

Geopolitics

## The West's values are important, but so is realism, says Finland's president

The Global South must be courted, even if that means compromising interests, argues Alexander Stubb



illustration: dan williams

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There are moments in international relations when we understand that the world is changing, but we do not yet know exactly where it is going—those moments when an era dies and a new one is yet to be born. We are living through one of them. The post-cold-war era is over. It ended with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The things that were supposed to bring us together—trade, technology, energy, information and currency—are now tearing us apart.

Interdependence did not automatically lead to peace. Market economics did not translate into free trade. Freedom did not always mean liberal democracy. The West won the cold war but failed to convince the rest of the world to adopt the values it holds universal.

In many ways this is our generation's equivalent of 1918, 1945 or 1989. The next few years will probably define the world order, balance and dynamics for the rest of the century, or at least for decades to come.

We can get it wrong, as happened after the first world war, when the League of Nations was unable to contain great-power competition and we ended up in another world war. Alternatively we can get it more or less right, as happened after the second world war with the establishment of the United Nations. It did, after all, help preserve peace among the two cold-war superpowers, America and the Soviet Union—though at the same time many countries in Eastern Europe paid a terrible price through Soviet repression and occupation. In addition, proxy and civil wars fought under the pretext of cold-war ideology saw millions of deaths in Africa, Asia and elsewhere.

Many, myself included, believed that the end of the cold war would spell the end of history—that most of the world's roughly 200 nation states would gravitate towards open, democratic and free societies. That did not happen.

Accepting reality is a good starting-point for policymaking. The era of Western domination, as we used to know it, is over. The question is how global power will be shared in the future. We are witnessing a realignment of the balance between three spheres of power: the Global West, the Global East and the Global South.

The Global West encompasses roughly 50 states, mostly in North America and Europe, plus Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. These countries are more or less democratic and actually more united than

at any time since the cold war. They want to preserve the current world order because they built the institutions and rules that support it. But in many ways those institutions fail to reflect the geopolitical realities of today.

The Global East is composed of 25 countries, led by China. The followers include Russia, Iran and a cluster of countries that tend to vote with them in the un. This group has a strong authoritarian streak and would like to see the West's wings clipped. Its members pine for a world order that is more closely aligned with their own systems of governance.

The Global South, a group of roughly 125 countries, is naturally a simplification because of its diversity. It includes democracies and more authoritarian states from three different continents. Countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, South Africa and Brazil have established themselves as swing states in a shifting balance of power.

Though this categorisation into a triangle of power is an oversimplification, it helps to illustrate how the world is changing. Demography, technology and natural resources are driving that change.

The West and the East are fighting for the hearts and minds of the South. The reason is simple: they understand that it is the South that will decide the direction of the new world order.

It would be a mistake for the West to think that the South will gravitate towards it only because of values or the power of freedom and democracy. The East would be equally mistaken to think that big infrastructure projects and direct finance buys it full influence in the South.

Ultimately, it is about both values and interests. The South will pick and choose—because it can. The West needs to start thinking about a global system where the rules and norms are not just adopted but also created by the South. It is, for instance, a historic anomaly that no permanent seats on the un Security Council go to Africa, Latin America or Asia beyond China. If the West wants to convince the South to support international institutions and rules, it must give those countries a voice where it matters.

### **The case for values-based realism**

The West has a choice. It can continue believing in an illusion that it can remain dominant, just as it has for centuries. Or it can accept the realities of change, and start behaving accordingly, especially towards the South.

To gain the South's trust, the West needs to adopt what I call values-based realism. On the one hand it should lean on values it has espoused for decades, such as democracy, human rights and international institutions. On the other hand it needs to understand that global challenges such as climate change, immigration and economic development can't be solved with like-minded states only.

It is not about compromising your values, but realising that in order to make progress you have to compromise some of your interests. At the same time it is about respecting the values and interests of others in the interest of global co-operation.

Foreign policy is about value judgments mixed in with interests. Do you sell arms to a country that is authoritarian but is fighting terrorism? Do you buy arms that are crucial for your security from a country that is waging an illegal war? Do you give development aid to a country that imprisons homosexuals?

The West is often accused of double standards. India's foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, has given us ample food for thought by noting that "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems." Indeed, perhaps the West would stand to gain from dealing with the rest of the world on an equal footing.

The countries of the South do not want to make a choice between democracy and autocracy, between the West and the East. They are driven by their own interests, and they want a relationship of equality and mutual respect.

One of the reasons that the East is a more convincing partner for the South is linked to the systematic infrastructure, finance and development programmes set up by China around the world. The strategy has been successful, though not flawless.

Values-based realism is a good starting-point if the West wants to appeal more to the South. But this needs to be combined with agency for the South—in other words, real power in the international institutions that are supposed to provide the basis for multilateral economic and political co-operation.

Uncertainty is a part of international relations. The key is to understand why change is happening and how to react to it. If the West reverts back to its old ways of direct or indirect dominance, or outright arrogance, it will lose the battle. If it understands that the South will be a big part of the next world order, it just might be able to forge both values- and interest-based alliances that can tackle the big global challenges. Values-based realism will give it enough foreign-policy space to navigate this new era.■

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