

A divided world

Power politics and welfare thinking in the international relations of the 21st century

By Wendelin Ettmayer *

STRASBOURG, France - 21st century international relations divides our world between nations practicing “Realpolitik” and those for which the personal well-being of the citizen has become the core impulse of their foreign policy.

This split is historic. Under the European state system established by the Peace of Westphalia (1648) interactions between states focused on territorial integrity, sovereignty, and power, with nations subject to no authority superior to their national interests. For more than three centuries, few questioned the legitimacy of the use of force in pursuit of those interests. To be considered “great,” from Alexander through the ages, leaders were expected to conquer other territories, increasing their personal power and imperial reach. Realpolitik, hand in glove with success at war, depended on unity in action between the soldier and the diplomat.

Realpolitik meant that territories and people could be indiscriminately exchanged by peace treaties; following the logic of a balance of power, winners gained at the expense of other states, players in a zero-sum game. Today, however, national policies are more about meeting domestic, and even global, human needs: the fight against poverty, hunger and AIDS; world population pressures; development aid and environmental protection; human rights, emancipation of women and the welfare of children.

These imperatives have broken the mould, shifting the focus to human welfare as a shaping force in international relations. Today, the scope of these challenges demands we see our world as a single cohesive unit, with problems shared. Sovereignty becomes less the point. Mass armies, dying for one’s fatherland, even the “field of honour”, all seem strangely quaint.

After the terrible suffering of both world wars, the drive to build a welfare-state, pioneered in Europe, is now the basis for legitimacy in international relations. While sovereignty remains fundamental in relations between nations, achieving the personal welfare of the individual citizen is the goal now in the ascendant. The venues for this “welfare-thinking” foreign policy include massive international conferences, involving wholly new classes of players – “stakeholders” – including NGOs, media, and multinational companies. The result is the internationalization of the welfare state, pushing that social model onto the world stage as the essential driver of international relations.

The United Nations, comprising economic and social goals since its founding in 1945, best demonstrates the globalization of this ambition. Indeed, these UN goals have since been complemented by special competences in development, trade, the environment, and the welfare of children. At about the same time, before establishment of the European Union, the Council of Europe laid the groundwork for a new international order. Seeking unity and broad international co-operation through common values, the Council of Europe granted citizens of its member states, for the

first time in history, the legal basis for pursuing their rights before an international body, the European Court for Human Rights. This is perhaps the most striking example of how the welfare of the citizen has taken center stage over the power of the state.

War, in this context, is de facto rendered unthinkable to Europeans, given the redefinition of the national interest. For most of us in the West, more so than in the developing world, from Europe and Canada to Australia, when we discuss security, we're talking about social security and pension funds. While America may take an independent, traditional view on security issues, and go to war to defend its national interests, Europeans participate in military operations as "international peace-keeping missions" where the mission of the soldier is no longer about the individual nation's foreign policy. American elections are won or lost by the promise to "make America strong again"; in Austria elections are won by those who promise to develop the welfare state even further.

To be sure, with the United States the only remaining superpower, able to conduct its foreign policy in the classical sense, waging war and concluding peace at its discretion, power politics has not disappeared. Arms spending, the international weapons trade, and the various current wars suggest many countries remain determined to follow the Realpolitik course to national glory. In this divided world, indeed, we see the paradox, at the far end of the scale, of states like Somalia and Ethiopia and their troubling take on sovereignty, allowing them, as well, to wage war at will. Everyone else, in the post-Westphalian divided world, is bound by a new dynamic, obligated to abide by the welfare-thinking imperatives uniting the international community.

*Austrian Ambassador at the Council of Europe, previously Ambassador of his country to Finland and Canada.