

# Thucydides Trap or Orderly Multipolar World?

## Challenges and Opportunities for Africa

*Address by Sebastian Sperling, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South Africa  
to the conference*

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Excellencies,

Thank you, Mistra, for encouraging us to get a grip of what’s happening in the world, to make sense of it. In South Africa, even if there is debate about international relations and foreign policy, we often manage to make even those about domestic questions; about definitions of national interest or “solving the national question first”. Thank you, Joel, Abba, Laurence and the whole team, for shaking us out of our navel-gazing. Together with my colleagues Zanele, Agness and many others who are working behind the scenes, we truly appreciate the long-standing partnership and collaboration. Thank you for organizing this opportunity to engage an amazing selection of outstanding scholars; and we particularly appreciate the presence of those who travelled far.

This conference is about geopolitics, by definition the relations between states, so this makes us FES humbled to be part of this engagement as a partner together with the embassies of India and China. I speak neither as a diplomat nor as an academic; but rather as a representative of a German political foundation rooted firmly on the left, social-democratic,

socialist side of the political spectrum. The reason we deem this discussion so important is that none of the other challenges we are focusing on as progressives (gross inequality, the tech revolution and its implication for the world of work, the climate emergency and the need for a just transition, the crisis of democracy) can be fully addressed without peace and without understanding current geopolitical shifts. We need to understand geopolitics as an important aspect of today's polycrisis, meaning the entangled mess of interdependent, mutually reinforcing crises we face as humanity that Joel also spoke to. And we seek to understand it not out of pure academic interest, but with a view to build political strategies and the necessary international alliances to address the polycrisis. Allow me to elaborate what I mean:

It is obvious that we are no longer living in the world of the turn of the century; the most unipolar moment if there ever was one, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when liberal democracy married with largely unfettered financial capitalism seemed the direction the world is heading; end of history; and the US arguably dominating on all fronts. Today, neither the US nor any other single major power seems able to contain current escalations of war. And neither is our multilateral order; the United Nations seem equally helpless in the face of the atrocities and the escalation of violence and human suffering that we are seeing in Gaza and Lebanon, in Ukraine and Sudan and other places. It is helpless in part because its institutions are built on an equally outdated reading of the world, namely the post-WWII dispensation.

So what are we seeing today: Thucydides Trap or Orderly Multipolar World?

When the Thucydides Trap is referenced in International Relations, it is generally to suggest heightened probability of war given China's challenge to US hegemony. That rivalry that is real, of course. Yet reducing our reading of today's world to just that big-power-competition or the arguable transition from one hegemonic power to the next doesn't seem to do justice to the complexity of what we are up against. It also comes with the notion that the rest of the world is just spectators. Which is not the case. On the contrary, we do see particularly countries of the Global South claiming their agency and rightful place on the global stage, without any appetite for being sucked into new block confrontations. By the way, to those still talking about "the West" as something homogenous: this interest of not being sucked

into another block confrontation is shared also by middle powers in Europe for example. We are already living in a multipolar world, with many centers of limited power.

Yet there is very little to suggest – watching the news these days - that this emerging multipolar world is “orderly” by any measure.

The trap of the Thucydides-Trap: it leads us to solely focus on states and inter-state conflict. Yet part of today’s disorder is that states are certainly not the only relevant actor. The sole focus on states doesn’t allow us to comprehend, let alone address many of today’s violent conflict. It doesn’t do justice to the concentration of corporate power globally and the tremendous power of international finance and transnational companies; and even the obscene concentration of individual wealth and power, with the eight richest human beings owning more than what 50% of the world population combined own. It doesn’t acknowledge that big part of the current polycrisis is that – even if the negative consequences are, once again, suffered in an unequal way - all of humanity is up against a climate emergency. And it also doesn’t acknowledge that a lot of the current struggle about the future course, about where we’re heading as humanity and how we respond to the polycrisis is actually being fought out within increasingly polarized societies.

Antonio Gramsci’s quote that is almost hundred years old seems distressingly fitting: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.”

Those monsters are not just the obvious villains and warmongers. We see not only terrorism, militarization and imperialism and a return of the rule of the strongest; we also see the rise of authoritarianism and ethno-nationalism globally and its success on the ballot box; the rise of a patriarchal backlash to feminism; of racism, xenophobia and identity-based exclusion as well as economic nationalism and a new wave of protectionism. Democracy is on the backfoot almost everywhere; and so is the idea of a liberal world order.

