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**Universalism and geopolitics**




# *Universalism and geopolitics*

*Abstract:*

*The West is universalist and, since its origins, has always been so. As the European powers, and later the US, expanded throughout the world, they also westernised it.*
*In the last decade, the process has come to a halt in a trend of de-Westernization driven by the revisionist powers.*
*In the struggle for the shaping of the future international order, the Global South, which claims its legitimate participation, also opposes the use of Western values as a universal reference.*
*At present, the growing rivalry between the major powers and the much more widely distributed power throughout the planet prevents any of the parties from shaping the global system without the other parties.*

*Keywords:*

*Universalism, values, world order, West, revisionist powers, Global South*

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## Introduction

Are there universal values applicable to all humanity? What are these values? How and by whom are they determined? And are the values that the West upholds universal? These are questions that have leapt from the theoretical and philosophical realm into the realm of geopolitics and are becoming extremely relevant. Depending on how the response is articulated, so too will the strategic reaction to the great struggle between the great powers and their allies be conditioned.

There is a fairly widespread consensus that the world is going through the most dangerous time since the middle of the Cold War. Our time is being subjected to growing tensions as a result of the struggles over the configuration of the future international order. While the West defends a global system inspired by universal values, the rest of the world rejects both the Western powers' shaping of it and the determination and imposition of their value system on the rest of the world.

Since its medieval origins, the West has always had a universalist conception of the values that articulate its culture and the life of its societies. Despite the ups and downs of history, this conviction has always persisted. No other civilisation has equalled it in its conception of the equal dignity, freedom and rationality of all human beings.

In addition, for five centuries and until less than a decade ago, the world has been undergoing a process of progressive Westernisation. The overwhelming victory of the capitalist bloc over its socialist alternative led many to believe that the world was marching inexorably towards the universal adoption of the Western-inspired liberal democratic model.

In recent years, however, the process of Westernisation has come to a halt and now seems to be moving in the opposite direction. Within the Western powers, there is a prevailing view that the rule-based liberal order must be upheld. However, as Alexander Stubb, the current President of Finland, said after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the three-decade holiday from history is over and we now find ourselves in a new world disorder[1]. In addition, values and beliefs can be proposed but not imposed. In trying to do so, resistance from the rest of the world intensifies and cooperates to oppose it.

[1] Stubb, Alexander (2023) Video "From Disorder to Disruption - The New World (Dis)Order". *STG Series*, The New World (Dis)Order with Alex Stubb, 8th November. [Accessed: 2025].

This paper seeks to reflect on the deep-rooted universalist convictions of Western nations and to seek a response that, without giving up on the substance of the issue, promotes a more pragmatic international system that reverses the tune of all against the West's drive to impose its values. All this, moreover, at a time when Western societies seem to have lost the compass of their own references. It also affirms the right of all parties to participate in shaping the international system to make it properly international.

## The universalist roots of the West

Breaking with its mythological and particularistic past, since the philosophical revolution of Classical Greece, all the roots of Western culture have a universalist approach. Those Greeks began by giving the world its own name and chose the term *kosmos*, which means beauty (from which the word cosmetic also comes) and order or the beauty resulting from order[2]. From this admirable order they deduced a world governed by a natural law of universal character within a cosmic hierarchy. In opposition to the Sophists, Plato argued that both the questions of ethics (the ideals of goodness, justice, wisdom, etc.) and metaphysics are objective, universal, necessary and immutable[3].

For Aristotle, the cosmos was hierarchical and, although subject to a universal natural law, it was not egalitarian (equality does not appear in the order of nature), something which, for example, justified slavery.

The Greek tradition merged with the Christian tradition in the Roman Empire, initiating a marriage of Christian faith and Greek reason that was to last for 1,500 years. In the Middle Ages the cosmocentric world gave way to a theocentric one. At that time, both the cosmos and man were considered in relation to the creator God. Thus, the term "creation" was used instead of "cosmos" and the human being was spoken of as a creature of God[4].

