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A perspective from Asia on the global order: the importance of global understanding

Una perspectiva desde Asia sobre el orden internacional: la importancia de la comprensión global

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Abstract: With the Western order in crisis, the centre of gravity in terms of demographics and global trade has shifted to Asia. But this geopolitical area did not define the current world order nor is there an alternative yet. The non-Western Rest no longer shares a Western perception of geopolitics that thwarts its own development. Growing neonationalism and the prioritisation of domestic policy favours geostrategic rivalry, obstructing cooperation and a constructive international dynamic on every front. Contradictory ways of defining the terms of the debate lead to discrepancies that hinder the resolution of conflicts. From a constructivist approach, it is necessary to deconstruct the discourses on geopolitical power, which have been hijacked by realism. Understanding the underlying political philosophies of the Rest could facilitate a constructive debate on the nature of the emerging world order and how it might be organised.

Key words*: g*eopolitics, world order, strategic autonomy, systemic rivalry, civic discourse, the West versus the Rest, Asia, international relations

Resumen*: En un orden occidental en crisis, el centro de gravedad demográfico y comercial mundial se ha desplazado a Asia; sin embargo, esta área geopolítica no ha definido el orden mundial existente ni aún hay alternativa. El Resto no occidental ya no comparte una percepción occidental de la geopolítica que frustra su propio desarrollo. El creciente neonacionalismo y la priorización de la política doméstica favorecen la rivalidad geoestratégica, obstaculizando la cooperación y una dinámica internacional constructiva en todos los frentes. Las formas contradictorias de definir los términos del debate causan desajustes que impiden la resolución de los conflictos. Por eso, desde un enfoque constructivista, es necesario deconstruir los discursos sobre el poder geopolítico, secuestrados por el realismo. La comprensión de las filosofías políticas subyacentes del Resto podría facilitar un debate constructivo sobre la naturaleza del orden mundial emergente y cómo este se podría organizar.*

Palabras clave*: geopolítica, orden mundial, autonomía estratégica, rival sistémico, discurso cívico, Occidente frente al Resto, Asia, relaciones internacionales*

The world is between orders and adrift

The world's demographic and commercial centre of gravity has shifted to Asia, but Asia did not define the existing world order. The West's order is in crisis, but no alternative has yet emerged. The Rest no longer share a Western perception of geopolitics that thwarts their own development. Neonationalism and the prioritisation of domestic politics favour geostrategic rivalry and stymie cooperation for global public goods and constructive international dynamics on all fronts. Many of the Rest see the war in Ukraine as a local European problem, even though its geoeconomic consequences are global. When Lula met with Xi Jinping in April 2023, they discussed trade and carbon credits, not the war in Ukraine (Pozzebon, 2023).

Realists say that universal moral principles do not apply to International Relations, but they also try to justify hegemonic dominance of the world order by providing global public goods. In the past, a *Pax Americana* did favour developing countries, but it no longer does. For the Rest, the neoliberal world order the West defines and defends is self-serving. China and India have become the major powers among the Rest. In the following analysis, neither "the West" nor "the Rest" are homogeneous monolithic concepts, as differing foreign policy priorities between the EU and the US or India and China or China and Southeast Asia make clear. The terms are used for convenience only, to abstract a theoretical model. For the Rest, the concepts of world order developed and defended by the West have become obsolete.

The twenty-first edition of the CIDOB's "War and Peace in the 21st Century" conference (11 March 2023) debated the question "China and the US: Can Bipolar Confrontation Be Avoided?" with experts from the US and the EU, on the one hand, and from China and India, on the other. Bonnie S. Glaser, of the American German Marshall Fund, argued that Western countries conceive of a liberal democratic world order with global norms and Western alliances to preserve peace. She described strategic competition between China and the US as a clash between democracies and autocracies. On the other hand, Shivshankar Menon, of India's Centre for Social and Economic Progress, declared that this order had neither been liberal nor democratic, highlighting the fact that most countries in the world do not share the "Western" perception of the geopolitical order because it does not function for them. For Pol Morillas, Director of CIDOB, the debate described "an age of global disorder due to current geopolitical tensions and based on domestic pressures on foreign policies, revisionist powers, a mindset of pursuing national interests, eroded multilateralism, and spheres of influence being strengthened at the expense of global cooperation", even though "global challenges remain transnational" and global conflicts need to be managed (Morillas, 2023).

