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The world of tomorrow

To prevent a global clash of civilisations, where every culture relativises the rules of coexistence, we need to stand by universalist norms

Ukraine, the Caucasus and the Middle East. The latest eruptions of violence mark the end of *Pax Americana*. The rise of new powers is shifting the global balance of power. Whether tomorrow's world will be bipolar or multipolar still remains to be seen. If the Sino-American system rivalry escalates into a new Cold War, we could see a bipolar order of competing blocs becoming reality once again. Should the remaining centres of power manage to retain their strategic autonomy, however, tomorrow's world is likely to remain a multipolar one.

This global development has fundamental consequences for the world order. Will the erosion of the hegemony of Western liberal democracies mean an end to the liberal world order? Can the multilateral institutions co-founded by the United States, along with their normative foundations, survive if the 'world's policeman' no longer has either the power or the will to guarantee them? Will universal institutions that are open to all states and whose norms are binding for everyone still be around in the future? To put it even more pointedly, can the universal nature of human rights survive in a multipolar world where civilisations with different values compete against one another?

The rise of illiberal particularism

Let us take a look at the ideological dimension of the struggle for tomorrow's world order. The liberal order is being challenged both domestically and globally by competing concepts of order. In the West, liberal universalism is coming under pressure from different forms of illiberal particularism. The far right are dismantling the rule of law and transforming liberal republics with strong minority rights into illiberal majority democracies. Their aim is to limit democratic participation and the blessings of the welfare state to a nativist majority. As the 'America First' and the Brexit campaigns show, right-wing populists try to break free from the chains of international law which impede their goal of

illiberal transformation of the state and society.

Yet, the identitarian left is no stranger to particularistic tribalism either. The incitement of people with different skin colours, origins, religions or sexual identities against one another undermines the egalitarian ethos of the republic. Attempts to limit dissenters' freedom of speech, to culturally relativise infringements of the law or to bypass the parliamentary system by means of political commissars arise from an illiberal spirit. At the end of the day, selective condemnation of human rights violations makes a mockery of the universalist ideas of equal rights for all.

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If these forms of particularism are allowed to affect state policy, the West's commitment to universal norms is undermined. It is true that China and Russia instrumentalise the Global South's criticism of the West's double standards for their own ends. But it was the West itself that damaged its own moral authority by breaching international law in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

This loss of legitimacy and relative loss of power weakens the West's ability to assert itself. Wherever isolationist or nationalist forces come to power, there is also a lack of political will to advocate for international law and human rights around the world. This is not a good omen for the future of the liberal world order and its universal fundamental values.

Russia and China

The Global South's criticism of the neo-conservative spread of democracy by force of arms points out that there have always been proponents of an American Empire in Washington, and indeed there still are to this day. In Russia and China, in particular, defensive and offensive varieties of neo-imperial concepts of order are gaining attention. On the defensive side, Russia and China are calling for the non-intervention of the liberal West in their civilisations' internal matters. On the offensive side, with recourse to their imperial history, they are laying claim to a position as an independent power centre in a hierarchically organised world order.

Russia has ideologically disguised its attempt to use armed force to create an exclusive sphere of influence by drawing a distinction between a vital Eurasian and decadent Western civilisation. Ironically, these neo-imperial fantasies are especially popular in nationalist circles in the

'decadent West'. Perhaps the renewed popularity of the Huntington thesis of a 'clash of civilisations' stems from the particularistic yearning to sort a chaotic world into tribes made up of 'people who are like us' and 'people who are not'.

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China, on the other hand, promotes, with reference to its millennia-old high culture, the idea that civilisations can live in harmony if their own cultures and traditions are respected. Instead of the universality of human rights, Beijing's 'Global Civilisation Initiative' talks about 'common values of humanity', which every culture must interpret with respect for their 'own conditions and unique features'. Within the United Nations framework, China advocates its own interpretation, which places the right to economic and social development above political and civil rights. Philosopher Zhao Tingyang re-introduces the ancient *Tianxia* system ('all under heaven') as a normative superstructure for a world order with Chinese characteristics. Critics worry that all these rediscoveries of concepts from China's imperial history conceal an attempt to justify the hegemony of the old and new Middle Kingdom in Asia.

China's attempts to undermine the equality, sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbours elicit just as much outrage as the West's humanitarian interventions, which critics castigate as cynical ploys to use universal rights as a pretext to interfere in a country's domestic affairs. In the Global South, the Westphalian principles enshrined in the UN Charta are positioned against the encroachment by imperial and liberal ideas of order. Instead of a hierarchical order, in which the vassal states group around imperial poles, they insist that all sovereign nation-states are equal under international law in spite of asymmetries of size and power. The principle of territorial integrity aims to put a stop to violent attacks from the imperial centres. On the other hand, the principle of non-interference is upheld against the humanitarian interventions of the liberal internationalists and the structural adjustment programmes of global governance institutions. This resentment against external interference is the reason why the Western narrative of systemic rivalry between democracy and autocracy finds so little resonance in the Global South.

Finding consensus in a multipolar world

Since its foundation in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the international system of states has been designed without central authority. The US hegemon selectively performing the role of the 'world's policeman' after the end of the Cold War was always only a poor substitute. In future, Washington is unlikely to have either the will or power to sanction violations of universal norms. The crucial question is therefore whether, in a multipolar and thus normatively pluralistic world, in which civilisations with different values and historical experiences, a unilateralist minimum consensus can be formed based purely on voluntarism.

Which concept of order eventually prevails will depend on the balance of power in the struggle for tomorrow's world order. If the West wants to maintain a liberal order, it will have to refrain from the intrusions of humanitarian interventionism, which are perceived as imperialist, and double standards with regard to the application of universal norms. This does not mean abandoning the fundamental values of democracy and human rights, but it does mean refraining from disseminating those values by means of armed force and economic coercion. Whether or not the West can bring itself to implement this change, of course, will depend in particular on the outcome of the internal conflict between the illiberal particularists and liberal universalists. From a progressive point of view, the universalist commitment to equal rights for all is the most effective antidote to the endless zero-sum games between identitarian tribes, which are causing society as a whole to stagnate.

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To prevent a global clash of civilisations, where every culture relativises the rules of coexistence, we need to stand by universalist norms. If the norms currently underpinning the world order, with its Christian and natural law connotations, are no longer acceptable for everyone, an equal dialogue between the civilisations is required to work out which universal principles can be agreed on instead. The concern is, however, that a reasoned debate about the West's enlightened self-interest in the preservation of an international order rooted in universally applicable norms is in danger of being drowned out by the din of morally charged culture wars.

Advocates of a concert of the great powers remind us that respect of the superpowers' exclusive zones of influence prevented the Cold War from

escalating into a hot war (for instance during the Cuban Missile Crisis). The price of this relative stability in the imperial centres is, however, never-ending proxy wars on the periphery. The rejection of neo-imperialist concepts of order also feeds off the reluctance of the overwhelming majority of states to kowtow to the dominance of one pole.

Large parts of the Global South – including important voices in China and Eastern Europe – advocate for the renaissance of a Westphalian order of equal and sovereign states. If the West lacks the political will and the power to preserve the liberal order, maintaining peaceful coexistence based on the UN Charta principles of equality, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states may just be the best of all worse worlds.



Marc Saxer

Marc Saxer coordinates the regional work of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in the Asia Pacific. Previously, he led the FES offices in India and Thailand and headed the FES Asia Pacific department.