

# Global Politics and the Collapse of the Political West Divide: The Emerging New Global Landscape

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Twenty years after the collapse of the USSR, after the withering away of the Cold War, and the crumbling of the (physical) German wall, there is an emerging consensus that these events by themselves did not cause major changes in and of the international landscape. Rather, they were embedded in major tectonic shifts of global politics.

These shifts were, and still are caused by a “global causal agent” – globalization. In this context, we do not perceive globalization as a neoliberal political program of deregulation, pursued and implemented by some political groupings. Rather, it is understood as the aggregate outcome of market-related actors, behaving in their respective fields, branches and regions as rational utility maximizers, in the sense of maintaining and enhancing their respective market positions. To achieve this, they support new technologies, new tools for capital markets (like securitization), the commoditization of ever more assets, including time and space, accelerated processes and procedures. Many of these trends, once implemented, lead to shorter time horizons.

This is the underlying trend. It hardly can be fundamentally changed by political actors, certainly not on a national level.

Related to these mega-trends, there are some collateral effects – not only in the economic sphere, but also increasingly in politics, domestically and in the global scene. These are the major shifts which can be observed over the last 20–30 years and these will continue in the foreseeable future.

## 1. LESS STABILITY

The Cold War system, as it was known between 1948 and 1989, was often criticized for its inherent risks and security dilemmas. Even after its demise since 1989, one can hardly enjoy the impression of more, or better guaranteed stability. There are rather more colorful and complex conflicts, including asymmetrical ones between state- and non-state actors. And many people are still not able to make sense of what is going on globally. During the East West Conflict there was at least a handy narrative of who was standing against whom, and why. The number of actors involved was limited. With a few, but notable exceptions (1952/52 Korea, 1958/61 Berlin, 1962 Cuba), most people did not feel an immediate danger of another big war.

This relative feeling of security and certainty is gone. One of the reasons is that with the Cold War, the underlying bipolar structure has disappeared. Bipolar systems are notorious for being relatively stable, whereas unipolar systems may be stable (with a “benign hegemon”), or unstable, and multi-polar structures are rather unstable. The latter is what we are living in since 1989.

There are too many actors (state and non-state), and too many cleavages, and not enough effective rules and institutions, to manage this kind of system. Also, it is difficult to describe even for specialists, let alone for the men and women in the streets and at home. There is no simple narrative strong enough to become dominant, and to cover what is going on worldwide. There are plenty of stereotypes, but mostly they only have a partial reach.

In this sense, Fukuyama’s much belittled dictum of the “end of history” seems to be rather correct – so far. The dominant discourses are centered around economic and political markets (representative democracies). Their implementation along with a series of conflicts, though, is not a recipe for eternal happiness, but apparently, they are not yet organized around new, alternative mobilizing ideas. Alas, there may be new challenges ahead. One is a fundamentalism originating mostly from Muslim-type societies. This fundamentalism is, as in its Christian companion, is fundamentally opposed to secularism and, therefore, to core values of Western-type societies. Another future challenge may be a potentially new formula for economic-political and global governance, deliberated and developed in China. The basic

ingredients here are Confucianism and market regulation. But both are not yet concepts and they still are not credible challenges to the dominant discourses.

## 2. THE WESTPHALIAN SYSTEM.

Since 1648, when the Westphalian Peace made an end to the 30 Year War, there was a relatively stable macro-configuration of the inter-national system. This configuration rested on the existence of nation states bounded to territory. Only these entities were entitled to act as inter-national players. The core principles of this system were (internal and external) sovereignty, a monopoly of the power apparatus, and clear division between domestic and external affairs, indicated by the existence of (mostly) clearly delineated borders.

The core issues for these state actors were security and power, and the dominant currency was the military, resting upon a sizeable population and economic capabilities. The core principle was survival, according to (not only) realist thinkers. This was because governments could not rely on declarations of other governments (they never were considered to be credible), there most important preference was to prepare for the worst – war.

They followed the classical way of doing inter-national politics by maximizing economic and military power, and by building (temporary) alliances, as envisioned by writers such as Machiavelli, Morgenthau, Kissinger, Waltz, Mearsheimer, and others.