The medieval world was Catholic and for Christians all human beings are brothers and sisters and children of the same God, without distinguishing between believers and non-believers. According to Christianity, it is not the fact of sharing the same faith, but the

[2] Brague, Rémi (2008). *La sabiduría del mundo. (he wisdom of the world) Historia de la experiencia humana del universo (History of the human experience of the universe).* Ediciones Encuentro. Madrid: Translated from the original French version (1999).
[3] Kreeft, Peter (2019). *Socrates' Children. Ancient Philosophers*. World on Fire Institute. Elk Grove Village.
[4] *Ibidem.*

divine filiation that is the source of the same dignity as a person for all human beings. On the other hand, the term "catholic" in Greek means universal. Thus, for both philosophical and theological reasons, the West was born on an unequivocally universalist basis. Thus, the principle of equal human dignity applied universally will be defended in the West with more force and conviction than in any other civilisation.

The Protestant Reformation broke the unity of the medieval order, but maintained the universalist vocation, although the idea of Calvinist predestination somewhat weakened the principle of equal dignity of all human beings.

At the same time that the foundations on which the *Christian republic* was based were shaken and, as a consequence of the discovery of American, new horizons were opening up to modern man, Francisco de Vitoria and the School of Salamanca gave a concrete and universal response to the new emerging global orb.

> "Vitoria gave birth to the innovative and pioneering idea that there are rules common to all nations - an international law - and fundamental rights and freedoms based on equal human rationality. [...] The theologian and jurist from Salamanca was the first thinker of the Globalisation characteristic of the modern constellation"[5].

The French Revolution broke with both the philosophical foundations of classical Greece and the theological foundations of Christianity, yet remained faithful to the universalist conception in its ideological premises as an emancipatory process with a global vocation.

However, the modern West is not a monolithic reality and a variety of worldviews coexists within it: some transformative, questioning themselves as they evolve, and others traditional. Jacques Barzun insists that the idea of Western culture as a solid block with a single meaning is contrary to the facts, "the West is the mestizo civilisation par excellence, [...] it is unity combined with diversity". It is best defined as "an innumerable sequence of opposites: in religion, in politics, in art, in morals and customs that survive beyond the first moment of conflict"[6].

[5] Beneyto, José María (2024). *La Conquista, el imperio y la paz. (Conquest, empire and peace). Vitoria and Erasmus before Charles V.* Chair. Madrid:

[6] Barzun, Jacques (2001). *From dawn to decadence. five hundred years of cultural life in the West (from 1500 to the present day). an X-ray of the Western soul*. Taurus. Original in English (2000).

Universalism, however, remains a characteristic of Western culture to this day. When in these countries, even in the plurality of their conceptions, philosophising or discussing human issues in depth, it is always done with a global perspective and its scope does not distinguish one culture or race from another.

No other civilisation makes such a categorical statement on this matter. Perhaps Islam comes closest to it. In the case of China, we see how its Communist Party speaks of socialism "with Chinese characteristics" and uses the same "refrain" for many other categories, considering that what is appropriate for China is not necessarily appropriate for the rest of the world. In countries with an Orthodox tradition, the national character of religion blurs the universalist interpretation of Christianity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was a moment of great lucidity, an astonishing and hopeful achievement which, although clearly Western-inspired, enjoyed a very broad consensus.

## The progressive Westernisation of the world

In addition to conceiving the world in universal terms, the small kingdoms of the Old Continent spread throughout the world in a process of progressive Westernisation.

Since the 16th century, thanks to the dominance of the great oceans and the establishment of trade routes across them, European kingdoms began a process of increasing Globalisation that, for the first time in history, brought the populations of Asia and Europe into direct contact with each other, as well as, logically, with the Americas and, in time, with Africa.

Thanks to the Scientific Revolution, which began in the middle of that century, the European powers moved ahead of the rest of the world in innovation, giving them a significant material and military advantage. Before the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the European empires had taken control of the Americas and large parts of Oceania and Asia, incorporating into their spheres of influence territories that had previously been tributaries of the Chinese Empire.

China, Korea and Japan resisted Western influence but, by the mid-19th century, eventually gave in to British and US gunboats. From then on, every society that wanted

to modernise, starting with Japan, did so following the patterns set by Western societies.