From Menon's point of view (2022), the countries of the Global South "have steadily lost faith in the legitimacy and fairness of the international system" because the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization, and G-20 have failed "to act on issues of development and … the debt crisis plaguing developing countries—a crisis made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and food and energy inflation caused by the Ukraine war" (the debt crisis affects over 53 countries according to the IMF). That economic failure "is compounded by the record, just in this century, of serial invasions, interventions, attempts at regime change, and covert interference engineered by major powers", of which "Russia's invasion of Ukraine is only the most recent and egregious example of such violations of national sovereignty, but many Western powers have also been guilty of these actions". This has caused "many developing countries to feel even more insecure and to doubt the international order" (ibidem).

The liberal democratic world order has neither been liberal nor democratic for most of the countries in the world.

Menon sees the old order disintegrating while a new one struggles to be born: "The world is between orders; it is adrift". He attributes an advantage to "states that clearly understand the balance of forces and have a conception of a cooperative future order that serves the common good" (ibidem). He also finds symptoms of revisionism regarding the existing world order among all the major powers, the US and the EU as well as Russia and China, but "none of the significant revisionist powers, each of which wishes to change the international system, has a compelling vision of what that change might be (…) do not yet offer an alternative, or one that is sufficiently attractive to others", nor is "the rapidly shifting balance of power likely to provide the basis for a stable order for some time", so they "will probably muddle along from crisis to crisis as their dissatisfaction with the international system and with one another grows" (ibidem). The West reverts to neonationalism to conserve its dominance in the emerging world order while the Rest defend achieving their fair share on nationalist grounds. As a response, Menon proposes cooperation among willing partners on specific issues as an antidote for the neonationalism that thwarts wider multilateral cooperation.

Asian perspectives on the war in Ukraine and the emerging world order

The current world order being precipitated by the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine and the NATO-led response is not the new world order that China hoped for, even though China has been promoting an alternative model to the existing world order. A geoeconomic power shift has occurred and the global landscape emerging from it represents the end of five hundred years of world dominance by the West. The US and EU response to the war in Ukraine seems to be offering the US, through NATO, an opportunity to re-forge a world order subordinated to US leadership and interests. Even so, uncertainty about the constancy and reliability of the US as a world leader (from NATO's point of view) or fear of its hegemonic power (from the point of view of Russia and China and developing countries) has eroded America's moral authority in international relations. "America First" and neoisolationism could return to power because the Republican Party, the main opposition party in the US, continues to endorse populist nationalism and white supremacy, as well as protectionism and exceptionalism. At the same time, Vladimir Putin's return to a nineteenth century "Great Powers" vision of the world order as a response to NATO's abandonment of the "Yalta Agreement" that cemented a post-World War II order is not the alternative that China wants. In any case, the common element all around is the prioritisation of neonationalism and domestic politics over international cooperation and respect for multilateral rules and institutions.

A geoeconomic power shift has occurred and the global landscape emerging from it represents the end of five hundred years of world dominance by the West.

Russia has historically considered itself to be European, even though most of its territory is in Asia. China wants to construct a Euroasiatic order through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Europeans and Asians seemed to be converging across the Eurasian land mass for which the BRI promises an inevitable flood of investment that will create a flourishing Eurasian commercial system, but the war in Ukraine and the sanctions proposed against Russia impede this process, to the annoyance of potential beneficiaries.

Even though, the US and the EU often quote the "no limits friendship" alluded to by a Russia-China Joint Statement (USC US-China Institute, 2022) issued before Russia invaded Ukraine, the reality is that relations between Russia and China have historically been difficult, and China stated quite clearly that this friendship was not a conventional military alliance. Xi Jinping's visit to

Moscow in February 2022 demonstrated that China is now the greater power among both. China will not take kindly to attempts to enforce sanctions on Russian raw materials that are crucial to China's development. Although the joint statement went out of its way to criticise attempts by "certain States" to "impose their own 'democratic standards' on other countries", to "monopolize the right to assess the level of compliance with democratic criteria", and to "draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology (…) by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience" (USC US-China Institute, 2022), China does want to maintain a rules-based world order conducive to trade. This is another reason why China cannot endorse Russia's actions: they are provoking global economic shocks that are highly unwelcome.