Governments, or rulers, as the representatives of nation states, expressed and pursued their “national interests”. How these national interests were defined, who was entitled to define them, where they were derived from, how to explain that different agents in one state expressed various attitudes and positions regarding one particular issue – all this was not troubling our black box or container state defenders. Allegedly, the box was black, and shut.

In the latter half of the 20th century, there was another school, the institutionalist, who shared the realists’ assumption of nation states being the only relevant players in town. But they diverged from them in assuming that

Governments may be willing to implement, maintain, enforce and preserve rules and institutions. Rules, so they said, have a lot of advantages: they make messy things potentially more predictable,

reduce costs of monitoring and control transaction costs, create mutual vulnerabilities and dependence, and thus can overcome the notorious danger of the security dilemma which is inherent in realist thinking and behavior.

Both approaches were challenged by other theories: Liberalist and Pluralist. These approaches demonstrated that the domestic dimension was much more important than both traditional schools – realists and institutionalists – assumed.

They opened the famous “black box” of societies, scrupulously kept shut by the traditional theoreticians. This was a major step forward, but the resulting theoretical and methodological suggestions were not particularly parsimonious.

Another challenge was related to the advent of the constructivist school (actually, it always was too broad and diverse to be called a “school”).

According to authors subscribing to non-positivist assumptions, reality is not a given, not exogenous, but can and will be influenced by actors trying to make sense of it. So observers, including researchers, are not neutral bystanders, but they are actively shaping what they try to understand. This happens, mostly, by communication via oral and written texts. To understand the (often) hidden or real meaning of these texts, they have to be deconstructed.

### **3. THE GRADUAL EROSION OF THE WESTPHALIAN SYSTEM**

All of these macro-approaches are in trouble when their main object of desire, the state, represented by national governments becomes weaker, or less relevant. But this is precisely what is happening. Ever more observers are registering this, but only a few can comprehend it.

A disturbing development was and is the emergence of flows. Flows, by their very nature, are floating. They neither know, nor care about borders. They make governments more often and do not look like an outdated and slightly weird director in a theater production where the piece on stage has changed repeatedly, as have the actors. But the director is still trying to organize the thing as if the old piece would still be given. This is because he does not observe the major problem as huge parts of the audiences are whistling or applauding him.

These flows, again, are not deliberately invented and sent off by some capitalists, or neo-liberal political groups. They are the result of an unbelievably effective reduction of transaction costs, the emergence of new technologies, and the ongoing search of market actors for relative advantages for investment, production, distribution, consumption and advertisement.

There are more traditional flows, like those of goods and services (though both types are today handled in a completely different way, compared to 100, 50, or 20 years ago – one may think about revolutions in logistics, transport etc.).

The same goes for flows of people, i.e. migration. Here we are observing the merger of old and new types of flows, domestic and transnational. They are today less induced by push and pull factors, but by the existence of networks, and by strategic decisions of families and clans (portfolio migration to enhance human capital investment). Of course, there are still refugees. And there is labor migration, from permanent to temporary and unskilled to skilled, and also a new type of circular permanent migration.

The two types of flows which are probably most decisive today are those of capital, and of content. There are very different categories of capital flows – credits (state to state, IO's to state, banks to state and reverse), portfolio investment, foreign direct investment (FDI), remittances, and others.

The core of the recent global financial crisis was not just the under-regulation by international organizations or states, but the ever more sophisticated nature of financial products, including loans, who are re-packaged and re-sold until even the actors directly involved have problems to properly assess the risks attached. This process of securitization is so complex that even many of those actors were clueless, let alone governments standing by, not being aware of what was going on. This ridicules the traditional notion of governments as the regulators of last resort.

Even today, after massive bail-out programs, it would be erroneous to say that the “state is back”. Governments could in a relative manner quickly mobilize huge (and, in terms of future prospects for the budgets plundered, rather problematic) amounts of cash for giving guarantees to “systemic actors”, or for bail-out operations. They were able to jump from bonfire to bonfire to throw sand at them, but this is different from strategic action. If governments (or IO's) will ever be able to anticipate innovations

in capital markets to have proper regulation timely in place, is doubtful.

