

Opinion – A New World Order? From a Liberal to a Post-Western Order

Written by Giorgio Shani and Hartmut Behr

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GIORGIO SHANI AND HARTMUT BEHR, MAR 13 2022

The unprovoked invasion of the sovereign state of Ukraine by Russia has sparked fears of a global conflagration the like of which we haven't seen since World War II. Echoes of the war can be gauged by the stated aim of the intervention: to 'demilitarize' and 'denazify' a Ukrainian regime committing 'genocide' against a Russian-speaking minority. These claims have proved baseless but are hardly unprecedented in the light of recent 'humanitarian' interventions in other parts of the world, in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In the latter case, the infamous presentation of fabricated "evidence" of the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) by George W. Bush's administration to legitimise pre-emptive strikes appears to have provided Putin with a precedent to launch his attack on Ukraine, and prior attacks in Syria. Indeed, Russia's invasion(s) may be seen to have replicated Western attempts at Liberal Peacebuilding, most notably in Afghanistan, where a costly occupation was deemed necessary to 'de-Talibanize' the country with disastrous results. Furthermore, the expansion of NATO to the borders of Russia and the incorporation of former Soviet republics, in spite of an alleged agreement made with Gorbachev in the last days of the USSR, has contributed to the climate of fear which may have led to Putin's actions and has elicited some sympathy from "neo-realist" IR scholars, especially that of John Mearsheimer. Ukrainian calls for a no-fly zone, as implemented by NATO in Libya, are entirely understandable given the use of Russian airpower to bomb civilians into submission but risk further escalations of the war.

Putin's claims also resemble crude and brutalist nationalist expansionism of the 19th and 20th century. In his speech before Russian troops invaded Ukraine, on February 21, recognising the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent countries, he used arguments and metaphors that typify ethnic nationalist thinking in its purest – and inherently expansionist and imperialist – form. His perennialist invocation of a "historic Russia" and of the unity of all the people living in this "fatherland" of "comrades" going back to "times immemorial" is used to justify present policies. From these imaginaries, claims of uniqueness, Russians as "true people", and "Russia as a sacred space", including the dismissal and discreditation of the "real" existence and sovereignty of Ukraine, are derived that render politics instrumental and justify every means to "protect" and affirm the nation as an altar. We know this language from the 19th century nationalism, for instance from French nationalist historian Jules Michelet as well as we are all too familiar with the political consequences of such thinking that ultimately demands sacrifice.

As Hannah Arendt has convincingly argued in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, politics then degenerates into the mere execution of higher forces that are believed and propagated to determine inner-worldly fortunes and of which the nation perceives itself to be the manifestation. And both Rabindranath Tagore and Hans J Morgenthau have fiercely critiqued the nation-state and nationalism as an inevitable conflict-inflicting and generating pattern in international politics. The "unboundedness" of means, including war and means of warfare as the then logical, even if perverse, continuation of politics (following Carl von Clausewitz), and the expansionism inherent in the nationalist ideology follows. The nation is always longing for itself. It is incomplete *per se* as there are always people living outside the state territory, but are those claimed to belong as nationals to the "sacred space" of the "fatherland" and are therefore to be integrated through expansionism. "The nation as a state" is the dangerous, violent and war-prone formulation encapsulated by G.W.F Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*, §330-340.

The global response to this attack on the post-war security architecture in Europe, however, has not been as strong

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as the US and the EU have claimed. Although the majority of states supported the UN General Assembly resolution to condemn the invasion, China and India abstained as they did in the UN Security Council. Whereas China's abstention is hardly surprising, given the closeness of ties proclaimed by both Putin and Xi Jinping in their recent meeting on the eve of the Beijing Winter Olympics, India's decision to jeopardise greater ties with the West and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific suggests that it too does not buy into the Liberal World Order which has increasingly been reframed in racialized terms as a *Western* world order.

Some, such as Francis Fukuyama, have interpreted this as a further example of the threat which authoritarian populism poses to the liberal world order. Modi shares with Putin an authoritarian populist agenda which has, hitherto, proved popular with voters within the confines of a tightly controlled and increasingly repressive media. However, it is hard to envisage that the Indian National Congress (INC) would have voted differently given their historic ties with the USSR during the Cold War. Significantly, South Africa also abstained leaving Bolsonaro's Brazil the only members of the BRICS to support the resolution (although it continues to trade with Russia). This suggests that, for the BRICS at least, the liberal world order is giving way to a multipolar order where the Westphalian norms of international relations, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity themselves, are subject to national power politics.

What is urgently required is a new engagement with normative claims from different cosmological traditions in order to construct an emancipatory post-western world order which is based on serious and emphatic engagement with "other" traditions and in which territorial expansionism has no place. This order must be based on the recognition that liberal values such as representative democracy and human rights are not the *only* 'universal' values in town and that the 'universal' values of other cosmological traditions need to be taken into account in international policy making based on a plurilogue of cosmologies.

This taking-into-account includes diplomacy that aims at de-escalating violence through dialogue without "red lines", i.e., it includes the conduct of an emphatic dialogue even with partners and ideologies with whom one does not share sympathies or values. However, in such a dialogue one must be aware of and defend universal, normative values in one's own cosmological traditions, while acknowledging the traditions and values of others and recognising differences. This does not mean to greet, welcome, or sanction the "other" by all means, but to take them seriously, be honest, and engage with sincerity. Such guidelines for a plurilogue of and between cosmologies is different from past Western attempts to deal with post-Soviet Russia as a vassal state in the 1990s which exhibited the worst excesses of liberal internationalist triumphalism as typified by Fukuyama's assertion that "history" has ended.

Thirty years later, he is at it again, invoking the "spirit of 1989" and asserting that the liberal order is under attack and needs to be defended without questioning whether the values on which it is based are the *only* universal values, or particular to a certain cosmological tradition. Putin's speech of February 21 clearly demonstrates that he, like many others in Russia and former Soviet Republics, is still traumatised by the collapse of the USSR and finds himself placed outside of "history", a relic of a by-gone age but resembling the spirit of the Freikorps in the Weimar Republic that became the first and fiercest supporters of National Socialism. A serious engagement with post-Soviet Russia would have entailed treating her empathetically.

Empathy, however, should not, in the case of Putin, be confused with sympathy. We need to be utterly critical of his regime which rests on brute force and support from oligarchs who benefitted from the privatisation of the Soviet economy to the detriment of ordinary Russians. The past flirting of Western political, business, and show-biz "elites" with Russian oligarchism and the hypocrisy of many politicians involved made Putin strong in the first place and is thus indirectly complicit with the tragic events unfolding. These same elites are now (again, it seems) determined and all too convinced to do the right thing, supporting and arming Ukraine to defend itself. The radical change in German foreign and defence politics as well as past and present discussions about Nord Stream II indicate this.

As the recent history in Afghanistan has taught us, the flooding of arms into Ukraine will neither bring peace, nor an end to fighting or de-escalation but a protracted war with massive civilian casualties and unforeseen consequences. And arming militias fighting for freedom may lead to imperial blowback as we saw with 9/11. What a plurilocal strategy would recommend is, by contrast, reversible, small-scale action that does not exceed the conditions and

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their control on which it is based. A plurillogical strategy would seek to engage in dialogue with “others” based on respect and empathy and not resort to force. Any attempt to enforce a “puppet regime” should be met with non-cooperation and civil disobedience. The aggressor may have a monopoly of the use of force but this does not mean that it will be considered legitimate either domestically or internationally. This critical reflection must inform foreign policy action.

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