

Beyond the 'big pictures' in international politics.

A vision from Germany in the context of the recent elections

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“Nothing is as it used to be”, “The West has imploded”, “Europe has failed” - there is no shortage of headlines that try to describe the dramatic nature of events - not least in the wake of the Munich Security Conference. Certainly, the ideological speech of US Vice President J.D. Vance not only leaves us stunned, it also points to a political turning point, because secure starting points and conditions for action suddenly appear precarious. This applies not only to the categorisation of Ukraine as a war-monger and dictatorship, but also to the implicit questioning of the transatlantic security alliance. The possible and materially inaccurate dictum that 'once again we were unprepared' in Europe with the actions of another Trump administration is countered in Germany by the argument that from Monday after the Bundestag elections we will be living in a different world, according to which Germany will once again take the lead in Europe, the German economy will be set on an expansionary course and the difficult search for consensus in 'whatever coalition' with a 'basta chancellor' will come to an end.

But the most likely scenario is that we wake up in the same world we thought we had left behind. Difficult coalition negotiations and protracted European processes, a US president and his entourage who care only about the next headline and the limelight. The media echo then turns this into a general lament about the inability of politicians to act, the ossification of structures and complaints about the general lack of prospects. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to take a closer look at some of the headlines to see how viable they really are in terms of their message and, above all, their impact.

1 'The West has imploded' - really?

First of all, 'the West' is not an inevitability, but a projection of political community-building that has been the subject of much ambivalence and debate in recent decades alone. This is still the case today, except that a conception of the political West understood as the EU, the US and NATO has come to the fore, whose cooperation is seen as precarious, especially in the current economic climate - politically and militarily, but also in the basic socio-political understanding of the Trump administration. Freedom, pluralism, democracy and the rule of law are currently threatened worldwide by a protracted advance of autocratic and authoritarian regimes, to which the political West has yet to find a response. The debate on democracy promotion, once the flagship of German political foundations, has fallen silent; civil society and advocacy groups have taken the lead through their ability to mobilise.

However, much of this is due to a narrow geopolitical perspective: The decline of Germany and Europe may be primarily in the military and defence sector, while other sectors are much less affected. Europe, as the "second voice" of the West, is still present, and in many policy areas, such as the economy and science, it is at least

decisive and in some cases leading. This may not be satisfactory, but it means that the political West, which continues to function in these policy areas beyond the governments currently at the helm, is still intact and should be used more intensively. In economic terms, the transatlantic relationship is closer than in any other region of the world, despite all the tariff gimmicks. The fact that relations with the Trump administration, with all its excesses, cannot be expected to 'flourish' should come as no surprise to anyone - especially at the discursive level. Similarly different worlds are opening up here that can also be observed within the USA - but the USA still exists despite all the polarisation and heterogeneity, Trump does not stand for the USA as a whole.

What is needed, therefore, is the ability to work with less homogeneous assumptions about international politics and to develop approaches to action in heterogeneous policy areas. For the Trump administration, there are no hierarchical forms of cooperation in the international arena that are accepted by all participants - even if the impression is created that all states can be blackmailed through tariffs, visa and migration policies. The important thing is to 'enrich' alternative content in individual policy areas by introducing elements that would not be sustainable in the grand geopolitical design. The West's commonalities are helpful in this regard, and also allow for further understanding, which is difficult to achieve with other regions.

2 Trump and the “gone wild”, severely disrupted order

The self-fixation, ruthlessness and domineering behaviour of the Trump administration has so far destroyed, and will continue to destroy, much of the political inventory accumulated by the 'West'. The destruction of the old order can be clearly seen in the case of Ukraine. But even beyond the US, the EU in particular is being criticised for its policy of double standards, without this having become the subject of serious debate within Europe. This applies not least to the exaggerated discourse on values in recent years. In this respect, the dissolution of the much-vaunted 'rules-based order' is not only the work of Trump, but also the result of its erosion from within. But what we are seeing now are not just the first elements of a disordered order (in the NATO alliance, for example), but also the much harder to grasp phenomenon of an emerging 'order gone wild' due to a lack of certainty of expectations, unreliable partnerships and unpredictable advances. Trump personally enjoys this, but so does the 'reactionary international' that is now forming, which has established itself under the name of CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference).