The other form of flows is content-related. Here, we have basically two groups. The first one is providing information, with the Internet, intranets and data banks as the prime forms of delivery and storage. The size of these flows today is unbelievable huge. The generation and processing and storage of data, produces all kinds of problems, including that of data protection. E-related capabilities have grown into basic civilizational skills, equal to learning English. No CV will be taken seriously without elementary or, more often, advanced documentation about IT knowledge.

The second one is related to entertainment – including movies, music, TV productions like serials and soaps. These content flows are ever more relevant for transnational politics. They offer images, visions, patterns of life and consumption, of brands and “cool behavior”. These flows do have a major impact on people. They do not make them uniform, but they induce them to digest these images against the background of their respective cultural legacies. This process of adaptation, called indigenization, may produce major ruptures of identities. “Rich people also cry”, there is a lot of “sex in the city”, and housewives everywhere “desperate” – but in different contexts, making their inhabitants less content.

There are various forms for generating, storing, downloading etc. But, again, governments have a hard time to effectively control these flows.

Flows cross by their very nature borders. They do not carry passports. They are difficult to deter, and problematical to control.

#### **4. EVER MORE ACTORS ON THE PLAYGROUND**

As can be seen on the basis of the preceding parts, there are innumerable actors around today in global politics, along with states and governments.

To get some structure into this conundrum, it may be useful to put those actors into four groups: state related, market related, society related, and international.

Here are some examples:

State: governments, sub-national administrative entities (states, provinces, regions), cities (both megacities and globalizing city regions), sovereign wealth funds, etc. and even governments are

by far not unitary actors. The public choice theory has informed us that we have rather co-existing and competing fragments of bureaucracies, than a homogeneous state.

Market: Companies, Rating Agencies, Law Firms, media, legal and illegal entrepreneurs, lobby organizations, etc.

Society: NGO's, networks, including terror organizations, churches and religious communities, individuals, media, etc.

International: International Organizations (UN, EU, Shanghai Organization, CIS, WTO, World Bank IMF, G 8, G 20, Iran 6, Korea 6, etc.).

All these actors are permanently trying to influence each other, to build coalitions, to shape rules, and to protect and convince constituencies. Governments are, and remain powerful actors, but they are now far away from effectively dominating the crowded playgrounds of global politics.

## **5. MULTILEVEL GAMES AND RULES**

This term was coined for describing and understanding the way of doing politics in the EU. Here we can see that governments and other actors have to simultaneously pursue their interests at least on three different levels: on the national level, in the sense of organizing the ruling government and/ or coalition and the parties involved. On the EU level, the Council of Ministers, the Commission, and the European Parliament have to be taken care of.

But then, action has to be taken also on the subnational/ domestic level, because consensus has to be built and maintained among domestic actors and (potential) veto players. No energy policy initiative, or some move on subsidies for agriculture, or changes of oversight over banks can be imagined and engineered without having some support on the domestic front/s, including the media.

Politicians have to address, to calculate, and to target their politics, fine-tuned to all these levels and audiences. They have to calibrate and re-calibrate their messages to each of them. It goes without saying that this produces linkages, side-payments, contradictions, and opposition. Also, that voters can have all of these politics, layers and dimensions in their mind when they go and vote, is highly unlikely.

## 6. NEW POLITICAL STYLES – ADHOCISM

Allegedly, there were times when politicians enjoyed the luxury of being able to address one or two problems at a moment. They had relatively long time horizons, one or two TV stations to take care of (mostly public ones), and a stable number of political parties.

Today, there are four interrelated reasons for a fundamental change in this orderly sequence of addressing problems: overload and growing complexity; election cycles and (shorter) time horizons; acceleration; and media involvement.