The world adopted its ideas and practices. Thus, the major references that articulate the international community are of European origin: customs such as the way of dressing, political concepts such as the State, instruments of relations such as diplomacy, methods of knowledge such as Science, means of travel such as the aeroplane, artistic expressions such as cinema, English as the *lingua franca*, etc.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the overwhelming material strength of the Western powers allowed them to eventually divide up the world until the World Wars, and the consequent weakness of the metropolises, favoured the process of decolonisation.

After the last of those great Wars, the world was divided into two rival and irreconcilable views. The abrupt end of the Cold War created a mirage that made it seem that Globalisation, Westernisation and Modernisation were equivalent categories and that history was marching inexorably towards the universal adoption of the Western-inspired liberal democratic model, which Fukuyama called the "end of history".

As a consequence, the interpretation that identifies the principles that the West stands for with a broader worldview has gained wide currency in Western societies.

> "The Westernisation of the world tends to merge into a broader global agenda in which it loses its Western contours and in which extra-Western and even anti-Western actors must necessarily participate. This approach confronts us with the paradox that, to the extent that Western values triumph and become universalised, they cease to be properly Western"[7].

The weakness of this approach is that few outside the West understand it in this way. Moreover, since the end of the previous decade, it has become clear that the Westernisation of the world has not only come to a halt, but seems to be moving in the opposite direction. Thus, in 2020, the Munich Security Conference entitled its report "Westlessness", showing that the illusion of a world globalised according to Western standards has faded.

It was clear that in the Islamic world, with a wide variety of cases, there was great resistance to Western values, but these were less influential countries and the successful

[7] López-Aranda Jagu, R (2020). "El futuro de Occidente en el orden global" (The future of the West in the global order). *Panorama Estratégico,* IEEE [Accessed: 2025].

democratisation of some of these countries suggested that the tide might be turning. The key was therefore what happened in China, a huge country with a central position in Asia that is set to continue to grow and gain global influence.

The Chinese Communist Party had long ago taken the decision to modernise without westernising itself, by relying on its own history and culture, taking only partial aspects from foreign models. However, there was a conviction in Western societies that, in order to fully modernise, Beijing would eventually have to democratise.

> "For decades, the conventional wisdom in the United States held that it was only a matter of time before China would became more liberal, first economically and then politically. We could not have been more wrong—a miscalculation that stands as the greatest failure of U.S. foreign policy since the 1930s. How did we make such a mistake? Primarely by ignoring the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party. Instead of listening to the CCP's leaders and reading its key documents, we believed what we wanted to believe"[8].

## Reaction from the rest of the world

All these previous disquisitions are now of major geopolitical relevance because we are witnessing a struggle for the shaping of the future international order[9] and the recognition or rejection of universal values is a substantial part of this dispute. To the intense rivalry between the USA and the revisionist powers, China and Russia, with their respective alliance systems, other powers and regions are also demanding for their voices to be heard.

Within the Western powers there is still talk of defending a rules-based liberal order, even though this has been superseded by the emergence of a multipolar world. Already in 2019, the *IISS Strategic Survey* stated that "a global rules-based order is now clearly deposited in the banks of Western strategic nostalgia"[10].

[8] O'Brien, Robert C. (2020). "How China Threatens American Democracy". *Foreign Aff*airs, 21 October. [Accessed: 2025].
[9] *US National Security Strategy*. The White House, October 2022. Available in: 8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf.
[10] "Strategic Survey" (2019). *IISS.*

The West, which has long enjoyed undisputed supremacy, can no longer determine the international system on its own. Trying to do so is a futile and counterproductive effort because, as the facts show, it pulls much of the rest of the world in the opposite direction.

Samir Puri in his recent book *Westlessness: The Great Global Rebalancing* argues that it is undeniable that the West has lost power and influence over the rest of the world and while it will continue to have great weight in global affairs, it will not regain the degree of dominance it enjoyed until a few years ago[11]. The process of loss of relative power is likely to continue, further conditioned by unfavourable demographic trends in most Western societies. The US is the big exception[12].

In contrast to the Cold War, when strategic alignment was based on ideological positioning, today's opposition to the West is based on very different, and in many cases opposing, worldviews. What unites them all is the idea that each society has the right to choose its own reference values without outside interference and the determination that the other regions of the world must be included in the shaping of the future international system.

