

Will Democracies be Able to Act Rationally in a Multipolar World?

DailyKos member 'villmanstrand'

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A number of comments from the readers can also be found at that site.

Since some time now, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have proposed that the present de-facto international order should be replaced by a multipolar one. Their proposal was accompanied by ultimative demands from Putin to the effect that some of his neighboring states should be subordinated to his own 'pole', or sphere of influence, even though this would be against their own will. His demands were flatly rejected by other interested parties, which has meant that the concept of a multipolar international order is rarely being discussed at present.

This does not mean that the idea is dead. In particular, the German political scientist Herfried Münckle has recently published a thorough analysis of this concept, and related ones, in a book whose English title will be *World in Turmoil. The Order of Powers in the 21st Century*, although the full text of the book is only available in German at the present time. My description of his approach is available at the webaddress shown below, together with some comments of my own.

As the title of his book indicates, Herfried Münckle addresses the problem that the world is in turmoil at present, but he also emphasizes from the start that this is not a new situation. From a European perspective, in particular, we may have lived with a comfortable assurance that the world is a benign place, but this has been due to our parochial perspective. The 'Rule-Based International Order' under the auspices of the United Nations Organization is not adequate for its intended purpose and it has never been, according to him. Another framework based on the classical notion of 'great powers' must come instead.

Given that the world, conceptually, consists of a large number of sovereign states, Münckle observes that a certain structure is required for this world to be manageable. The General Assembly of the United Nations can not provide the

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Erik Sandewall (editor) can be reached at erik@sandewall.net

required order; some of the states must emerge as leaders, with certain powers and certain obligations, and the relations and the interplay between these leader states is essential in order to guarantee the stability of the entire system, where its ability to control conflicts and to resolve them is the most important aspect of the stability.

The group of leading powers will not be elected, in Müntzle's view; they will emerge as leaders in view of their strength from the military, economical, and cultural points of view. At the same time, he discusses at length what should be the *number* of members in the 'club' of leading states if it is going to serve its purpose. With a combination of historical examples and philosophical analysis, he concludes that clubs of one, two, or five members are the ones that are the most likely to provide stability. With one single member it becomes more or less a world government; with two members one obtains a bipolar world of the kind that we have had seen during the Cold War. He argues that this is no longer an option.

The case of a club of five great powers is obtained by comparison with its alternatives, in his analysis: there should be an odd number of members so that one of them can serve as the tongue of the balance; three is too few since it invites instability through two-against-one constellations, and seven is too many. Müntzle describes several historical situations where a structure of five leading powers worked well for a reasonable period of time, and he also describes what caused the eventual instability and the collapse of these structures. His bottom line is that the states that are members of such a 'club of five' must act judiciously and according to a number of well defined principles, in order for the resulting system to remain stable.

Based on his analysis along these lines, Münckle discusses what would be the possible member states on the global level, and he suggests that the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, and India would be the only realistic choice. Each of these has significant weaknesses at the present time which may make them unfit for taking on the proposed role, but he states as his opinion that no alternatives are in sight.

There are many things one can say about Münckle's theses, and many conclusions can be drawn if one accepts them. One particular consideration is of particular interest here: Given that the foreign policy of a country shall be conducted according to the will of the people, in a democracy, what are the chances that such a country will be able to take on the role of being a 'leader state' in a responsible way? A bipolar system can be easily understood by the general public in terms of enemies and friends, but the dynamics in a 'club' of five great powers is much more subtle, making it much more difficult to explain in popular terms.

To make matters worse, one minimal requirement for understanding Münckle's account is that one must have a certain knowledge of European history since the

early times and, in particular, those aspects of history that have traditionally been considered as essential, but which are often looked down upon today: the history of military conflicts between states. If they have been disregarded, it has been because wars were seen as an obsolete phenomenon, a thing of the past. Now that we have been taken out of that illusion, we may have to learn more about our history, also in the military sense.

Furthermore, there is one more difficulty for a democratic state that may be called upon, or wish to play the role of being a 'pole' in the structure that Herfried Münkler proposes: its vulnerability due to the ability of other states to manipulate its public opinion using social media, and in some cases also their ability to use corruption for influencing its political system.

These difficulties occur much less in autocratic states, and they add up to being arguably a big challenge for democratic states if the world evolves towards a multipolar system, according to the analysis that is made by Herfried Münkler.

References

[1] Herfried Münkler: *Welt in Aufruhr. Die Ordnung der Mächte im 21. Jahrhundert*. Rowohlt, 2023.

<https://www.rowohlt.de/buch/herfried-muenkler-welt-in-aufruhr-9783737101608>

My review of his book is available at
www.argumentochfakta.se/artiklar/261/world-in-turmoil.pdf