The number of domestic and international issues to be taken care of in a country like Germany used to be limited. In the 1950's, it was re-armament and the question of EEC and NATO membership. In the 1960's, it was the lag of domestic reforms, and the blocked educational system, both in international cross-comparison, producing, together with historical debates and revolts at the universities. Also, the Vietnam War and the "Spiegel" scandal (actually, the F.J. Strauss scandal) kept looming over the horizon. In the 1970's, it was the "New Eastern policy", i.e. the new balance with the U.S.S.R. and Poland, and a new realignment with the GDR.

In the 1980's, the debate about armament, particularly new medium range missiles to be deployed in Europe, was dominant. At the same time, the new social movements, especially in the sphere of ecology, required attention. Then, unexpectedly, German unification came over us.

Today, in a globalized world, there are not just one or two items on the agenda. In Germany, European issues have become dominant and can be seen in the current situation where the questions of the Lisbon Treaty, future enlargement, a more robust European foreign and security policy, and a redefinition of the distribution of the EU budget have become matters of great importance. In addition, regional questions are prominent on the agenda: proliferation issues, especially in Iran and the greater Middle East in general; the future of Turkey; the apparently eternal and irresolvable Near East conflict; the issue of domestic developments and their external repercussions in the Russian Federation; how to manage the gradual decline of the United States as a geopolitical factor; and the future role of China, whose

elites seem to be still caught in a debate between accepting and shaping geopolitical ascendancy, and a reinvention of a new global landscape – something like Confucius going global.

And there are a plethora of domestic issues: a still difficult demographic trend, causing worries about labor markets and the stability of social security systems; educational systems in need of reform; a still undecided new balance of federal and regional roles in the national constitutional/ European configuration, also after the so-called federalism reform II; a cumbersome tax system; an awkward health sector; and many other items.

The astute American observer Peggy Noonan has put it in the following way:

“I refer to the sheer scope, speed and urgency of the issues that go to a president’s desk, to the impossibility of bureaucracy, to the array of impeding and antagonistic forces (the 50-50 nation, the mass media, the senators owned by the groups), to the need to have a fully informed understanding of and stand on the most exotic issues, from Avian flu to the domestic realities of Zimbabwe.

The special prosecutors, the scandals, the spin for the scandals, nuclear proliferation, wars and natural disasters, Iraq, stem cells, earthquakes, the background of the Supreme Court backup pick, how best to handle the security problems at the port of Newark, how to increase production of vaccines, tort reform, did Justice bungle the anthrax case, how is Cipro production going, did you see this morning’s Raw Threat File? Our public schools don’t work, and there’s little refuge to be had in private schools, however pricey, in part because teachers there are embarrassed not to be working in the slums and make up for it by putting pictures of Frida Kalho where Abe Lincoln used to be. Where is Osama? What’s up with trademark infringement and intellectual capital? We need an answer on an amendment on homosexual marriage! We face a revolt on immigration.

The range, depth, and complexity of these problems, the crucial nature of each of them, the speed with which they bombard the Oval Office, and the psychic and practical impossibility of meeting and answering even the most urgent of them, is overwhelming. And that doesn’t even get us to Korea. And Russia. And China, and the Mideast. You say we don’t understand Africa? We don’t even understand Canada!

Roiling history, daily dangers, big demands; a government that is itself too big and rolling in too much money and ever needing more to do the latest important, necessary, crucial thing.

It's beyond, "The president is overwhelmed." The *presidency* is overwhelmed. The whole government is. And people sense when an institution is overwhelmed. Citizens know. If we had a major terrorist event tomorrow half the country--more than half—would not trust the federal government to do what it has to do, would not trust it to tell the truth, would not trust it, period."<sup>1</sup>

A few years later, and from a different political angle, it sounds similar:

"Even before Obama's helicopter lifted off from the South Lawn, the start of his whirlwind trip to the Danish capital, Republicans were calling the effort a distraction for a president already dealing with a health-care reform bill, job losses in the economy, Iran's nuclear ambitions and a fateful decision about the U.S. military's mission in Afghanistan. The IOC's quick dismissal of Chicago only intensified the criticism."<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, all this had to be addressed against the background of a notorious over-exposure to elections, accompanied by increasing election fatigue on the side of the electorate. The political elites, alas, are caught in an everlasting and almost permanent cycle of elections – European, federal/parliament, federal/ presidential, regional and some local ones. Germany enjoys (or, rather, suffers from) the luxury of having almost 20 elections spread over four years.

