

THE EMERGING MULTIPOLAR BALANCE OF POWER VERSUS THE ARROGANCE OF AN EMPIRE IN DECLINE

Concept and history of global order

In discourses on international affairs, “world order” is understood in a *descriptive* as well as a *prescriptive* (normative) sense. The confusion of the two aspects has fueled many of the actual polemics. For the purposes of this analysis, we confine ourselves to the former, namely a contemplation of the actual *relations of power* that determine – and limit – the global interaction of states. Order in such a context – and the balance of power it incorporates – is nothing static. It is in a state of constant flux. Depending on the historical constellation, there may be one, two, or multiple centers of power. So far, in empirical terms, not much can be said about the stability of either of these configurations – unipolar (hegemonic), bipolar, or multipolar. Everything depends on the imponderables of the historical sequence.

While Metternich’s multilateral order – the concert of great powers post-1815 – provided, after the Napoleonic upheavals, a framework of relative stability,² it ultimately gave way to unrestrained power struggles of those countries, culminating in World War I. That conflict resulted in a rather synthetic and fragile reorganization of international relations on the basis of priorities set by the victorious powers.

In contrast, the remarkable durability of the bipolar order post-1945 depended on *mutual deterrence* between that era’s major nuclear powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, i. e. on their unceasing awareness of the brutal truth of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD).³ Although this predicament did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the bipolar order ultimately succumbed to the overwhelming economic power and persuasion of the United States, the new hegemon. In the meantime, the stability of the resulting unipolar constellation has proven to be rather fragile and elusive, in spite of the propaganda slogan of the “end of history”⁴. The main trigger of instability was the growing rejection – in all corners of the globe – of a triumphant, effectively *impe-*

rial, claim to power. The development, described by some observers with reference to a so-called “blowback effect”⁵, appears to be far more *comprehensive* and *multidimensional* than a transformation of the global power constellation along purely economic and/or military lines.

While the multipolar order after World War II was essentially shaped by military parameters reflecting the balance of power between the victors of that conflict,⁶ and the bipolar system of the Cold War period perpetuated this type of constellation in the course of an *escalating arms race*, accompanied by ideological phraseology, the world now appears to be on the trajectory to a new, more genuine multipolar constellation. The gradually evolving multipolarity of power relations is *multidimensional*, comprising military, economic, social and cultural factors. In terms of power relations, multipolarity will only be sustainable if it is multidimensional.

In spite of the many solemn proclamations of a “New World Order” by the main beneficiary of the collapse of the bipolar order,⁷ the “imperial overstretch”⁸ during the post-Cold War period made this order unsustainable. The rapid technological and industrial development in the non-Western world, and the resulting political empowerment of multiple players, boosted and consolidated by globalization, was an unintended consequence that had not been foreseen by the propagators of a borderless world under U. S. auspices. The dynamic of the process appears unstoppable, not the least due to the law of *actio-reactio* that also applies to economic, social and cultural relations.

Arrogance of an empire in decline

Rarely in history has the transition from a hegemonic (unipolar) order to a multipolar balance of power been smooth. As defender of the status quo, a hegemon almost unavoidably tends to deny reality and to repress and ignore the dynamics of power relations. A most illustrative example is the National Security Strategy proclaimed by U. S. President George W. Bush in 2002 according to which the supreme guideline for the United States military must be to build and maintain the country’s defenses “beyond challenge.”⁹ This was the proclamation of a strategy of *perpetual hegemony*,¹⁰ with the President unambiguously stating, “our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of

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² See: *Sofka J. R.* Metternich’s Theory of European Order: A Political Agenda for ‘Perpetual Peace’ // *The Review of Politics*. 1998. Winter. Vol. 60, № 1. P. 211–228.

³ For an overview, see: *Sokolski H. D.* Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, its Origins and Practice // *Strategic Studies Institute (SSI)*. Carlisle Barracks, PA : U. S. Army War College, 2004.

⁴ *Fukuyama F.* The End of History? // *The National Interest*. 1988. Summer. Vol. 16. P. 3–18 ; *Idem.* The End of History and the Last Man. L. : Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

⁵ E. g., *Blowback J. C.* The Cost and Consequences of American Empire. N. Y. : Metropolitan Books, 2000.

⁶ The composition of the United Nations Security Council, in terms of permanent membership, mirrors that constellation. For details see: *Köchler G.* Security Council Reform: A Requirement of International Democracy // *Democracy at the United Nations: UN Reform in the Age of Globalisation* / eds. by G. Finizio, E. Gallo. Brussels : P. I. E. Peter Lang, 2013. P. 263–274. (Ser. “Federalism” ; № 1).

⁷ For details, see: *Köchler H.* Democracy and the New World Order // *Studies in International Relations*. Vienna : International Progress Organization, 1993. Vol. XIX.

