of global GDP, now accounts for 22 per cent. However, it was a mistake to believe that with the capitalist economic system and the associated economic upswing, countries would also adopt the political system of the West. In many cases, the opposite was true. The new economic dynamism gave countries such as China and India a new sense of self-confidence, which led to a renaissance of their own cultural values.

On the other hand, criticism of globalisation also grew louder in industrialised countries, as reflected in the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016. In fact, globalisation brought more opportunities for some, offering the chance of economic advancement, while for others it meant the loss of their familiar way of life and even their jobs. One could speak of a dialectic of globalisation. Initially, there was a trend towards a world state, but economically strengthened states were no longer willing to accept the existing balance of power.

This led to an economic war between the US and China. Donald Trump, who had campaigned under the slogan "America first", initially imposed tariffs on imports from China. His successor, Joe Biden, who had criticised this policy during the 2020 election campaign, developed his own policy as president under the slogan "China is our enemy, indeed a threat to civilisation throughout the world". This severely undermined an essential element of globalisation, namely the optimism associated with it.

The Covid pandemic exposed significant weaknesses in globalisation. There were difficulties with supply chains, and the extensive deindustrialisation of some industrialised countries became clearly visible. This resulted in export controls and government subsidies in many countries around the world. Various wars, from the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 to the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Iraq War, the war in Ukraine and the wars in the Middle East, led to the formation of new alliances, which also had an impact on globalisation. Cooperation gave way to confrontation.

4. The "Global War on Terror"

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington initially caused enormous shock. The incumbent President George W. Bush declared the "Global War on Terror". Some saw the attacks as confirmation of Samuel Huntington's thesis that the wars of the future would be between civilisations.

In the United States, the Patriot Act greatly expanded the surveillance powers of the authorities. The National Security Agency (NSA) was given the power to monitor everything and everyone. The impact on the international order was also enormous. Because the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was unwilling to hand over Osama bin Laden, US troops, supported by allies, invaded Afghanistan in 2001. The war was officially described as a "stability mission", but the costs were enormous.

By the time US troops withdrew 20 years later, 180,000 people had been killed, including 50,000 Afghan civilians. The war cost \$2.1 trillion in military operations and arming the Afghan armed forces.

Ultimately, the Taliban government was reinstated in Kabul. Was global terrorism successfully combated? It seems more likely that there has been a shift, for example to neighbouring Pakistan, to the Sahel region, and from groups to lone perpetrators. The Global Terrorism Index lists 3,492 terrorist attacks worldwide for the year 2024.

The Iraq War, which began in 2003, had similarly disastrous results. It cost \$3 trillion and claimed the lives of 300,000 people, including 200,000 Iraqi civilians. The war destabilised the country and enabled the rise of the Islamic State.

Overall, these wars have caused a huge increase in US national debt, a loss of trust among allies and increased Iranian influence in the region. Clearly, there are problems that are difficult to solve militarily.

5. The rise of China and India

First, China's economic rise changed the world. The "Middle Kingdom" became the world's workbench. In 2000, the American gross national product was \$10.2 trillion; China's was \$1.2 trillion. Over the next 25 years, American GDP tripled, while Chinese GDP increased 16-fold to \$19,200 billion.

But it is not just about economic growth. Chinese President Xi Jinping makes no secret of his desire to change the international order that emerged after 1945 and give China a prominent place in the new world. In March 2023, he announced the "Global Civilisation Initiative", which aims to prevent governments from imposing their own values and political institutions on other countries in order to lead ideological disputes

. The West's efforts to impose its human rights on others are seen as a new form of colonialism.

The "Global Security Initiative" was presented at the 2023 Munich Security Conference. According to this initiative, bloc formation as seen during the Cold War should be overcome and countries should be able to coexist without sanctions and without war. And with a "Global Development Initiative," Beijing is promoting development in line with the Chinese model, without imposing any conditions on others. The Belt and Road Initiative, as a new Silk Road, is intended to serve as the basis for the expansion of an intercontinental trade and structural network between the People's Republic of China and over 100 other countries. Even if Beijing does not want to impose its socio-political model on other countries, it is definitely striving for more influence in the world.

Unlike China, India is courted by the West. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was invited to speak before both houses of Congress in Washington. The basic tenor was that "the world's two largest democracies" must defend their interests together. Since the Bandung Conference in 1955, India has attached importance to an independent foreign policy and has been a leading member of the "non-aligned" movement. While the aim at the time was to curb American influence in the government, New Delhi's policy is now strongly influenced by competition with China, and alliances are being sought to help strengthen India's position.

India is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, based in Beijing. This organisation represents 40% of the world's population and also has observer status at the United Nations. Here, too, the goal is to achieve a new distribution of power in the world. When the current world order was established after the Second World War, India was still a crown colony within the British Empire. Today, it wants to be the "Vishwa Guru", the teacher of the world.