The Russia-China Joint Statement proposed to "strongly uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and the existing post-war world order" (USC US-China Institute, 2022). The Cold War froze in place one aspect of that outcome — the Yalta agreement. The fall of the USSR eroded that example of Realpolitik. The Warsaw Pact disappeared but NATO expanded. China is a nervous observer of this process. NATO's perception of its sphere of interest runs from Vancouver to Vladivostok and it contemplates the accession of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea to a North Atlantic pact that has intervened in wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. It is not hard to see in NATO's development in the aftermath of the Cold War an ambition to create a worldwide alliance dominated by the US. It is also not hard to see that such an alliance would contain rather than engage Russia or China, giving both countries reason for concern. The presence of US missile systems in Eastern Europe and East Asia, as well as the AUKUS agreement between Australia, the US and the UK, and US withdrawal from disarmament treaties, all lend credence to this concern. None of this justifies the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but it does help to contextualise China's response to the invasion.

The war in Ukraine seems to be offering NATO an opportunity to re-forge a world order subordinated to US leadership and interests.

The Russia-China Joint Statement also proposed to "promote more democratic international relations, and ensure peace, stability and sustainable development across the world". Implicit in this catalogue is a criticism of a world order dominated by the US and the EU in the voting systems of the Bretton Woods institutions. This insistence on "genuine multipolarity", "more democratic international relations" and the right to "sustainable development", chimes with the wishes of much of the rest of the developing world as well.

Although the invasion of Ukraine is a clear violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity that China can neither justify nor defend, it also cannot align itself with a US-dominated NATO that it sees as an instrument of US hegemony either. The situation is fluid, but China's equidistant stance would prefer a return to a pacific rules-based world order founded on a balance of power that favours neither NATO nor Russia. Hence China's agreement with Russian opposition to NATO's expansion, but not with Russia's actions in Ukraine. China has abstained on UN resolutions critical of Russia that it could have vetoed and has offered to act as a mediator in the conflict. Such a stance is probably more in tune with the attitude of the rest of what was once called the Third World — the largest part of the world's population (a significant part of which has abstained from voting on several NATO-led UN resolutions about the war in Ukraine) — as long as China itself does not exhibit hegemonic tendencies.

China's reluctance to follow NATO's lead on the war in Ukraine is shared more widely among the Rest. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting in May 2023, Indian Foreign Minister Subhramanyam Jaishankar emphasised the problematical disruption of global supply chains caused by the war in Ukraine, saying that this hits developing nations the hardest, and called for a greater role for the Rest — "With more than 40% of the world's population within the SCO, our collective decisions will surely have a global impact". SCO representatives called for a reduction of the dominance of "Western-led global institutions and alliances". Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang said that "the world is faced with multiple crises and challenges featuring a resurgence of the Cold War mentality, headwinds of unilateral protectionism, as well as rising hegemonism and power politics", and accused the US of trying to contain China's economic and military rise, while calling upon the support of SCO members for "safeguarding sovereignty, security and development interests", and to "oppose external forces interfering in regional issues" (Pathi, 2023)

Geostrategic analyst Parag Khanna (2017), of the National University of Singapore, has written that there is a "false subconscious assumption" that impedes US strategic thinking. "American officials and intellectuals speak about accommodating China's rise as if the global system has an entrenched essence that prefers American leadership". US conservatives believe that "either restraint or containment can ensure the longevity of American primacy" while US liberals believe that "the binding character of Western institutions is the source of America's de facto centrality to world order". For Kanna, neither approach is valid because they are "normatively focused on what the U.S. should do without first appreciating the dynamics driving the system, the forces beyond its singular control". As an alternative paradigm, he proposes "global strategic thought" because "the deepest attributes of our complex global system are a growing entropy (de-concentration of power) … Globalisation

diffuses power and resists centralisation. It is a world of symmetry, not hierarchy". No single power can impede the dynamics of this system. "If America doesn't do trade deals, others will. If maritime passageways such as the Suez Canal are blocked, shippers will use the Arctic. If the World Bank won't finance a project, China will. If American banks won't do business with Russia, Chinese ones will". Khanna's approach emerges from a more broadly based geographical, historical, and cultural perspective than that of western neoliberalism (ibidem).

