

VISIONS FOR A NEW WORLD - WHAT HAS BECOME OF THEM?

In art and culture, science and research, there are always ideas and works, analyses and visions that influence the zeitgeist and trigger intense debate. As far as international relations are concerned, in recent decades Paul Kennedy's analysis of the "Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" ⁽¹⁾; Francis Fukuyama's theory on "The End of History and the Last Man" ⁽²⁾; and Samuel Huntington's book on "The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order" ⁽³⁾ have triggered worldwide discussions. It is probably time to make an attempt to assess how far these mostly forward-looking statements have materialised or not.

1. As much as Paul Kennedy's work received worldwide attention in 1988, the year of its publication, his theses were very soon criticised. This was because his core message was reduced to the "decline of the USA", whereas one year after the book was published, the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union dissolved a few years later. The United States emerged as the great victor in the Cold War.

In fact, Paul Kennedy's statements were much more nuanced than they were later presented. After a comprehensive account of how the Habsburgs initially had to relinquish their global power to France, it is then explained how England was able to take over global supremacy after the Napoleonic Wars. Paul Kennedy shows in detail what influence wars, economic development and the industrial revolution had on these shifts in power. He sees the greatest development of the British Empire's power around 1900, but also identifies the causes of its later decline: Overextension of military involvement, compared to the actual economic strength of the country.

In this sense, Kennedy also criticises a possible relative decline of the USA. We are still in the Cold War and the author refers

The USSR's problems are much greater than those of the United States, even though America's share of global power has declined in relative terms. Above all, the USA is far superior to the Soviet Union economically and in areas of technology. In addition, American society is far more dynamic and better able to adapt to new challenges than the authoritarian regime in Moscow.

So while Paul Kennedy states that the USA is still in a class of its own economically and militarily, he also points out that the extent to which military capabilities are in line with global commitments is crucial in the long term. This is particularly true because the economic balance of power in the world is constantly shifting. Kennedy shows how first Spain and later the British Empire entered into more and more strategic commitments over time, which were then almost impossible to manage overall. The result was an "imperial overstretch": all of the commitments and obligations could hardly be honoured and defended at the same time.

Moreover, in the past, the leading powers were often not concerned with the security of their own country, but with commitments that were made somewhere in the world, even if the commitment at the time made perfect sense. Paul Kennedy compares the naval bases that Great Britain had around the world at the height of its power with the 800 military bases that the USA maintains on every continent today. While military involvement has steadily increased over the years, the American share of the global economy has declined significantly: from 60 % after the Second World War to 24 % in 1990.

This can create a gap between political interests and the ability to enforce them militarily. This can very easily lead to another problem: high budget deficits and a high national debt. In this context, Kennedy points out that the US budget deficit rose from \$ 59.6 billion to \$ 202.8 billion between 1980 and 1985 alone; the national debt in the same period rose from \$

914.3 billion to \$1823 billion. (In 2022, the US budget deficit was \$1400 billion; the national debt had risen to \$30,899 billion). Paul Kennedy already compared the development of the 1980s with that of France in the 1780s, which famously led to the French Revolution.

The author also emphasises the positive development of the American economy: the establishment of thousands of companies every year, the high level of investment and the huge expenditure on research and development.

Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether all this is enough to cover the global obligations that the USA has entered into since 1945.

The decline in industrial production, which was also caused by globalisation, seemed particularly worrying. In any case, the American economy was much healthier after 1945, when many commitments were made, than it was four decades later.

The competitiveness of the economy can also be weakened in particular by the fact that an arms race entails the risk of too much money being spent on unproductive weapons systems. This is why no world power has been able to maintain its leading position forever in the past. And this could also be the case for the United States. However, due to its strength, the USA will not suffer the fate of the Netherlands or Spain, which have largely disappeared from history, or fall apart like Austria-Hungary, but will remain a decisive power factor in a multipolar world. The USA's loss of power is therefore only relative and it will depend on Washington's fortunes how the country fits into the new world order and whether it correctly recognises its possibilities and limits.

Paul Kennedy wrote these sentences just over a generation ago. They may have sounded too pessimistic for some at the time, but they apply very well to international relations today.

2. Francis Fukuyama was extremely optimistic about the future, speaking of the "end of history" because the liberal ideas of democracy and the market economy had finally prevailed everywhere. Just like another important student of Hegel, Karl Marx, Francis

Fukuyama believed that history unfolds in certain periods almost as a law of nature: But while Karl Marx believed that the final stage, after the socialisation of the means of production, would be a communist social order, Fukuyama was convinced that liberalism would have prevailed after the victory of the West in the Cold War: in the political sphere as democracy, in the economic sphere as capitalism.

