

Review of 'World in Turmoil' by Herfried Münkler

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has violated a number of rules that we took for granted, such as the respect for international borders and for the integrity of a sovereign state, not to mention the classical maxim of *pacta sunt servanda*: agreements shall be honored. The resulting war is a clear violation of the Rule-Based International Order which is a cornerstone of the relations between states, as we have become used to thinking.

The German political scientist Herfried Münkler adopts an entirely different perspective in his book 'World in Turmoil' [2] which is so far only available in its original language as 'Welt in Aufruhr' [1]. In the present article which is based on the original text, I shall describe his approach and some of the important observations that it leads to, as well as some observations of my own.

The Need for Leader States

As the title of his book indicates, Herfried Münkler addresses the problem that the world is in turmoil at present, but he also emphasizes from the start that this is not a new situation. From a European perspective, in particular, we may have lived with a comfortable assurance that the world is a benign place, but this has been due to of our parochial perspective.

Since turmoil is a recurrent phenomenon in the world, the question becomes how it can best be avoided or kept within bounds. Münkler identifies an important step in that direction that was taken by the peace agreement in Westphalia that ended the thirty-years war, in 1648. He describes it as important, not merely for having concluded a long and horrible war, but even more because it introduced a number of principles that have applied in much of the subsequent developments in Europe and beyond. The sovereignty of states, the binary distinction between 'war' and 'peace' without allowing for any intermediate condition, and the establishment of a separate set of rules for each of those two conditions whereby the behaviors of states became less unpredictable, are some of the achievements that play an important role in the account of Herfried Münkler.

One long-term consequence of this development has been that conflicts within states have tended to be replaced by conflicts between states, since it favored states

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that were relatively homogenous from religious, ethnic and linguistic points of view. To the extent that European states could evolve mechanisms for resolving their conflicts, the continent's total level of turmoil could be reduced, in principle.

However, the increase in the number of states and the increasing autonomy for each state tended to have the opposite effect as well: more inter-state conflicts arose and had to be resolved. Münkler discusses alternative 'models' for how a multitude of autonomous states can be stabilized, and he argues convincingly that this can only be done by the emergence of one or a few leader states that behave responsibly in order to promote the stability of the whole group. According to him, these leader states must be among the strongest ones in the entire multitude, both from a military point of view, and in other ways, so that they can effectively force the behavior of other states that transgress the rules that may have been established.

In particular, Münkler identifies three specific configurations of leader states that seem to work well, namely the choice of one leader state, two leader states, or five leader states. The case of one single leader state means that there is an empire; the case of two leader states with opposing interests is exemplified by the situation in the world during the cold war, and the case of five leader states is the one that he proposes as the best arrangement for the world during the rest of the 21st century.

With this view, Münkler explicitly rejects approaches that are based on an agreement between all the states in the multitude, such as the United Nations for example. In his view, the experience since the United Nations organization was formed has been quite disappointing as far as its capacity for conflict resolution is concerned and, moreover, this is just what one should have expected from the outset, exactly since this organization had neither an effective leadership nor an effective power for enforcing its decisions. Therefore, another approach must be tried if mankind shall be able to meet the very big challenges that it faces at the present time.

The Advantages of a Pentarchy or Quinquevirate

A quinquevirate is *an official group of five people, especially a council of five men sharing office or rule* (Wiktionary), and such a structure is also called a *pentarchy*. These terms arose in early Roman and Christian history, which suggests that it is a structure that has particular advantages. Münkler cites several cases in history where a group of five major states have served well for stabilizing a larger community, and at the same time he describes situations where such a group of five did not function as intended because one of its members violated the premises that such a group must be based on. The developments that led up to the WWI of 1914-1918 are analyzed as follows, in his account. During the major part of the

19th century, Europe had been stabilized by the balancing interests of Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, and Great Britain, where the first two tended to have common interests; France and Russia tended to have similar interests as well, and Great Britain often acted so as to preserve the balance of power between the others. However, the stability was violated after the turn of the century when Great Britain sensed a threat to its interests from the increasing strength of Germany; both economic and military strength. Consequently, Great Britain began strengthening its links with France and Russia whereby it abandoned its role as a balancing agent. Münkler cites this as an important part of the process that led up to WWI, and also as an example of how the members of a group of five leaders must be aware of the intricate power dynamics of such a group, at the peril of otherwise causing a breakdown of the entire structure.

Another example was from medieval Italian history where the group of five leading city-states consisted of Milan, Venice, Florence, Rome (as led by the Pope), and Naples. At one point the last four teamed up against Milan, which caused Milan to violate another rule for such a group of five: it went for help from outside, in this case from France. This opened the door for foreign interventions in Italy and led to devastating effects for the entire Italian peninsula for a long period of time.

In spite of infortunate cases such as these, Münkler refers both to historical evidence and to logical arguments in support of his thesis that five is the best size if a group of leader states are going to take joint responsibility for maintaining the stability in a region. The example from Italy indicates one important condition, however: the region must be sufficiently 'closed', so that interventions from the outside are not likely to occur. By comparison, in a group with an even number of members it will be more difficult to have single balancing agent; a group of seven would be too large since it invites too many conflicts; and a group of three would be less stable. It is easier for two to beat one, than for three to beat two.

Moreover, conditions may change as time goes by, and there may sometimes be necessary for one member of the group to retire, and for another one to enter in its place. Such a change of guard may be much easier in a group of five than in a group of three.

