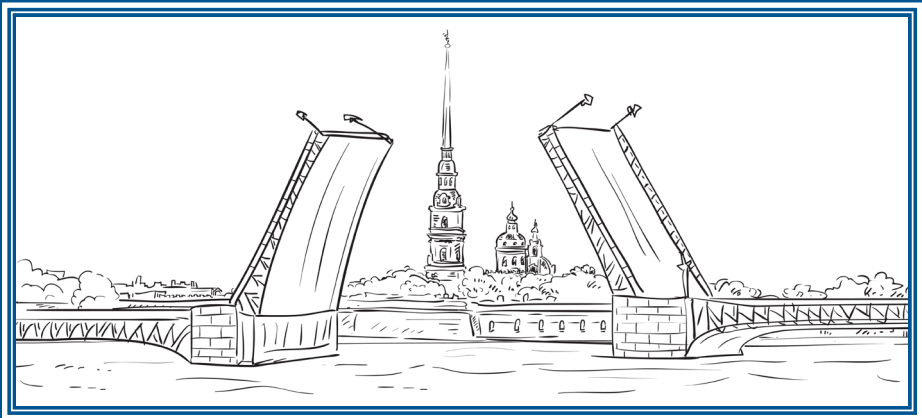


Hans Köchler

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



The Saint Petersburg Lectures



Hans Köchler

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



INTERNATIONAL PROGRESS ORGANIZATION

Saint Petersburg Lecture IX

25 May 2023

Text of report prepared for the XXIst International Likhachev Scientific Readings (“International Likhachev Conference”) in Saint Petersburg, 25-26 May 2023.

Image on cover page: © dreamstime.com. Local drawing of *Dvortsoviy Most* (Palace Bridge) spanning the Neva River between Palace Square and Vasilievsky Island in St. Petersburg, with Peter and Paul Fortress in the background.

© 2023 by Hans Köchler. All rights reserved.

International Progress Organization
Kohlmarkt 4, A-1010 Vienna
Printed in Austria

ISBN 978-3-900704-34-6



Photo: Roberto Stuckert Filho/PR

Fortaleza, Brazil, 15 July 2014

BRICS leaders sign agreement on the New Development Bank (NDB)

Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil, center, with (from left) President Valdimir Putin of Russia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, President Xi Jinping of China, and President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa. Since March 2023, Dila Rousseff serves as President of the NDB.

Bibliographical Note

Except during the years of Covid restrictions (2020, 2021), Hans Köchler delivered from 2013 to 2023 annual lectures or reports to the International Scientific Likhachev Conference in Saint Petersburg.

Lectures I-VII are published in Volume XXXIV of Studies in International Relations (*The Saint Petersburg Lectures: Civilization and World Order*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2019). Lecture VIII (“The Struggle for World Order: Reflections in Times of Global Realignment”) is published in Volume XXXVIII of the series (*MMXXII – WAR OR PEACE*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2023, pp. 37-52). A complete list of lectures can be found at the end of this publication. Russian translations of the lectures are available at www.lihachev.ru.

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. Confusion between the two aspects has fuelled many of the actual polemics on world order. 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, after the Napoleonic upheavals, Metternich’s multilateral order – the concert of great powers post-1815 – provided a framework of relative stability,¹ 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 relative 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).² Although this predicament did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw

¹ Cf. James R. Sofka, “Metternich’s Theory of European Order: A Political Agenda for ‘Perpetual Peace,’” in: *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Winter, 1998), pp. 211-228.

² For an overview, see Henry D. Sokolski, *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, its Origins and Practice*. Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), November 2004.

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.”³ The main trigger of instability was the growing rejection – in all corners of the globe – of a triumphant, effectively *imperial*, claim to power. The development, described by some observers as so-called “blowback effect,”⁴ appears to be far more comprehensive and multidimensional than a “conventional” transformation of the global power constellation along economic and/or military lines would be.

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,⁵ 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 indeed only be sustainable if it is multidimensional.

³ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” in: *The National Interest*, Vol. 16 (Summer 1988), pp. 3-18, and: *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

⁴ E.g., Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Cost and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.

⁵ In terms of permanent membership, the composition of the United Nations Security Council mirrors that constellation. For details, cf. Köchler, “Security Council Reform: A Requirement of International Democracy,” in: Giovanni Finizio and Ernesto Gallo (eds.), *Democracy at the United Nations: UN Reform in the Age of Globalisation*. (Series “Federalism,” No. 1.) Brussels etc.: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 263-274.