6. The revolution in European diplomacy

The establishment of the Council of Europe in 1949 marked a "revolution in European diplomacy". The goals and means of foreign policy have changed fundamentally. Traditional power politics was replaced, initially in Western Europe, by a policy of cooperation for the benefit of citizens. This policy was based on shared values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Promoting the welfare of citizens became the legitimization of foreign policy action; the welfare state took on an international dimension. Wars to enforce national and power-political interests became unthinkable for these countries.

For centuries, foreign policy was conducted in the interests of national security as *realpolitik* in the power-political interests of one's own country or its ruler. Wars were considered "the continuation of politics by other means" and territories and people were divided up arbitrarily in peace treaties. This "revolution in diplomacy" did not take place in the USA, which continues to pursue foreign policy in the traditional sense, sometimes quite openly, sometimes with

an idealistic tone. The foreign policy of other major powers is realpolitik-oriented in their sphere of interest. With NATO's eastward expansion, power politics and new tensions have returned to Europe.

After the Second World War, the establishment of the Council of Europe, later deepened by the European Union, created a zone of peace in Europe. Europe no longer conducted military operations to strengthen national foreign policy, but as international peace missions. Generations of peace in Europe were possible because the "balance of power thinking" based on power politics was replaced by a policy of common values, compliance with which was monitored by European organisations.

"Security" was redefined in Europe. Whereas international security had traditionally been military security, among the members of the Council of Europe it was now only to a small extent based on military considerations. What was the decisive change? Whereas intergovernmental relations had previously revolved around the question of who was the stronger, international security now encompassed many aspects in all areas affecting the welfare of citizens, from currency security, health and the environment to education and the guarantee of human rights. "National security" was replaced by "human security".

Europe has become a continent of peace and prosperity. Today, 7% of the world's population lives in Europe

% of the world's population; however, the countries of the EU and the United Kingdom produce 20

% of global GDP and consume half of all social benefits worldwide. Europe became a continent of human rights, setting an example in environmental protection and playing a leading role in development policy.

In recent years, mainly due to the new foreign policy following the eastward expansion and the war in Ukraine, this European project has been turned upside down. The European Union has adopted the logic of war.

7. The effects of the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has turned the European model of peace upside down. The European Union has become a war alliance. Some decision-makers in Brussels even see this war as a new justification for a European Union. Under the leadership of the US, the new security order in Europe was established against Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Western policy during the Cold War was entirely defensive in nature, the US took an offensive approach after the collapse of communism. Whereas during the Cold War the aim was to keep the enemy in check through "containment", in the new international order the aim was to bring adversaries to their knees through "regime change" or "rollback". Victoria Nuland expressed this attitude very clearly years ago. In a telephone conversation with the American ambassador in Kiev, she stated that the US had already spent so many billions of dollars in Ukraine that it now had the right to determine policy there.

Despite the American's disparaging remarks about the EU, the latter was content to play a subservient role in this conflict from the outset. When the US under Donald Trump took on a mediating role from 2025 onwards,

leading EU figures insisted on supporting Ukraine "as long as it takes".

In fact, Brussels bore a heavy responsibility for the escalation of the conflict. Already at the time of the signing of the Association Agreement in 2013, Ukraine was denied the opportunity to act as a bridge between the EU and Russia. Kiev was required to choose against Russia. In December 2021, President Putin demanded written guarantees to reduce the threats to Russia posed by NATO expansion. The idea was to ensure Ukraine's military neutrality, prohibit the stationing of US troops on the Russian border and restrict the deployment of missiles in Europe. The Russian Foreign Ministry presented a draft treaty that largely corresponded to what Boris Yeltsin had already demanded in 1997. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg later stated that these Russian proposals "were not even ignored."

The EU's involvement in the Ukraine war was accompanied by strong war rhetoric and the announcement of a massive arms build-up. But this war led to lasting shifts in the balance of power far beyond Europe. Russia was driven into the arms of China. The political and economic exclusion of Russia by the Europeans also meant that the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) found an important role to play. This group of countries is repeatedly criticised for being incoherent and lacking direction. That may be true. But by providing political and economic support to Russia in its conflict with the West, the BRICS countries have made a decisive contribution to Moscow's ability to survive the sanctions. The "Global South" has become a new factor in international relations.

8. Donald Trump and his world

In January 2025, Donald Trump began his second term as President of the United States. From the outset, he made no secret of his intention to shape American foreign policy according to his own ideas. In doing so, he pursued traditional goals, but in his own way. His motto, "America first," was implemented throughout the world with his unique style and preferred methods. Where others have only talked, Trump has taken action, often relying on the military power of the US armed forces. The arrest warrant for Venezuelan President Maduro was already drafted under President Biden; Trump executed it. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, all American presidents spoke of "regime change" in Tehran; Trump used the military to achieve it. When terrorists kidnapped schoolchildren in Nigeria, Michelle Obama staged a media-effective demonstration with a sign reading "Bring our Children back". Trump had the kidnappers' positions bombed by the US Air Force.