Hegel had already spoken of the end of history when he believed that Napoleon's victory over Prussia in the Battle of Jena (1806) would now realise the ideas of the French Revolution. The Russian-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968) then made a decisive contribution to the rediscovery of Hegel. Like Hegel, he saw the end of history in Europe after the ideas of freedom and equality, on which modern states could be built, had become established. Fukuyama also adopted Kojève's theory that self-confidence and the need for recognition are important for every human being. Fukuyama now says that it is these character traits that underlie people's striving for liberalism and freedom in politics and the economy. This provides the essential driving forces for the course of history.

Fukuyama was then able to point out that after the collapse of communism in Europe, former communist states became democracies, i.e. countries in which the people were given the right to elect their own government. At the same time, driven by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, a liberalisation of the economy prevailed worldwide. Fukuyama largely believed that liberal democracy and liberalism in the economy went hand in hand. The philosophical question here is whether this development can be seen as a "universal history" that ultimately ends at the climax and end of history in a "realm of freedom".

These theses, put forward by Francis Fukuyama, were received with enthusiasm by the neoconservatives, who had established themselves as the dominant force in foreign policy in Washington. They saw it as a confirmation of "American exceptionalism", i.e. the belief that the United States is a chosen nation, destined to dominate the world.

to lead. This belief was already deeply rooted in the thinking of the American founding fathers and goes back to Puritan, Calvinist thinking. As early as 1656, Oliver Cromwell spoke of an "axis of evil" against which England had to fight in the name of God. The good thing about this was that God's will and English interests were congruent.

If, as Francis Fukuyama pointed out, the course of world history leads to more freedom and democracy like a law of nature, then wars that support this development can only be just wars. From this, one could even derive the mandate for the USA to carry out "humanitarian interventions" all over the world; to define "democracy building" and "nation building" as special goals of foreign policy. "Regime change" and "colour revolutions" could be justified as means to achieve these goals. This meant that one's own law could also be used as a weapon beyond national borders; competitors in the economy had to bow to one's own laws when it came to asserting American interests. In this sense, Bill Clinton's first Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, declared: "Blessed by God, the American nation has an obligation to enshrine the values of democracy everywhere in the world" ⁽⁴⁾.

Victory in the Cold War has strengthened the conviction that anchoring American values and interests everywhere in the world can only lead to greater peace and security.

This is linked to another thesis by Francis Fukuyama, namely that democracies do not wage war among themselves. George W. Bush in particular has invoked this to justify his wars ⁽⁵⁾. It is therefore worth fighting for freedom and democracy all over the world if this can become the basis for a peaceful world in the future. However, this creates at least two problems: An armed conflict between a democracy and an authoritarian state is also a war. And: if wars are constantly waged until the last country is democratic, there will be no long periods of peace in between.

The optimism highlighted by Francis Fukuyama has fuelled another project that the USA has repeatedly pursued: The creation of an alliance

of democracies. President Joe Biden has taken up this idea again and made the "fight against autocrats" a focus of his foreign policy. The aim of this alliance is probably to support American supremacy in the world and, above all, to legitimise the use of military force where the United Nations is not prepared to do so. Specifically, it is about isolating Russia and China and supporting US economic sanctions against these and other countries. When President Biden explains that the aim is to contain China as a rising power "because its policies are aimed at replacing liberal democracies with authoritarian dictatorships around the world", the question arises as to whether this is actually true. After all, it is precisely these guiding principles that are used to arm other countries. But is Beijing really training subversive forces that are planning "regime change" in other countries or is it mainly about doing business?

This is a serious question, because by introducing an ideological dimension into international relations, the aim is also to justify armed conflicts.

In any case, the "end of history" thesis had a huge influence on the shaping of American foreign policy. But how can the thesis of eternal peace be reconciled today with the wars in Ukraine, the Middle East and the tensions in the Far East? The fact is that even after the victory of the West in the Cold War, the power-political endeavours of the major powers continue to exert a strong influence on their foreign policy. And if Fukuyama said that self-confidence is a driving force for human behaviour, then this probably applies not only to individuals, but also to nations. If a market economy leads to more prosperity, then this can certainly mean more freedom of choice for individual citizens, but also more self-confidence, which leads to stronger nationalism.

In addition, Francis Fukuyama has also explained in the chapter "Empires of Resentment, Empires of Deference" how people from other cultures and with other ways of life would and could resist adopting the Western model of democracy and capitalism. In particular

he describes the reaction of Islamic fundamentalism and the countries of Asia against modernity supported by the West.