⁸ *Kennedy P.* The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000. N. Y. : Random House, 1987.

⁹ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. September 2002. Washington, DC : The White House, 2002. Chapter IX.

¹⁰ For the geostrategic implications, see: *Gaddis J. L.* A Grand Strategy of Transformation // *Foreign Policy*. 2002. Nov.-Dec. № 133. P. 50–57.

surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”¹ Ultimately, this would be a *program to stop history*. In real terms, it is the quintessential form of a geostrategic denial of reality, along the lines of the earlier paradigm of the “end of history”.

In less than two decades, the grand vision, in fact illusion, of unchallenged hegemony has come to an end. Always in history, the encounter with the realities of power, and the eventual awakening to the unstoppable progress of time, has proven traumatic for any dominant player. Due to the ultimately “defensive” nature of imperial rule², the hegemon, feeling a need to “preempt” potential threats at any moment, and especially at the peak of power, will increasingly resort to acts of *self-assertion* and *self-righteousness*. (Emperor Hadrian who – at the zenith of the Roman Empire – decided, proverbially speaking, to “retreat from Babylon” may have been a rare exception.³)

In the present global scenario, self-assertion has often meant an excessive – and illegal – use of unilateral economic sanctions, including their extraterritorial enforcement, by the defender(s) of the status quo.⁴ In a resolution adopted with an overwhelming majority, the practice has been decisively condemned by the United Nations Human Rights Council at its latest session.⁵ Also, there exists an intricate nexus between this essentially punitive approach and the self-righteousness of a hegemonic power that arrogantly asserts its values vis-à-vis antagonists or competitors for power. The so-called *Global Magnitsky Act* of the United States is a case in point.⁶ The evocation of democracy, human rights and the rule of law – or a “rules-based order”, in the newspeak of the West – has been part of an ultimately futile effort at *delegitimizing* all competitors who do not subscribe to the Western interpretation of these notions – with the aim of *legitimizing* the West’s hegemonic claim to power. A *false universalism*, which almost hysterically insists that everyone endorse Western interpretations, indeed the “deconstruction”, of values related to family, social and cultural identity, etc.⁷, is part of the colonial legacy of Western powers. It amounts to a new form of *cultural imperialism* that totally neglects the global diversity of worldviews and

socio-cultural values – in different phases of their expression – and instead imposes cultural and civilizational uniformity on all nations and peoples.⁸ Pope Francis has rightly, and repeatedly, criticized such an approach as a form of “cultural colonialism” by which “Western countries seek to impose their values on developing ones in return for financial aid.”⁹ Self-righteousness, coupled with political and economic blackmail, has often in history been characteristic of the rearguard battles of empires in decline.

In today’s global reality, however, these strategies and policies may trigger counter-reactions among an increasing number of peoples and countries. Overzealous self-assertion, meant to preserve a predominant position, will actually accelerate the decline of power. Insisting on the perpetuity of leadership – claiming paradigmatic status at the global level – has always been a delusional strategy. The events since February 2022 are clear evidence of this law of history.

Risk of global instability amidst the emerging multipolar order of the future

While in the first two decades after the collapse of the bipolar balance of power the assertion of geostrategic interests by the new hegemon brought war and destabilization especially to the wider Middle East, with serious repercussions for Europe, the recent developments in Europe carry the risk of a wider geopolitical confrontation, indeed a major global conflagration. The Cold War of the bipolar era is reemerging as a new “cold war” between the Western block, controlled by the United States, and the Russian Federation. The proxy war in and around Ukraine has resulted in a highly volatile global situation.¹⁰ In this scenario, the struggle for power among today’s major competitors (United States, Russia, China) overshadows the gradual emergence of a new multipolar configuration of the world. As history has taught us, a trial of strength among a multitude of actors, aiming at once to determine the outcome in their own favor, always threatens to be a harbinger of protracted turbulence. Also, in a situation of major geopolitical transformation, indeed a recalibration of the balance of power after a rather violent hegemonic interlude,¹¹ the risks of nuclear confrontation must not be overlooked.¹²

The events of 2022 have intensified the evolution of global order towards a new multipolar constellation that will be markedly different from that which existed right upon the end of World War II. Though this is not the “change of eras” (*Zeitenwende*) diagnosed by the German Chancellor – in spite of the UN Charter, the Chancellor’s “rules-based order” did not exist, or was not respected by the predominant Western power, in the time before February 2022 – it will be a sea change nonetheless, not in terms of the paradigm, but in terms of a shift of the center of gravity from the Western industrialized world towards countries

¹ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.

² This characterization may appear rather counterintuitive. At first glance, hegemonic rule means the tendency to spread power and control over the entire globe, which requires an *offensive* strategy. However, the offensive approach implies that a hegemonic country is constantly “on the defensive”, feeling a need to contain the counter-reactions of other actors and to defend the status quo. This is the “defensive vigilance” of the hegemon.