What is the key to understanding Donald Trump's politics? Probably that he sees himself as a saviour; a saviour of his own country from enemies within and without. Since surviving two assassination attempts against him during the election campaign, he and many of his supporters are convinced that God himself has chosen him

chosen for this task. Just as with internal decadence, the decline of the US must also be countered internationally. China has benefited enormously from the US economically, and Europe militarily. Tariffs are now intended to ensure that the US is re-industrialised. And the Europeans are to finance their own defence.

The Trump administration's foreign and security policy was set out in two policy documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS, November 2025) and the National Defence Strategy (January 2026).

The NSS is a guideline for the "conservative revolution" at the international level. In a world where rising powers pose a new challenge, the dominance of the United States must be secured for the next generation. The US armed forces must remain the strongest and most technologically advanced in the world. The motto is "peace through strength". American foreign policy should be realistic and not based on abstract ideals. Trump sees Europe as being in economic and civilisational decline; China is not an enemy, but a strategic competitor with whom business can be done. It is about deterrence through strength, not confrontation. The priority is the Western Hemisphere, from Greenland to Patagonia, which is considered US territory. The Monroe Doctrine is supplemented by a "Trump amendment": illegal immigration and drug trafficking are now also classified as threats to national security. So it's about American interests in tomorrow's world. Friends and foes alike are invited to take note.

9. New players in international relations

Traditionally, it was states that shaped international relations. Foreign policy was the "domaine réservé" of the head of state. In recent decades, a number of new players have emerged, leading to a new distribution of power in international relations. The new players have brought new goals and new ways of thinking, putting existing structures under pressure. These new players include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), old and new media, multinational corporations, international organisations and regional groupings, international courts, but also transnational networks such as terrorist organisations and hedge funds. Even individuals are acting as players. George Clooney, Princess Diana and Bernard-Henry Lévy have demonstrated this impressively. However, it has become apparent that it is easier to declare South Sudan independent than to establish it as a functioning state. NATO bombing in Libya was successfully initiated, but the ensuing chaos could not be prevented.

Multinational corporations have not only contributed to the global market becoming a unifying force, they have also increasingly emerged as new players in international relations. Their power is often greater than that of many states because they are the ones who determine the rules of the game, from the selection of locations to tax policy. The market value that individual corporations will have reached in 2025 shows the scale of this: Apple \$1.3 trillion;

Amazon \$2.41 trillion; Microsoft \$3 trillion, to name just a few examples. With these new players, the nature of power has changed significantly: it is no longer enough to win over states or their governments for one's own interests; it is also necessary to convince people or citizens. The number of those involved in decision-making processes has grown dramatically.

10. New topics in international relations

While the discussion of international relations was long dominated by the power politics of the major powers, in recent decades new issues have increasingly shaped the international discourse: human rights, environmental protection, development aid. Even morality is used as a yardstick for international action. This does not mean that power politics has disappeared as a guiding principle of foreign policy. But it is no longer the sole guideline, the sole issue in international affairs.

The final document of the United Nations World Human Rights Convention in Vienna in 1993 stated: "The universal character of these rights and freedoms is beyond question." This was not always the case. Until well into the 20th century, even Christian churches were sceptical about human rights, whose origins were traced back to the anti-Christian stance of the French Revolution. In the papal document "Syllabus Errorum" by Pius IX from 1864, human rights were rejected as an expression of liberal modernism, which "values the freedom of the individual more than the common good based on religious truths".

During the Cold War, there were still fundamental differences regarding the content of human rights, i.e. whether they should apply more to individuals or to the collective. Today, however, the prevailing view is that a constitutional state must guarantee the rights of its citizens. Numerous international agreements and organisations are in place to monitor this. This development is also closely linked to the fact that every foreign ministry has a human rights department that cooperates with international bodies. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the United Nations human rights covenants on social and cultural rights; conventions on refugees and asylum seekers; against racial discrimination; prohibiting torture; international agreements on women's and children's rights; and provisions for the protection of migrant workers are just a few of the documents that shape international politics today.

Undoubtedly, there are still serious violations of human rights. But states can no longer invoke their sovereignty as they did in the past.

All are measured against internationally established standards, whether they like it or not.

What will be the next major tectonic shifts? The competition for global hegemony between the United States and China will continue; the European Union will struggle to halt its further decline, even after the end of the war in Ukraine; whether

in Iran, after the end of the war, will there be the "regime change" desired by the US and Israel. The major tectonic shifts originate in the Earth's interior and do not follow human planning.

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