In spite of the many solemn proclamations of a “New World Order” by the main beneficiary of the collapse of the bipolar system,⁶ the “imperial overstretch”⁷ during the post-Cold War period made this order unsustainable. Also, the rapid technological and industrial development in the non-Western world, and the resulting political empowerment of a multitude of 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 eternal 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 or 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.”⁸ This was in fact the proclamation of a strategy of *perpetual hegemony*,⁹ with the President unambiguously stating, “our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from

⁶ For details, cf. Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XIX. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

⁷ The phrase was coined by Paul Kennedy: *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York: Random House, 1987.

⁸ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America – September 2002*. Washington DC: The White House, September 17, 2002, Chapter IX.

⁹ For the geostrategic implications, cf. John Lewis Gaddis, “A Grand Strategy of Transformation,” in: *Foreign Policy*, No. 133 (November-December, 2002), pp. 50-57.

pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”¹⁰ Ultimately, it would be a program to halt history. Such is the quintessential form of a geostrategic denial of reality, along the lines of the delusive 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 rule,¹¹ the hegemon, feeling a need to “preempt” potential threats at any moment, and especially at the peak of his 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.)¹²

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.¹³ In a resolution adopted with an overwhelming majority, the United Nations Human Rights

¹⁰ *The National Security Strategy, loc. cit.*

¹¹ 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 resistance of other actors and thus to defend the status quo. Such is the “defensive vigilance” of the hegemon.

¹² Köchler, *MMXXII – WAR OR PEACE: Speeches and Thoughts in a Pivotal Year*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXXVIII. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2023, p. ix.

¹³ On the legal implications, cf. Köchler, “Sanctions and International Law,” in: *International Organisations Research Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2019) (“Economic Sanctions, Global Governance and the Future of World Order”), pp. 27-47; “Unilateral sanctions,” pp. 32ff.

Council at its recent session decisively condemned the practice.¹⁴ There exists an intricate nexus between the essentially punitive approach of sanctions and the disingenuous zeal of hegemonic powers arrogantly asserting their “values” vis-à-vis antagonists or competitors. The so-called Global Magnitsky Act of the United States is a case in point.¹⁵ 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. The false universalism, which almost hysterically insists that everyone endorse Western interpretations – indeed the “deconstruction” – of values related to family, social and cultural identity, etc.,¹⁶ reflects the colonial legacy of Western powers. It amounts to a new form of *cultural imperialism* that 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.¹⁷ Pope Francis has rightly, and repeatedly, criticized such an approach as a form of “cultural colonialism”

¹⁴ 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.”

¹⁵ “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.

¹⁶ Cf. Köchler, *Human Rights and Global Power Politics. Statement delivered at side meeting of the 51st session of the United Nations Council on Human Rights*. Geneva / Changchun (China), 19 September 2022. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2022, at <http://i-p-o.org/Koehler-HUMANRIGHTS-GLOBAL-POWER-POLITICS-UNCHR-Side-Meeting-19Sept2022.pdf>.

¹⁷ On the nature of cultural imperialism, cf. Köchler, *Culture and Empire: The Imperial Claim to Cultural Supremacy versus the Dialectics of Cultural Identity*. I.P.O. Online Publications. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2009, http://i-p-o.org/Koehler-Culture_and_Empire-IPO-OP-2009.htm.

by which “Western countries seek to impose their values on developing ones in return for financial aid.”¹⁸ 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 reactions among a growing number of peoples and countries. Overzealous self-assertion, intended 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

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. After the power struggles of the bipolar era, a new “cold war” is emerging between the Western block, under the leadership of the United States, and the Russian Federation. The proxy war in and around Ukraine has resulted in a highly volatile global situation.¹⁹ 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. A trial of

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

¹⁹ For details, see Köchler, “MMXXII – War in Europe,” in: Köchler, *MMXXII – WAR OR PEACE*, pp. 113-140.

strength among a multitude of actors aiming at once to determine the outcome, each in their own favor, always threatens to be a harbinger of protracted turbulence. Also, in a situation of major geopolitical transformation, indeed recalibration, of the balance of power after a rather violent hegemonic interlude,²⁰ the risks of nuclear confrontation must not be underestimated.²¹

The ongoing war in Europe has further accelerated the evolution of global order towards a multipolar constellation that will be markedly different from the one that was shaped right upon the end of World War II. Even if 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 as a shift of the center of gravity from the Western industrialized world towards countries and regions that for many decades were treated rather arrogantly by the West.

The role of the People’s Republic of China as mediator in 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

²⁰ We mean here the repeated wars of aggression, acts of intervention and use of economic coercion by the global hegemon after 1990.

²¹ Cf. Köchler, “Politics of Peace in the Nuclear Age,” in: *Current Concerns*, No. 21, 11 October 2022, pp. 1-3.

multipolar order cannot depend on the military balance of power alone, 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 intergovernmental cooperation between actors in Asia, Africa and Latin America, with their regional and global strategies. 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 G7.²²

These developments and initiatives will need to be complemented by alternative financial arrangements that create a balance against the dominance of the U.S. dollar, which in the last few decades has almost systemically been used for purposes of power politics, and in particular as a tool for the enforcement of unilateral coercive measures, including 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" (NDB), established by the BRICS countries with headquarters in Shanghai, and 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?"²³

²² For details, see "BRICS' GDP, potential currency a challenge to US dollar dominance," by Heng Weili (New York), in: *China Daily Global*, 14 April 2023.