Moreover, Western values are interpreted as a form of domination, which is true to a large extent. Those who impose or determine values gain power and influence over others.

This has led Beijing and Moscow to find indirect support in the nations of the Global South to resist the strategic designs of Western powers. Both capitals also strive to foster anti-Western resentments from the imperialist and colonialist era in those nations.

Raja Mohan warns:

> "The Global South encompasses countries with such varied interests and ideologies that the term may no longer be a useful tool. However, if the Western world hopes to counter the growing aggression of Russia and China, rebuilding strong relations with these countries is more important than ever[13].

[11] Puri, Samir (2024). *Westlessness: The Great Global Rebalancing.* Hodder & Stoughton, London.
[12] EBERSTADT, Nicholas (2024). "The Age of Depopulation: Surviving a World Gone Gray". *Foreign Affairs*, 10 October. [Accessed: 2025].
[13] Calduch, R. (2023). "Engaging With the Global South. Foreign Policy. Global Reboot podcast, 8 December.

Brzezinski had already anticipated in 2008, in what he called *The global political awakening*[14], the geopolitical importance that the developing world was acquiring:

> "Just as the French Revolution made the whole of French society aware of its political role, the revolution of Globalisation has, for the first time in history, made most of humanity politically active, politically aware and politically interconnected".

In this way, the nations of the new South have become aware that they are subjects and not just objects of the international system and want to participate in shaping it.

A further problem is that in order to claim that values are universal, at least one of the following two conditions must be met: they must be considered as such by a significant majority of the world, or they must rest on a solid foundation of global validity based on the equal dignity, freedom and rationality of all human beings.

Well, the first condition is obviously not met, and for the second condition to be met it would be necessary for the values that the West defends to be permanent, which is not the case either. On the contrary, Western values, beyond their own internal diversity, have undergone an important evolution that has accelerated in recent decades.

Certainly, the dominant view in Western societies is that, starting from Kant, values are determined from the moral autonomy of the individual. Thus, in the same way that they are established, they can also be modified, making societies progress. Two objections can be raised to this approach: on the one hand, progress is a rather plural concept and it would be necessary to agree on who determines it or to grant the West the principle of infallibility; on the other hand, it cannot be claimed that, by confusing the part with the whole, the rest of the world accepts that the will autonomously manifested within Western societies must necessarily have universal scope. If so, all nations would be hierarchically subordinated to the Western moral benchmark, which is precisely what the rest of the world is resisting.

Another weakness of the West's universalist vocation is that it is contradictory to its prevailing philosophical relativism. Alexander Dugin, for example, exploits this in his *Fourth Political Theory*[15]. Taking from Western post-modernism the idea that truth is relative, it

[14] Brzezinski, Zbigniew (2008). «The global political awakening». *The New York Times*, 16 December.
[15] Dugin, Alexander (2013). *La Cuarta Teoría Política (The Fourth Political Theory*). Nueva República, Barcelona.(New Republic, Barcelona). Translated from Russian into Spanish (2009). Available at: Aleksandr Duguin - The Fourth Political Theory : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive.

claims Russia's right to have its own truth, different from that of the West and elsewhere in the world. From this perspective, he interprets Russia as the leader of a broad space of Russian civilisation and the world as a diverse group of civilisations resisting Western universalism.

In addition, ideological differences within the West are becoming more pronounced with disputes becoming increasingly acrimonious, leading to extreme polarisation. In the US There is even talk of a dysfunctional society:

> "Two-thirds of Americans believe the country is on the wrong track, and nearly 70 percent rate the economy as “not good” or “poor.” Public trust in government has fallen by half, from 40 percent in 2000 to just 20 percent today. Love of country is fading, too, with only 38 percent of Americans now saying patriotism is “very important” to them, down from 70 percent in 2000. Congressional polarization has reached its highest point since Reconstruction, and threats of violence against politicians have surged. Former U.S. President Donald Trump faced two assassination attempts en route to reclaiming the White House [...] Some scholars draw parallels between the United States and Weimar Germany. Others liken the United States to the Soviet Union in its final years—a brittle gerontocracy rotting from within. Still others argue that the country is on the brink of civil war"[16].