As far as the Islamic world is concerned, it has never adopted the Western model with the same thoroughness as Japan, for example, adopted the Meiji Restoration. Even the Western ideologies adopted under Ataturk in Turkey and under Nasser in Egypt were largely only supported by certain elites. With the Iranian revolution of 1979, however, revolutionary fundamentalists who glorified the past and propagated it as a model for the future prevailed. Fukuyama sees a similarity with fascism in Europe. In his opinion, the success of this movement can be explained by the fact that Islamic countries were humiliated in the past, but also failed to successfully keep pace with modern developments.

As far as Asia is concerned, Fukuyama writes that societies there succeed in combining a market economy with a politically authoritarian tradition, with Japan and Singapore in particular coming to mind. The strong work ethic that exists there is the basis for the fact that their economies have been able to prove themselves in modern competition. The recognition of authority founded in the empty words of Confucius promotes a sense of achievement in the economy, but not individual, personal commitment in politics. The result is systems such as the decades-long rule of a single party in Japan or the presidential system of Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore.

Fukuyama was well aware of the problem of the extent to which Western values can also be universal values. In his "Global Civilisation Initiative" of March 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping clearly rejected this harmony when he demanded that "governments should not impose their values and institutions on other countries". However, "The Economist", which is certainly in favour of the supremacy of the West in the world, also expressed a similar opinion in a lengthy article on the topic of "Western values are steadily diverging from the rest of the world's" ⁽⁶⁾. It is explained that attitudes to religion, authority, family, individuality, sexual minorities and democracy are certainly characterised by the respective culture and can therefore be very different. In any case

Francis Fukuyama is generally recognised as the "herald of a better world", while he himself took a more nuanced view of the situation. Nevertheless, his political influence is very much based on the fact that official American foreign policy has found justification for its approach in his theses.

3. In contrast to his student Fukuyama, Samuel P. Huntington believed that the future of international relations would be characterised by a "clash of civilisations", which would form the basis for a new world order. In the chapter "The Cultural Reconfiguration of Global Politics", he writes that, driven by modernisation, cultural contrasts will determine world politics in the future. People and countries with similar cultures will come together. People and countries with different cultures will move apart.

While ideologies and the associated relations with a superpower determined the foreign policy orientation of a country during the Cold War, culture and civilisation will be decisive in the future.

Political borders will increasingly coincide with cultural borders: ethnicity, religion and civilisation will be decisive.

Cultural communities will replace the bloc system of the Cold War. This is why the fault lines between civilisations will be the decisive dividing lines between conflicts in the future. For example, belonging to Islam will determine a country's identity more strongly than Western institutions, which a state has often only adopted superficially.

If "international relations" or the "international order" in our history has been almost exclusively about relations between Western states, in the future we will live in a multipolar world in which other civilisations will also play a decisive role. Modernisation does not have to be synonymous with westernisation. There will be no universal standardised culture, nor will all non-Western societies adopt the Western model.

The balance of power between civilisations will change and the influence of the West will decline in relative terms. On the other hand, the civilisations of Asia will increase their economic, military and political strength.

increase. Population growth will explode in Islamic countries, which could destabilise both their own states and neighbouring countries. Non-Western civilisations can reflect more strongly on their own values.

The new world order will be characterised by the affiliation of individual countries to a particular civilisation. Societies will increasingly work together on the basis of their common cultural affiliation.

Efforts to anchor societies in a civilisation other than their traditional one will have little success. This is because states will group themselves around the leading nation in their respective civilisation.

In any case, Huntington predicts that the West will increasingly come into conflict with other civilisations such as China or Islam if it wants to continue to be the sole dominant force in the world. At the fracture points between civilisations, regional warriors may emerge, with one civilisation among those that profess to be a kind of "can establish "ties of kinship". This exists across national borders, for example when a country acts as a protective power for "its citizens" abroad.

The West must recognise that its culture is not universally adopted by all other civilisations. The West's belief in the universality of its culture is wrong, immoral and dangerous. There is cultural diversity in the world and to believe that the "Anglo-Saxon values" must prevail globally is simply not true. The belief that non-Western peoples must adopt Western values and institutions is immoral because it can only be a result of Western imperialism. This contradicts the right to self-determination and is therefore profoundly undemocratic, Huntington explains.

To what extent do the analyses of the three authors apply to today's international events, for example to Paul Kennedy's theory that "global overstretch" and great debt lead to the decline of a great power? In the 16 May 2024 edition of the New York Times alone, you can read the following article: "The U.S. is building a military arc in the Pacific".