Now it is cheap and easy to just lament the rise of illiberal forces, of the Trumps and Putins and other right-wing populists of this world; the right extremists in Germany and other fascists globally; their disinformation campaigns and their violent, vile and divisive strategies.

It does little good to just give Sunday speeches with hollow promises of democracy, human rights and a rules-based order. Virtue signaling is not enough.

We rather need to address some difficult questions: how have we prepared the fertile ground for those illiberal forces to rise? Why have democracy and a liberal rules-based order lost their appeal?

A big part of the answer is painful and simple: because they currently simply do not work for the majority. And this has a lot to do with the market-radical capitalist model they've come with.

Political freedom does not go hand in hand with socio-economic freedom for all. Global inequalities deepen while the tech revolution and geo-economic shifts close many of the traditional development paths. States do not find responses to high levels of unemployment and inequality, to the deterioration of public goods and services and to the unequal access to those; also because states' capacities have been eroded not only by corruption but also by neoliberal policies and austerity, imposed by the international system but also by a neoliberal Zeitgeist that even captured the political left.

On the global level, it seems that not only are our existing institutions not up to the challenges; but in some cases, they even worsen and perpetuate them, if we look at the global debt crisis for example. The global order is skewed in favor of the North and institutions do not guarantee democratic decision making nor an equal application of international rules and norms. We see a lot of impunity and double standards – again, look at responses and non-responses to today's violent conflicts.

It is against these injustices that the Global South emerged as a geopolitical fact and factor. What holds this set of countries with otherwise extremely diverse interests and trajectories together is a shared frustration with the current unfair and unjust global order.

The latest Global Census data – a survey of public perception on global governance issues in 15 countries published by our colleagues of FES New York – shows what people believe to be main causes of conflict. In rich countries like Japan, South Korea, US and UK, respondents primarily see the potential of conflict between democratic and undemocratic countries. Respondents from developing and middle-income countries like Tunisia, Turkey and South Africa, on the other hand, see more potential for conflict along economic lines, between rich and poor countries.

A reminder that particularly in countries of the North, in this current moment of geopolitical tension, war and rearmament, we need to make sure to not lose sight of what is a priority to the vast majority of humanity: to keep our planet habitable and to urgently address development, poverty and gross global inequality.

Now in most countries, progressive, democratic forces currently do not have a plan for that; they do not seem to have adequate responses to those challenges. To put it mildly, they do not seem to spark confidence in voters that their responses live up to the scale of today's global problems. We haven't fully realized that we do need fundamentally new economic and development strategies – let alone do we know how they'd look like.

Which makes it easy for right-wing-populists to score with their supposedly easy answers - and to turn what's essentially a socio-economic question into cultural warfare (around identity politics; anti-migration; anti-wokeness; ethno-nationalism,...).

Those illiberal forces are up against pretty much all of South Africa's foreign policy principles; which also represent the essence of progressive internationalism: the centrality of human rights; the promotion of democracy; justice and respect for international law; peaceful resolution of conflict; centrality of the historically marginalized Global South and Africa in particular; multilateralism, non-alignment and the avoidance of global block confrontations; economic development through greater international and regional cooperation.

Globally, we need to get real about translating these principles into concrete political initiatives that do justice to the environmental as well as socio-economic crises we are in, both nationally and internationally. The outcome document of the recent UN Summit of the Future lays out some important aspirations; but now we need to get into the "how". For instance, yesterday at FES, with many of those who will be on panels today and tomorrow, we discussed the overdue overhaul of the international financial architecture – issues of debt, climate financing, taxation. We need to start organizing for it, politically. We need to use the fora we have; from G7 to BRICS to G20, as imperfect as each of them are. And we need to be clear about who and where our allies are. On the level of states, in a volatile and complex, multipolar world, the way forward is probably not about all-encompassing marriages (we don't have to agree on everything!), but about different and changing, strategic, case-by-case,

issue-based alliances. Which is precisely why - to close the circle – we need to understand geopolitics.

But also, we need to build those alliances below the level of governments; union to union, party to party, movement to movement; with those who share similar interests and struggles; which is what we as FES remain committed to.

And which is why we are looking forward to this conference, and to fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.