This not only makes it difficult to recognise what Western values really are, but also undermines both their universal character and their appeal to other societies.

**Possible response**

The world has become much more complex and, as indicated by the GDP PPP of the major powers (figure 1), increasingly power-sharing. The revisionist powers are ready to do battle if it is offered to them and the Global South does not want to be dragged into the squabbles between the warring blocs. Most actors are reinforcing their own identity, with a clear rise of nationalism, in some cases with nostalgia for an imperial past.

Mistakes made in the strategic management of this global disorder will have far more serious consequences because of the context of rivalry and war that surrounds us. As a

[16] Beckeley, Michael (2025). "The Strange Triumph of a Broken America: Why Power Abroad Comes With Dysfunction at Home". *Foreign Affairs*, 7 January.

general rule, do not fight battles that you are not going to win. We must begin by accepting that we live in a time that is substantially different from the previous one, in a period of transition towards an international system that has yet to be defined, subject to the turbulence of a process of gestation.

| | Country | IMF at 2424 | World Bank in 2023 | CIA in 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***World*** | ***185-677-122*** | ***184-653-679*** | ***165-804-000*** |
| 1 | China: | 37-070-000 | 34-643-706 | 31-227-000 |
| 2 | EEUU | 29-170-000 | 27-360-935 | 24-662-000 |
| 3 | India | 16-024-460 | 14-537-383 | 13-104-000 |
| 4 | Russia | 6-910-000 | 6-452-309 | 5-816-000 |
| 5 | Japan | 6-570-000 | 6-251-558 | 5-761-000 |
| 6 | Germany | 6-020-000 | 5-857-856 | 5-230-000 |
| 7 | Brazil | 4-702-004 | 4-456-611 | 4-016-000 |
| 8 | Indonesia | 4-661-542 | 4-333-084 | 3-906-000 |
| 9 | France | 4-360-000 | 4-169-071 | 3-764-000 |
| 10 | United Kingdom. | 4-280-000 | 4-026-241 | 3-700-000 |

Figure 1. GDP of the major powers in purchasing power parity (PPP), those of western alignment in light blue. Source: developed by author

In these circumstances, what is essential is to recover coherence within societies themselves, and it is there that the effort to preserve and develop Western values must be focused. Without renouncing the universalist vocation, the West's paternalism would have to give way to an attitude of regeneration, exemplarity and virtue as the main mode of influence, being patient and trusting that, when the storm passes, the best models will eventually prevail.

A priority should be to rebuild trust and complicity with large regions of the world, whose main concern is the development of their own societies. This requires much more empathy and bringing the relationship to an equal footing based on the common grand challenges and legitimate interests of the parties. A minimum consensus can be a good way to start. Where differences are insurmountable, a formula for coexistence should be sought with confidence-building measures to prevent rivalries from growing further. All this without losing faith in humanity and in the existence of universal values based on the dignity and equality of all human beings.

## Conclusion

Western societies are universalist. This has been the case from its medieval European origins and their classical and Christian roots to the present day. Likewise, since the 16th century, the European powers, and later also the United States, have been westernising the world as they dominated it. Their values and models were increasingly adopted on an ever wider scale, making Globalisation, Modernisation and Westernisation appear to be equivalent categories.

However, this process has come to a halt and the world now seems to be moving in the opposite direction. China and Russia's fierce opposition to the unipolar international system, in place until a few years ago, has resulted in an acrimonious multipolar system.

In the struggle to define the future world order, the Global South claims its place in the sun and opposes its configuration according to Western parameters and benchmarks.

Nevertheless, the Western powers, based on their universalist convictions, do not renounce their democratic values as the benchmark for the future global order.

The fact is that the world is becoming more complex and power is much more distributed. None of the constituent parties, not even a large bloc grouping all Western nations and their closest allies, could shape the international system without bringing the other actors into the process.

To persist in this will only continue to bring the rest of the world closer together to resolutely oppose the Western design. Perhaps the time has come to change strategy, to look at the rest of the world on an equal footing and, without renouncing the universalist vocation, to seek a minimum consensus on which to build a possible international entente. The deep internal divisions within the West, stemming from disagreements over values, make this all the more urgent.

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