Accordingly, the United States is building up the armed forces in Japan, on the

Philippines and Australia. Under the heading "To aid Ukraine, West eyes Russian assets", it is explained how it is planned to use Russian assets to provide more support to Ukraine. If you add the American involvement in the Middle East and Africa to this, it could be what Paul Kennedy meant by "military overstretch", i.e. the "overstretching of our own military capabilities". In any case, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell has stated: "We have expanded our overseas alliances in a way that would have been unimaginable a few years ago" ⁽⁷⁾.

At the same time, we also hear from friendly media that the USA's finances are "a disaster" ⁽⁸⁾. The national debt has risen to 96% of GDP (2023), compared to 46% in 1992. And the budget deficit in recent years has amounted to 9 % of GDP. Even the International Monetary Fund has warned that "US debt could jeopardise the stability of currencies worldwide". So has Paul Kennedy got it wrong again? Only the future will be able to provide an answer.

The "golden age" that Francis Fukuyama believed in has not yet materialised. He was largely right in that the whole world has embraced one form of capitalism or another. But the introduction of a market economy does not mean that democratic institutions have been established. On the contrary; the introduction of capitalist structural elements into their economic systems also strengthened autocrats. This led to new political and economic challenges for the United States in a multipolar world.

Nevertheless, there are still very strong forces within the US foreign policy elite that want to maintain their country's absolute leadership role in the world. For example, Fareed Zakaria recently argued in his article "The self-doubting Superpower" ⁽⁹⁾ that it was the USA that established a new international order in 1945 that has brought peace and prosperity to many in the world. And: the USA still holds the leading position in the world in key areas, with the author citing the following examples: American per capita income is 54% higher than that of Japan and 32% higher than that of Western Europeans. The

The US economy is almost twice as strong as that of the eurozone. Nine of the ten most important corporations in the world are American. The conclusion for Fareed Zakaria is that the USA should continue to maintain its leading role in the world and in the international order.

But as much as the American claim to leadership was undisputed after the Second World War, the world is no longer the same as it was in 1945, when India was still part of the British Empire and Africa was still divided between the colonial powers. It is not a question of the USA giving up its claim to leadership in a multipolar world, but of the new system being adapted to the shifts in power politics. It should be in everyone's interest for this adjustment to take place at the negotiating table rather than through war.

As far as Samuel Huntington's theories on the "clash of civilisations" are concerned, entire libraries have been written on the extent to which they are true or false. It is fair to say that he was perhaps too rigorous in his claim to absoluteness when he said that in a future world, global claims to power would be obsolete. The new world order would therefore only be determined within or between civilisations as the ruling factors.

This argument underestimates traditional power politics endeavours. These are still decisive forces in the politics of the major powers.

Huntington correctly predicted that we are entering a multipolar world order, i.e. a world with several centres of power. It is also very true that "international relations" today encompass the whole world and not just the West. When Western politicians meet today and speak of themselves as "international community", they represent just 10% of the world's population. The "Global South", as heterogeneous as its composition may be, has demonstrated political relevance time and again. Without the support of these countries, it would hardly have been possible for Russia to survive the extremely rigorous Western sanctions.

Both in the war in Ukraine and in the Middle East, a picture is repeatedly emerging that is reminiscent of a constellation of "The West against the Rest". Especially when the West now demonstratively tries to compensate for dwindling power with moral superiority, this argument also meets with resistance from others. Too often in the past, Western powers have claimed the moral high ground when it came to power politics, and continue to do so today. It is therefore no wonder that some in the Global South point to a double standard. In this sense, Samuel Huntington is also well worth reading, as are the two other authors who have attempted to create visions for a new world.

NOTES :

- (1) Paul Kennedy; The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers-Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000; Lexington Books 1988
- (2) Francis Fukuyama; The End of History and the Last Man; Penguin Books 1992
- (3) Samuel P. Huntington; The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order; Simon & Schuster 1997
- (4) Alexandre Del Valle & Jaques Soppelsa ; Vers un choc global ?; Paris 2023
- (5) Stephanie Lawson ; International Relations ; Cambridge 2003
- (6) The Economist August 3rd 2023
- (7) thThe New York Times May 16 2024
- (8) thThe Economist May 4 2024 "America's fiscal outlook is disastrous"
- (9) Fareed Zakaria; Foreign Affairs January/February 2024

(*) Dr Wendelin Ettmayer; former Member of the National Council; former Austrian Ambassador to Finland & Estonia; Canada & Jamaica; at the Council of Europe; author; www.wendelinettmayer.at