

Editorial

Dear Readers,

When the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union disintegrated, it was more than just the final chord of a conflict in power politics between East and West: it was also the end of a clash between two disparate systems, two world views. The concept of the liberal market democracy had prevailed over the utopia of a communist world revolution. In the West in particular, a period of optimism began. Now that this clash of ideologies had dissolved, democracy could triumph across the globe – or so many people thought at the time.

Today, more than 30 years later, we know that many of these hopes have not been fulfilled. And anyone following the foreign policy debate in Germany will notice that one concept in particular is increasingly finding its way into discussions, evoking memories of the bloc confrontation of the Cold War: the notion of a “systemic conflict”.

Is this systemic opposition between democracy and authoritarianism the key factor shaping today’s geopolitical developments? To what extent do states outside the West share this interpretation? And should this “systemic conflict” provide the main interpretative framework in the field of foreign policy for us as Germans, Europeans and Western allies?

First of all, it is important to note that certain characteristics of the increasing confrontation between the Western states on the one hand and China, Russia and several other states on the other hand are indeed reminiscent of a systemic conflict. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that China – in the totalitarian organisation of its own state and beyond – is attempting to relativise the international standards that have emerged since 1945 with regard to human rights or the rule of law in favour of its own authoritarian standards. In other words, China today is not only seeking global redistribution of power within the existing system; it also wants to change the underlying rules of that system to our disadvantage. In view of this, we must strengthen our own competitiveness, economic independence and also our military deterrent potential and stand up resolutely for our liberal interpretation of fundamental concepts such as human rights, the rule of law and democracy in the relevant international bodies, in terms of both substance and strategy.

The rise of new major powers has always created tensions in the international order, however, and it is plausible to assume that there would be friction between the Western states that have dominated the world over the past decades and a rising power such as China even irrespective of differences in terms of political systems. And we should be more open than in the past – both to the public at home and to the outside world – about the fact that our foreign policy does not and cannot always be determined by moral considerations alone, but that it is also subject to necessities, constraints and our own interests. After all, many states outside the West have quite a keen sense of when we are “preaching water but drinking wine”, as Sabina Wölkner writes in this issue of International Reports.

Yet it is precisely these partners outside the West that we will need in the current geopolitical struggle. And here the vital question is whether or not it makes sense to view current developments primarily through the lens of a systemic conflict between democracy and autocracy – and to loudly proclaim this at every opportunity. The articles in this issue show clearly that there is reason to doubt this. Whether you read Susanne Käss’ analysis of a democratic state like Argentina, look at Lewe Paul’s article on India or consider Anna Reismann’s article on Uganda and Canan Atilgan’s on the states of North Africa and the Middle East: none of the countries in focus shows even the slightest inclination to fit into a bloc logic of any kind or to make abstract normative issues the guiding principle of their own foreign policy. This is even true of states in the South Caucasus, which are well aware that the EU and Russia stand for two fundamentally different political and social models and – like Georgia and Armenia – essentially have a clear preference for the Western model: they still shy away from taking a stand against Russia for security policy reasons, as Stephan Malerius points out in his article.

What dominates across all continents is that nations are following a pragmatic policy guided by their own concrete interests, geared far less towards fundamental principles than towards what they can achieve for themselves in the respective situation. The fact that many states avoid taking sides – either for the West or for its challengers – has varying reasons, sometimes of a historical nature. And that policy is perfectly rational from those states’ point of view. On the one hand, no one wants to join the

side that might eventually lose the global conflict, which is why many actors simply want to wait and see who “wins”. On the other hand, a nation that does not commit itself and is courted by both sides can push up the “price” for offering its support. In their foreign policy actions, not even democracies are automatically partners to the West on all issues and in some cases have considerably different perceptions and positions, for example with regard to Russia. This is true of Brazil, Mexico and India, but also of the NATO partner Turkey. Conversely, even hard autocracies are not necessarily close partners of China or Russia.

What does this mean in terms of our German and European foreign policy? Firstly, we will to some extent have to accept the sober, pragmatic – one might say “transactional” – approach adopted by many states. This requires us to undertake a realistic assessment and be open to other countries’ perspectives, interests and constraints, coupled with the ability to compare their interests with our own as we identify overlaps and then harness them consistently. As Andrea Ostheimer points out in her article, there is an overlap with many states in the defence of certain fundamental principles of the UN Charter, such as state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Here, we can forge alliances that extend far beyond the group of Western nations or even that of democratic states.

Secondly, it means we must be prepared to invest in relations with potential partner states in the long term and not just on a crisis-oriented basis. In individual cases, responding to their interests, for example in trade or arms partnerships, may entail looking beyond our own short-term economic benefit if this offers the prospect of binding the respective state closer to us politically in the medium term.

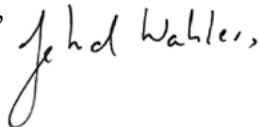
Finally, we have to recognise that while there are no “good dictators” from our point of view, as every dictatorship by its very nature restricts human rights and runs counter to what we stand for, it would at the same time be irrational to limit the circle of our potential foreign policy partners to democracies – let alone liberal democracies – from the outset. Caroline Kanter is right when she states in this issue: “when it comes to our foreign relations, not all autocrats are the same.”

There are quite a number of states in the world whose political and social systems do not correspond to our ideal, but which – unlike Russia and, increasingly, China – do not regard themselves as our adversaries or behave as such. Engaging with these countries on the basis of a purist interpretation of our values and standards is unlikely to bring any of these countries closer to our values, but it does risk driving them even further into the arms of the revisionist powers, thereby strengthening the latter’s position in terms of global power. While a pragmatic approach will not immediately turn such states into friends, it does mean that we can stay open to cooperation on those issues where there are common interests, thereby helping prevent the global balance of power from tipping in favour of China and Russia and, thus, ultimately doing better service to our values as well.

It is true that there is a global systemic conflict. In order to compete successfully within this conflict, we should bear it in mind at all times, but not constantly talk about it to third parties. We should focus more on pragmatic action and less on outward posturing and high-publicity declarations that are often aimed primarily at a receptive domestic audience.

I hope you will find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers," with a stylized, cursive script.

Dr Gerhard Wahlers is Editor of International Reports, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (gerhard.wahlers@kas.de).