³ Köchler H. MMXXII – War or Peace: Speeches and Thoughts in a Pivotal Year // Studies in International Relations. Vienna : International Progress Organization, 2023. Vol. XXXVIII. P. IX.

⁴ On the legal implications see: Köchler H. Sanctions and International Law // International Organisations Research Journal. 2019. Vol. 14, № 3. P. 27–47 (“Economic Sanctions, Global Governance and the Future of World Order”), 32ff (“Unilateral sanctions”).

⁵ United Nations / General Assembly, Human Rights Council. Fifty-second session. Doc. A/HRC/52/L.18. 27 March 2023. “The negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights.”

⁶ Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (GMA) : 114th Congress, Public Law 114-328, signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 23, 2016. See also: Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) : 115th Congress, Public Law 115-44, signed into law by President Donald Trump on 2 August 2017.

⁷ See: Köchler H. Human Rights and Global Power Politics : Statement delivered at side meeting of the 51st session of the United Nations Council on Human Rights. Geneva (CH) / Changchun (China), 19 September 2022. Vienna : International Progress Organization, 2022 // International Progress Organization : [website]. URL: <http://i-p-o.org/Koehler-HUMAN-RIGHTS-GLOBAL-POWER-POLITICS-UNCHR-Side-Meeting-19Sept2022.pdf>.

⁸ On the nature of cultural imperialism, see: Köchler H. Culture and Empire: The Imperial Claim to Cultural Supremacy versus the Dialectics of Cultural Identity // International Progress Organization : [website]. URL: http://i-p-o.org/Koehler-Culture_and_Empire-IPO-OP-2009.htm.

⁹ Pope Francis criticises West for trying to export own brand of democracy to Iraq and Libya // Reuters. Faithworld. 2016. 18 May. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUK415642318520160518>.

¹⁰ For details see: Köchler H. MMXXII – War or Peace. P. 113–140.

¹¹ We mean here the repeated wars of aggression, acts of intervention and use of economic coercion by the global hegemon after 1990.

¹² See: Köchler H. Politics of Peace in the Nuclear Age // Current Concerns. 2022. 11 Oct. № 21. P. 1–3.

and regions that for many decades were treated rather arrogantly by the West.

Similar to developments in Europe, the role of the People's Republic of China as mediator of so far intractable disputes in the Middle East (Iran-Saudi Arabia / proxy war in Yemen) is a sign of the times. The perpetual predominance of the U. S. as power broker and global arbiter is not set in stone anymore.

Elements of sustainable multipolarity

As explained earlier, if the new multipolarity is to be *genuine*, it must be *sustainable* in terms of it being *multidimensional* and *comprehensive*. A stable and genuine multipolar order cannot exclusively be determined by the actual military balance of power, but also must have sound and robust economic foundations. In that regard, a lot will depend on the formation and progress of new frameworks of international economic cooperation, at regional and global level. It is worthy of note that, in terms of GDP based on purchasing power parity, the BRICS group of states (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has already more economic weight than the G7.¹

This development will need to be complemented by alternative financial arrangements that create a balance against the dominance of the US dollar, which in the last few decades has almost *systemically* been used for purposes of US power politics, namely as a tool for the enforcement of unilateral coercive measures, and in particular for their extraterritorial application. There is no logic in insisting that one particular country's currency should be the only medium of international transactions, and even less so when that country's position of global influence is gradually eroding, while it frantically clings to this unsustainable privilege, abusing it to preserve its hegemony. The "New Development Bank", established by the BRICS countries with headquarters in Shanghai, headed by Dilma Rousseff, the former President of Brazil, is an important step in the direction of alternative financial structures. In the words of President Lula of Brazil: "Why can't an institution like the BRICS bank have a currency to finance trade relations between Brazil and China, between Brazil and all the other BRICS countries?"²

Other cornerstones of a new multipolar architecture may be organizations with regional outlook such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), with its multidimensional focus on defense, international security and economy, or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), provided the latter grouping can avoid falling victim to a *divide et impera strategy* "from behind" (through which an outside actor might seize upon and exploit tensions between the agreement's pro-Western members and China, which applied for membership in the group in 2021).³

Also, a robust multipolar order will need to do away with *global cultural hegemony*, a legacy of the unipolar period that followed the sudden end of the bipolar balance of power. The multidimensionality of the new multipolar order must include the spheres of *ideology* ("Weltbild") as well as

information and *communication*. In such an order, no country, and certainly not the erstwhile hegemon, should be in a position to claim leadership in defining global standards of human rights or the rule of law. There can be no multipolarity on the basis of cultural or ideological uniformity. One must not see the world exclusively "through the eyes of the West,"⁴ which is just one of several poles in the emerging global constellation.

