

A World Power takes its leave and what comes next?

Already President Obama withdrew from the role of the USA as the world's policeman, but he did not fundamentally question the existing international order and its rules. Trump by contrast has upped the ante with his slogan "America first" and his approach to challenge the existing international order and the rules with numerous provocations. These provocations are meant to obtain "better deals" for the USA. But will they? It is too early to see or anticipate all the changes which Trump's political approach will yield. The only result, which is quite visible already, is that the USA as a political superpower is gone. Equally visible is, in my view that the emerging international order will function without a superpower. Even potential candidates like China, Russia, the EU, India have so many political, economic and military weaknesses, that none of them will possibly be able to replace the USA. Nor does any of them have the political will to step forward and assume the role of a superpower. Not even the G20 will be able to assume this role. Is this bad?

A World without a superpower

What the world with superpowers produced is a fierce fight with often missionary zeal for the creation, some would say the imposition, of a particular societal model on the world. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the "victory" of the market economy (capitalism) and the global adoption of the Western model of democracy appeared to be only a matter of course and time. Any problems on the way to this new global order were either ignored or assumed to go away, once the world would no longer know poverty and hunger, and new generations would be engaged in a peaceful competition for a brighter future for all. Higher degrees of political participation, empowerment and self-determination would ensure that the competition would stay on track. In other words, liberalism was the winning philosophy, in the paradigm of neo-liberalism.

But even the most optimistic liberals had occasionally lingering doubts that the road into a brighter future would be that straightforward and easy to travel. But they did not know how to overcome the stumbling blocks on the road, they just sidestepped them. By now, we know that through this negligence we lost a good part of our societies and never won others over to the liberal view of the world, namely a global market economy, an ever growing digitalization of all aspects of our lives, a high degree of personal mobility to seek opportunities for a better life, even beyond national borders, when it was not in the offing at the traditional place of residence. The accompanying growing income disparities appeared acceptable, as long as the bottom of the income level rose. But we continued to have persistent structural poverty, hunger, social marginalization and ethnic discrimination, uncontrolled and uncontrollable corporate power of banks and multinational corporations, which on several occasions brought the world economy to the brink of collapse or influenced political decisions (i.e. Cambridge Analytica in the case of BREXIT). Governments had to intervene with public funding to stabilize companies and economies. While in the US such government funding was repaid by the private companies, in Europe most of this money was lost. A fact which is still little known and not explained. The unethical intervention by a data processing company in the decision-making process of the BREXIT referendum was exposed after the fact, but the revelations did not lead to invalidate the outcome of the referendum.

On the fringes of the society religious and ideological extremism developed which governments either ignored or attempted to control with police interventions. Eventually,

after the turn of the century, conservative political parties were formed in the West, which had no qualms to use the extreme fringes of the society to gain political influence and votes. In non-Western countries like China and Russia, authoritarian traditions gained coinage, and in all continents a nationalist outlook on the world grew.

Nationalism as a response to the weaknesses of the neoliberal order

Current leaders are grappling to find solutions to the problems we ignored in the past decades. Those, who feel left out of the globalised and digitalized world, are opposing wholesale what exists. They support politicians who question everything which has been created, and want to lead the world back to the past. These politicians are vocal, aggressive, operating with half truths and questionable values, but they succeed to put liberal leaders on the defensive. Young politicians like Emmanuel Macron and Justin Trudeau stand their ground, and in some ways so does Angela Merkel. But they are invariably outmaneuvered in the public attention by the outrageous tweets by Donald Trump or statements by Boris Johnson and their likes. Leaders like Putin emulate past Western power games and do not shy away from interventions through cyber attacks in the affairs of other countries. It is partially a mirror action of the interventions of Western political leaders to strengthen civil society organizations in non-Western countries. While Western countries claim for their interventions the moral high ground of human rights protection, the non-Western leaders are mostly silent on their motives, and so the only one which shines through is self-defense of their traditions and culture.

Nation states, nationalism and global challenges

Economic globalization has accelerated the pace with which global challenges have arisen and advanced, such as climate change, loss in biodiversity, pollution of air, water and soil, illegal migration, spread of hitherto uncommon diseases (Ebola, coronavirus). Nationalism, which in most cases wants to shut borders, minds, and international connectivity is ill placed to address these challenges. In fact, they distract attention in the general public from these issues, which is thus left to bureaucrats and experts to solve. Although both these groups are important in defining solutions to these global problems, they are not sufficiently powerful as drivers of the needed change in the society, the economy, and the culture of our countries. While we do not have to question the existing international order, we can and we should question and alter some of the existing rules and procedures within the international order; to do that is the mandate of politicians.

Nationalism is an aberration in today's world; the nation state is not. It is for better or worse the entity which has political legitimacy. As long as national governments and administrations are trusted by the people of a given country, they are the only legitimate representative of the people. Such trust, however, has to be based on constitutional principles, ethical values and a clearly defined control system of checks and balances on political power. In other words, politicians who lead governments and manage administrations are the key to finding our way into the future provided they respect their countries' constitution or its equivalent and work on that basis, rather than on popular thinking and gut feelings.