²³ *Loc. cit.*

Apart from BRICS, with its global outlook, other cornerstones of a new multipolar architecture may be organizations with more regional focus such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (with its multidimensional approach including defense, international security and economy) or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (if it can avoid falling victim to a *divide et impera strategy* “from behind”²⁴ 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 2021).²⁵

Also, as we explained earlier, a genuine 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 new order must include the spheres of *information* and *communication*, and respect the diversity of *ideas* (“Weltbild”). In such an order, no country, and certainly not the erst-while 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,”²⁶ which is just one of several poles in the emerging global constellation.

²⁴ We allude here to a phrase – “leading from behind” – used in 2011 by an advisor of President Barack Obama to describe the latter’s actions in Libya. (Source: Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama’s foreign policy,” in: *The New Yorker*, May 2, 2011 Issue, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist.)

²⁵ The United States withdrew from the preceding TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) agreement in 2017.

²⁶ Cf. the article, “Communication – the key word to peace” (*Cyprus Mail*, 27 October 1984, p. 3), commenting on a meeting of experts convened by the International Progress Organization on the New International Information and Communication Order.

In view of the 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.²⁷ 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, by the Western mainstream media of the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines in Europe.

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.²⁸ 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

²⁷ For details, see Köchler (ed.), *The New International Economic Order: Philosophical and Socio-cultural Implications*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. III. Guildford (England): Guildford Educational Press, 1980; and Köchler (ed.), *The New International Information and Communication Order: Basis for Cultural Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence among Nations*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. X. Vienna: Braumüller, 1985.

²⁸ Cf. Köchler, “Law and Politics in the Global Order: The Problems and Pitfalls of Universal Jurisdiction,” in: *Souvenir & Conference Papers* [International Conference on the Emerging Trends in International Criminal Jurisprudence, 10-11 December 2005, New Delhi]. New Delhi: Indian Society of International Law, 2005, pp. 28-30.

outside that framework.²⁹ A peaceful multipolar order cannot exist with a politicized system of international criminal justice. The disparity of the paradigms – sovereign equality of states versus the supranational authority of judicial office bearers – reveals the incompatibility. The resulting doctrinal confusion has proven to be an invitation to opportunistic uses of criminal justice for political purposes, and a recipe for permanent tension and conflict among states.³⁰

Conclusion: Sovereignty and balance of power

For a new multipolar order to be robust and sustainable, it needs to be based on the mutual recognition of sovereignty by all states. In a substantive sense, the concept relates not only to the legal, but also to the military, economic and cultural domains. *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.³¹

Only under conditions of real multipolarity may smaller and medium powers regain and maintain their ability to decide as *equal* members of the inter-

²⁹ Cf. Köchler, *Global Justice or Global Revenge? International Criminal Justice at the Crossroads*. Vienna / New York: Springer, 2004.

³⁰ About the systemic problems of international criminal justice in the context of power politics, see also Köchler, "Justice and Realpolitik: The Predicament of the International Criminal Court," in: *Chinese Journal of International Law*, Vol. 16, Issue 1 (2017), pp. 1-9.

³¹ 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: "The Demand for Equity and Equality: The North-South Divide in the United Nations," in: Köchler (ed.), *The United Nations and International Democracy*. Vienna: Jamahir Society for Culture and Philosophy, 1995, p. 32.

national community, in conformity with their status under the UN Charter.³² A configuration where a multitude of centers of power hold each other in check will alone 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 tries 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 India³³ are just the latest, and most obvious, sign that the transformation towards a multipolar global configuration is under way.

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

³² Article 2(1) declares “sovereign equality” of states as foundational “Principle” of the United Nations.

³³ 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.

Saint Petersburg Lectures by Hans Köchler

2013

Dialogue among Civilizations and Cultures:
Philosophical Foundations and Implications for World Order

2014

Civilizations between Conflict and Dialogue:
Perception and Reality in the Global Context

2015

World Order and National Interest

2016

Power, Law and World Order:
Reflections on the Role of the United Nations Organization

2017

World Order in an Age of Transition

2018

Culture in the Age of Globalization

2019

Geopolitics and the Law of Unintended Consequences:
The Risks of Unilateralism in the Emerging Multipolar Order

2022

The Struggle for World Order:
Reflections in Times of Global Realignment

2023

The Emerging Multipolar Balance of Power
versus the Arrogance of an Empire in Decline