Two additional possibilities were mentioned above: leadership by one, or leadership by two. The problems with the first alternative are quite evident. With respect to the bipolar structure, one major problem is that this puts a lot on strain on the leaders, and they may have to resign from their role either because their resources are not sufficient for the task, or because their population does not accept the demands of that role. The recent histories of the Soviet Union and of the United States are obvious examples of this problem. If leadership by one or by two is not possible, then leadership by five remains as the most likely alternative, as proposed by Herfried Münkler.

Possible Configurations of the Great Five in the Foreseeable Future

The last chapter of Münkler's book has the title *The World Order of the Great Five*, and this title does not of course refer to the Security Council of the United Nations. He proposes that the most likely configuration of five leading states would consist of the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, and India, where India may serve both as a balancing agent and as a link to the Global South. Each of these would be associated with its own substantial handicaps in a role as one of the Great Five, but on the other hand it is difficult to see which other states would be able to play the required role. Emerging EU-like organizations in Africa and in South America are certainly not ready to take on such a role.

Can the EU and the USA Handle their Roles among the Great Five?

Herfried Münkler showed convincingly that being a leader state is not a free ride. It entails some potential advantages and some potential costs, and therefore a willingness to pursue the task even if the costs are bigger than the advantages during a period of time. It also requires an understanding of the range of admissible maneuvering as a member of the pentarchy, as illustrated by his historical examples involving Milan and Great Britain. These requirements are more demanding for democracies than for autocracies, since foreign policy is much more dependent on the public opinion in a democracy.

Furthermore, when comparing the character of foreign policy in a bipolar system (which we have had for a long time now) with foreign policy in a pentarchy, the former is much easier to grasp for the citizens in general: it can be understood in the familiar terms of enemies and friends. And finally, the belief in a rule-based international order can easily be combined with a bipolar view, in the sense that our friends respect the rule-based order and our enemies don't, but this belief will have to stand back for other considerations if and when an pentarchical international order has emerged.

It becomes an important question, therefore, whether the United States and the European Union would be both willing and able to accept the roles in the pentarchy. Two possibilities arise: either their populations will learn to understand how that system works, and how it can fail, or else the foreign policy in these leading states will be decided on the level of the government, with little regard for changes in popular opinion. The latter alternative would certainly contribute to an erosion of trust in the government.

Educating the general population about this "new" way of thinking will not be so easy, however. Herfried Münkler's book relies on many examples of alliances and conflicts between states, from classical times to the present day. But the study of History in various levels of the school system has been reduced since

the mid-twentieth century, at least in our country, and its relevance has often been questioned. Students have been heard saying that history is just concerned with "wars and such things", and that it would perhaps be interesting if they could learn about how people lived in earlier times. The belief in a peaceful future under the auspices of the United Nations may have contributed to a feeling that past wars are irrelevant today.

The corresponding situation in the United States may be different, but not necessarily any better. I sometimes read about calls for giving more attention to History in American schools, but these proposals seem to identify History with the history of the United States. The wars that are part of its history, and the presentation of them, will not likely contribute to understanding the notions that Münkler put forward in his book.

The fact that Münkler does not even mention the United Kingdom in his discussion of possible leader states is an additional reminder of how democracies may act irrationally with respect to global politics. At the present time, the UK can not realistically become a leader state by representing its Commonwealth since it disabled its presence there through its entry into what eventually became the EU, whereas the subsequent Brexit means that it can only be an adjoint state to the EU or to the USA, although of course a major one.

An Opportunity Lost

Münkler's model of the Great Five presumes that the other states in the system shall be more or less affiliated with some of the leader states, and that each leader state shall take a particular responsibility for maintaining proper order among its affiliates. The status of non-affiliated is also a possibility, but it is clear that if a powerful state is neither among the Great Five, nor affiliated with one of them, then a significant weakness in the system has occurred.

It is a very important question, then, how these affiliations are determined. Shall each state be free to form its own foreign policy with respect to affiliation, or will affiliation be imposed on some of them? Münkler begins his account with references to the Treaty of Westphalia and the sovereignty of states, and from this point of view it is obvious that each state should enjoy complete freedom in that respect.

The question of autonomous decisions has become more complicated in recent years due to the increasing use of social media for influencing the public opinion in countries other than one's own. This question will require further discussion.

Since more than ten years, Vladimir Putin has argued that the present de-facto international system should be replaced by a multipolar one, and one may imagine that a system of Great Five could emerge. However, Putin's proposal was accompanied by strong demands concerning the affiliations of a number of states

neighboring his own, and these demands were of course immediately rejected by the other interested parties. This development may be as natural as it is unfortunate, in particular since Russia did not even exist in its present form at the time of the Treaty of Westphalia (which marks the beginning of the current international system, in Münkler's account), and since it has developed since then in ways that are arguably quite different from ours. But it is an opportunity lost anyway. If the discussion about a multipolar world had been started with other premises then it might have been more constructive.

References

[1] Herfried Münkler: *Welt in Aufruhr. Die Ordnung der Mächte im 21. Jahrhundert*. Rowohlt, 2023.

<https://www.rowohlt.de/buch/herfried-muenkler-welt-in-aufruhr-9783737101608>

[2] Herfried Münkler: *World in Turmoil. The Order of Powers in the 21st Century*. Sample Translations from [1] .

<https://www.rowohlt.de/verlag/rights/book/herfried-muenkler-welt-in-aufruhr-9783737101608>