A strategic path into the future of the world

Solving problems of the past by going forward is a strategic approach, which so far only few politicians master. Most politicians are driven by balancing the various interests in the society. Invariably with this approach, the interests of the economically powerful, who can pay for a skillful articulation of their interests, win disproportionately in this political balancing act. Scientific knowledge, ethical standards, and needs of the poorer segments of the society will always be in a disadvantageous position in a political landscape which is determined by the interplay between interest groups. Lately the influence of civil society organizations has grown in Western societies and of social and other scientists in Non-Western societies, which has brought some countervailing forces into play against corporate and oligarchic interests. Last but not least, an independent justice system strengthens the checks and balances on public and private power holders. But in many countries, the judiciary is weak and not always politically neutral or independent. In other countries, populist politics are gaining momentum and are no longer held in check. There should be freedom of opinion, but if opinions violate e.g. the value of non-discrimination on the basis of sex and race, then political and legal measures need to be taken to prohibit actions on the basis of such views.

Still, if one focuses attention on our political problems of today without being distracted by nationalism and the extreme fringes in the political spectrum, one can detect little sprouts of a more equal, fairer, more peaceful future of the global society. As of today, I would not say that the glass is half full. But it is also not half empty. In fact, we haven't yet found the source of knowledge, ethics, political will and energy which fills the glass with more than a mere trickle.

Nevertheless a weak trickle of hope exists: The current leadership of the German Green Party is fairly close to defining a strategic path. But they far away from determining policies for the country. They will have to form coalitions with stronger parties, but this will demand compromises which will be very difficult to obtain and to convey to the general public. In other countries, too, there are politicians who wish to chart a new course. Regrettably, the established media are more focused on nationalistic leaders such as Orban in Hungary rather than on Trudeau. A world map of nationalist and globalized leaders may well show an almost equal balance between the two camps.

Apart from comparing the actual political leaders of the world, it may be more helpful to draw a balance sheet between those elements which will help us to address the global challenges successfully, and those, which we are lacking.

What do we have: human rights, a global agenda (Agenda 2030) with 17 sustainable development goals, peace-keeping and peace-making mechanisms, international cooperation, trade and investments, cultural and social diversity, flourishing science and technology, a vast majority of functioning nation states with the capacity to address economic, social and ecological problems which have global dimensions.

What do we lack: A lively debate on balancing individual and communal human rights, and thus an evolution of the human rights canon and its enforcement; a monitoring system on the implementation of the 17 sustainable development goals, which leads to corrective action when goals are not achieved; international cooperation which fulfills the demands of the 0.7 GNI target by all wealthy countries; fairer international trade and investment

patterns; effective peace-keeping and peace-making mechanisms with enforcement powers; unflinching respect for cultural and social diversity; science and technology development, which is supported through increased public and private funding to address sustainability policies; an acceptance that democracy and good governance are necessary, but that there is no “one size fits all” democracy model.

Instead we should create an independent international review mechanism, which would review in regular intervals the governance situation in all countries. As yardsticks the 5 dimensions of a democratic system, namely transparency, accountability, participation, fairness and justice, and equity can be used. As a result we may find that there are varying ways to observe these principles. It may also help to respect the differences between countries, but not to be immobilized by them or an incorrect understanding of national sovereignty. The principle that the protection of human rights is a higher legal value than national sovereignty is today widely accepted. Thus monitoring national governance systems and an early determination of international interventions could forestall that crises developed, as we have seen them in the recent past, e.g. in Syria, Yemen, Venezuela.

How to get on the strategic path

Some strategically important elements are already in place, others we lack:

What we have is a collective system through the United Nations to establish with the involvement of multiple stakeholders global programmes for action. The Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are two of the more recent examples. All these programmes need to be implemented nationally or in the context of regional groupings such as the European Union. Nothing can thus replace in the foreseeable future the nation state. But what we can foresee in the near future, or rather, what we should demand, is a collective system of nation states which enforces the adherence to global programmes once they are adopted. A reformed security council as well as a possibly re-constituted trusteeship council would be linchpins in such a more vigorous collective system.

We have on all continents regional groupings. Mostly they are formed around economic interests. It is perceivable that they also function as guarantors for regional security and peace. The Security Council could base the enforcement of its decisions on the active involvement of such regional alliances. At the same time, competing alliances without any Security Council mandate, such as the ones in Yemen and Syria, would then be unacceptable.

The Status Quo is not enough

The current UN secretary-general and the permanent members of the UN Security Council are at present taking small steps in this direction. But we need bold and quick action. We need a consensus of the member states how we want the UN to function in today's world and give the UN system the wherewithal to do so effectively. Sooner or later a general conference of all member states according to article 109 of the UN Charter should be convened to map out a way towards a UN which can ensure that all governments adhere to the principles of the UN Charter. Such a conference was foreseen to be held every 10 years, but so far it never was convened. Part of such a reformed UN system would have to make the Security Council truly representative of today's assembly of nation states and to give the Council the means to enforce its decisions. Eventually the UN may have to abolish the

consensus principle and opt for a weighed majority vote (i.e. at least half of all member states plus one representing at least 51% of the world's population).

This is a tall order. But nothing less will get us to a world where we can all live in peace and with a living standard which allows everyone a decent life. Time is not on our side. Civil society therefore needs to put pressure on political leaders to act. We all need to engage and participate. We need to think out of the box, radical, but not extreme. And we need to try to bring those, who have run astray back to the mainstream. Everybody counts in this endeavour to make the world a better place for us all. We also need to be aware that the need for adjustments will never been ending. Changes solve one set of problems and create new ones.

If we take decisions in good time and with the right mix of understanding and empathy for those who resist change, we can succeed.