In view of the new multipolar dynamic, one should also revisit the concepts of a "New International Economic Order" and a "New International Information and Communication Order" that were hastily abandoned under Western pressure in the 1980s.⁵ The information boycott and systematic censorship by the Western block of news from Russia and Iran, to give just two of the most salient examples, has once more highlighted the need for genuine multipolarity in the field of global information. The most recent case in point, indeed a classic example of disinformation and hybrid warfare, has been the coverage, or suppression of it, of the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in Europe by the Western mainstream media.

In terms of the emerging new order, a major issue will also be the practices of international criminal justice initiated during the unipolar interlude of the 1990s, namely a number of arbitrary, imbalanced and dysfunctional ad hoc arrangements or bodies that are not in any way representative of the international community.⁶ A genuine and stable multipolar balance of power requires respect of the *sovereign equality* of all states (as expressed in the UN Charter) on the basis of *mutuality*. This excludes any institutional framework of international criminal justice that lacks universality of membership and, as such, would risk being manipulated by powerful actors from inside and outside that framework.⁷ A peaceful multipolar order cannot coexist with a politicized system of fake international jurisdiction. The disparity of the paradigms – sovereign equality of states versus the universal and absolute authority of office-bearers of an unelected body, without any democratic legitimation – reveals this incompatibility. The resulting confusion is an invitation to an opportunistic use of criminal justice and a recipe for permanent tension and conflict among states.⁸

Conclusion: Sovereignty and balance of power

For the new multipolar order to be robust and sustainable, it needs to be based on the *mutual* recognition of sovereignty.

⁴ See: Communication – the key word to peace // Cyprus Mail. 1984. 27 Oct. P. 3, commenting on a meeting of experts convened by the International Progress Organization on the New International Information and Communication Order.

⁵ For details see: The New International Economic Order: Philosophical and Socio-cultural Implications : Studies in International Relations / ed. by H. Köchler. Guildford (England) : Guildford Educational Press, 1980. Vol. III ; The New International Information and Communication Order: Basis for Cultural Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence among Nations : Studies in International Relations / ed. by H. Köchler. Vienna : Braumüller, 1985. Vol. X.

⁶ See: Köchler H. Law and Politics in the Global Order: The Problems and Pitfalls of Universal Jurisdiction // International Conference on the Emerging Trends in International Criminal Jurisprudence : Souvenir & Conference Papers (New Delhi, 10–11 December 2005). New Delhi : Indian Society of International Law, 2005. P. 28–30.

⁷ See: Köchler H. Global Justice or Global Revenge? International Criminal Justice at the Crossroads. Vienna ; N. Y. : Springer, 2004.

⁸ About the systemic problems of international criminal justice in the context of power politics see also: Köchler H. Justice and Realpolitik: The Predicament of the International Criminal Court // Chinese Journal of International Law. 2017. Vol. 16. Iss. 1. P. 1–9.

¹ For details see: Heng Weili. BRICS' GDP, potential currency a challenge to US dollar dominance // China Daily Global. 2023. 14 Apr.

² Ibid.

³ The United States withdrew from the preceding TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) agreement in 2017.

In a substantive sense, the concept relates not only to the legal, but also to the military, economic and cultural domain. *Pro forma* (voting) rights of states in international organizations are abstract and superficial if the majority of states ultimately are at the mercy of powerful players who are able to impose their choices by way of methods that effectively amount to blackmail.¹

Only under conditions of a genuine multipolar constellation may smaller and medium powers regain and maintain their capability to decide as *equal* members of the international community, as stipulated by the UN Charter.² Only a configuration where multiple centers of power hold each other in check will provide sufficient space for decision-making of smaller states without undue intimidation

or fear. This alone will help them to evade the *divide et impera* trap that is so often laid out by a hegemon who is trying to prevail at all cost. The desperate attempts by the dominant Western player to reap the benefits of such Machiavellian tactics even vis-à-vis major powers such as China or India³ are just the latest, and most obvious, sign that the transformation towards a multipolar global configuration is under way.

In the emerging configuration, no country may claim paradigmatic status. The arrogant missionary insistence on cultural and ideological supremacy, used to command obedience and legitimize coercive action anywhere on the globe, has become a blunt weapon and will not prevent the inevitable.

¹ For an example, see the pressure used to influence the voting behavior of non-permanent members in the UN Security Council prior to the Gulf war of 1991, referred to by Erskine Childers in: *Childers E. The Demand for Equity and Equality: The North-South Divide in the United Nations // The United Nations and International Democracy / ed. by H. Köchler. Vienna : Jamahir Society for Culture and Philosophy, 1995. P. 17–36.*

² Article 2(1) states “sovereign equality” of states as foundational “Principle” of the United Nations.

³ The simultaneous membership of India in BRICS and the “Quad” alliance (“Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” between Australia, India, Japan and the United States) illustrates the problem.