Beyond these circles, the experience of the loss of the supposedly established order has been joined by fears of a growing 'uncontrollability' of massive and, above all, unexpected losses of order. The dismantling of aid agencies such as USAID and the paralysis of international organisations are signs of this. Political discourses that always try to read an opportunity in this disruptive political practice do not help either, because the practices of "running wild" catch on and are copied by various state and non-state

actors worldwide or used as a licence to act accordingly. In this respect, we are faced with an 'unleashing' of international politics from its norms and standards, to which the EU in particular, as the protagonist of such regulations, must learn to react. It cannot be assumed that we will then move towards a two-world model - on the one hand, a world that acts according to norms and, on the other, a world that is not bound by norms. Both sides are dependent on limited security of interaction and - albeit limited - horizons of predictability, but which are now no longer supported by a broader concept of order.

This can be seen in the increasingly clear division of the world into multiple dimensions, which cannot be deciphered by a global approach, but only by looking at individual policy areas. Most decision-makers and opinion-leaders, however, do not want to make this effort. When some people today propose closing ranks with the 'Global South' as a solution, they fail to realise that our long-standing partnership discourses have only a very limited resonance there, as they expect effective participation and involvement in decisions, programmes and policies. Others expect the Trump administration's transactionalism to lead to a departure from 'values-based dialogue' and 'do-gooderism', as we can now finally talk clearly about national interests and then make 'sustainable deals'. But this will not create international order and predictability of action; instead, we can expect a constantly revisable (re)negotiation of status and political interests, which is also called into question by the fact that we cannot be sure that the other party will stick to the agreement.

What remains is a reorganisation of politics in terms of shorter action horizons, less reliable partner structures and a new marriage for diplomacy with its multiple approaches. By contrast, reliance on agreement at the presidential level is not very viable, as the volatility of ideological and personal politics is a natural limit to this.

3 Beyond the ritualisation of politics: new partnerships with the Global South?

The call in public discourse to focus on stronger partnerships with the states of the Global South in view of the expected distance to the transatlantic partner USA in the Trump era does not come as a surprise. It is astonishing because there has been no pronounced German foreign policy interest in this part of the world and the respective governments in the South have shown no interest in being 'positioned' by Europe as part of an international conflict against the US. One need only recall the unsuccessful initiatives of then German Foreign Minister Maas, who in 2019 proclaimed the 'Alliance for Multilateralism' initiative and wanted to set up a 'Marshall Plan for Democracy'. It does not take a great deal of foreign policy experience to realise that the vast majority of countries in the Global South have no interest in such attempts at 'instrumentalisation' and expect little from such superficial 'partnerships'. Serving as a mere appendage to great power rivalries is a pattern from the past that should not be repeated.

German and EU foreign policy must overcome such ritualistic temptations and practices. The path to dialogue 'at eye level' has not yet been taken; programmes, projects and joint declarations continue to be 'presented' to dialogue partners, and there is a lack of joint development of ideas. The EU, in particular, has recently suffered shipwreck with its pre-fabricated formulations and formats for agreements with Australia, and the agreement with Mercosur is not in the bag either. The reorientation of development cooperation along the lines of graduation and the focus on the objectives of other policy areas, such as migration and climate policy, have done additional damage by alienating traditional partners and politically 'bending' established relationships. Today, the situation has changed: The countries of the Global South are no longer waiting for the EU, but are seeking their own solutions, as in the BRICS alliance. If we do not adapt, we will fail. To avoid this, foreign and development policy approaches need to be rethought - especially in view of the geopolitical trap they are in danger of falling into.

4 Conclusion

The dominance of military and geopolitical discourses on security in Europe, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific has led to the 'colonisation' of a wide range of policy areas, which is unnecessary and unproductive. Apart this sort of thinking is excluding other parts of world and its interests. Following the pattern of Trump, Putin or Xi is a mistake for Europe, especially in the excitement of current media and political discourse. Looking at individual policy areas can help us to distance ourselves from the 'big pictures' that are currently presented to us on a daily basis.