This has significant and detrimental consequences for the time horizons of politicians and other decision makers. They are getting ever shorter. In other words: while the problems enumerated above require a rather medium to long term perspective, politicians are following ever shorter time horizons, bent to elections. This follows the dramatic shortening of time spans in the commercial sector, where CEO'S and managers have to produce – "positive" – reports every three months to their strategic investors.

Thirdly, we are experiencing a situation where different sub-systems of societies are developing ever faster: capital markets and

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<sup>1</sup> WSJ, October 27, 2005

<sup>2</sup> Washinton Post, October 3rd, 2009

flows, most of all; content flows and other culture-related spheres; life patterns and life cycles, also; and, up to a point, politics as well. But there is a significant “but”: to organize political decisions and outcomes, it takes a lot of time, at least in representative democracies. Processes have to be organized, actors involved, compromises negotiated and achieved, potential veto players neutralized or overcome, and procedures have to be observed. Then there may be legal options and obstacles to be overcome.

In other words: democracies are, increasingly, too slow to catch up with the problems faced.

Finally, media are playing an ever more important role in international relations and global politics. Events not fulfilling the criteria of relevant news value, or entertainment value, are not reported and, accordingly, are not taking place - in the horizon of millions of viewers and readers, ordinary people and elites alike. The so-called CNN effect is a related phenomenon.

Media and their main actors, journalists, produce images and put them into frames. Framing, supported by pictures and images, is crucial for producing images, imagination, and perceptions, and stereotypes.

How are persons applying violence to be called? Terrorists or Rebels or Freedom fighters? What do we take from black limousines delivering apparently important decision makers to an international conference? How do we assess apparently suffering “innocent” civilian victims of violence, contextualized as hosting and supporting terrorists?

The power of the media is hard to overestimate. Not in the sense of them telling politicians what to do and how to decide, but by setting the agenda of decision makers. This agenda setting role puts media – traditional print, electronic, and new virtual ones - in a decisive role for generating and shifting agendas, and for creating corridors for action by framing techniques.

Summing up, the sphere of politics is under pressure from different sides.

While electorates and constituencies are still harboring expectations, politicians and endowing them with some legitimacy, the political personnel seemingly in charge is hunting after ever more complex problems, bargaining for solutions, losing out in terms of pace, and being under duress from the media. Politics in general and global politics in particular, are losing agency.

Unlike the 20th century, Politics can no more be masterminded, engineered, implemented, executed, organized and controlled. Politics, rather, is happening, as the result of thousands of moves by a multitude of actors on different levels of action. It is looking ever more ad-hocistic.

## **7. HOW TO LIVE IN UNCERTAIN GLOBAL TIMES?**

Most people do not understand much about global politics. It is not their job to do so, to start with. It seems to be far away. It is complex, and who knows if it good for them to get involved especially with the current scenario and after 8 hours of work plus pressing family needs.

While they do not really believe anymore that national politicians can deliver (others are too far away), they still tend to support some of them, particularly those who express a sound level of optimism – like G.W. Bush in his 1st and 2nd runs for president. People should try not to get overwhelmed, but to look for linkages between the local, regional, sectoral or societal spaces they inhabit, and global trends.

Experts have to get engaged in serious new business, in exploring virtually new territories. Those analysts who are following global events and trends have to think about how to produce a reasonable re-mapping of the globe. They have to design a new cartography, where states still have their spaces after being squeezed by important classes of other, non-state actors.

Decision makers should think about how not to lose sight of the most pressing priorities. They should try to be more independent from (often too frequent) election cycles. And they should think about how to relate to those subsystems, like the finance sector, that develop much faster.

Probably, the demand that politics can be “done” has to be given up. Instead of expecting that things can be engineered, as it was the case since the Enlightenment. Politicians should reduce expectations. May be politicians can function as moderators, or as navigators. That would be much less, but it could be much more realistic. Moreover, this could be achieved – possibly.

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