Meanwhile, the EU debates its own need for "strategic autonomy" to avoid being squeezed between two hegemons of the US-China rivalry. European priorities do not always coincide with US priorities. Europe shares the same landmass as Asia and trade with China and the Rest is fundamental to the EU's interests. At the same time, the EU is wary of China. In a talk entitled "Human (In)Security in an Unsettled World", the Irish Foreign Minister Mícheál Martin (2023) summarised the perspective of a neutral EU member state that is not a member of NATO. He said that the West's "traditional understanding of the concept of security (…) one focused mainly on military capabilities and readiness to manage interstate conflict" must adapt to "a multi-faceted reality, which encompasses protection from pandemics, from climate crises, from violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, from economic shocks, from cyber or hybrid threats". While recognising that "China's worldview is different from ours [from the EU]. Our interests and values differ", and this reality "will inevitably shape how we engage with one another", the EU and China should "work constructively together; addressing climate change, advancing sustainable development, ensuring the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, building a fair and open global trading and investment system". He cited Ursula Von der Leyen's call for "de-risking but not de-coupling", for "developing our economic and systemic resilience, to in turn protect our values and interests", but said this "does not mean turning our backs on an economic, diplomatic and cultural relationship with China" (Martin, 2023; Von der Leyen, 2023).

Common consensual rules to construct a binding rules-based world order

At the "War and Peace in the 21st Century" conference, Shivshankar Menon also analysed the dysfunctions caused by contradictory ways of approaching geopolitical problems due to the terms of the debate being used, giving as an example the difference between India and China confronting the problem of a "border conflict"

versus their defence of "national sovereignty" or "territorial integrity". The former can be negotiated, the latter cannot. The deconstruction of Realpolitik power discourses requires a Social Constructivist approach to recover a debate hijacked by Realism.

I participated in a closed-door session at Copenhagen Business School a few years ago involving experts from a Chinese Communist Party Central Committee think tank and European experts. The working language was English, but all participants knew Chinese. At one point an internal debate broke out among Chinese experts about the term "meritocracy" that the Europeans used in English. Several different Chinese terms were possible translations of the English term, all with different connotations, and none exactly equivalent to the English connotations. This often happens in the case of Chinese. It became clear that we needed to step back and clarify in a consensual and shared way exactly what each part meant to say. In practice, this requires the development of new terminology that breaks down the schemas and biases that each side brings to the debate (again, "border conflict" versus "sovereignty/territorial integrity").

Another example might be the difficult nature of Irish–Northern Irish–British negotiations that must resort necessarily to "constructive ambiguity" to move forward, changing the metaphors and terminology used to define the conflict ("United Ireland" versus "Shared Island", or "union of Ireland" or "shared sovereignty"). Conflict resolution processes often resort to discourse modification as well. This requires, on the one hand, the analysis and interpretation of the civic discourse and the rhetoric that construct sovereignty and identity in the field of international relations and foreign policy, and of the consequences of this analysis and interpretation for the formulation of foreign policy. On the other it requires the adoption of a communicative strategy that should be fully cognizant of and sensitive to the criteria of the other's own identity, worldview, and moral order as well as one's own. Any other discourse will be perceived to be unilateralist and exploitative.

Jürgen Habermas (1996) developed a theory of civic discourse that could impose binding rules on debate and subsequently bind behaviour that might be extended to international relations. Minmin Wang (2002, 308), advocates establishing "a set of negotiable yet binding communicative rules and values, [and] world opinion [that] would both allow civic discourse and act as the binding power of an international norm". Such an approach to world peace would require "that we must first acknowledge the differences in moral orders on both sides, but then also move beyond this to realize the common ground on which both sides stand" (ibidem).

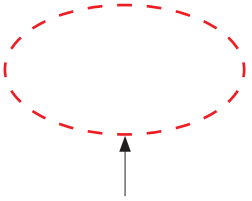
Western observers of social and political phenomena of the Rest run the risk of committing strategic errors when they take an *a priori* and prescriptive approach by applying theoretical models contingent on Western history and development as if they were universal models. By searching for — and not finding — evidence that would correspond to the predictions of their modernisation theories, they tend to

conclude that the Rest must be doing things wrong and need to conform to Western expectations. As a result, they fail to appreciate things that are happening among the Rest. This failure is a form of epistemic insouciance, a lack of concern about whether beliefs are supported by facts, or worse, a form of epistemic malevolence, an attempt to undermine knowledge, a strategy of misinformation or propaganda (Cassam, 2018). It is also a case of preaching to the converted, of telling people what they already believe and want to hear (confirmation bias). Any attempt to promote a dialogue on the nature of the emerging post-liberal democratic world order without falling into the trap of epistemic insouciance or confirmation bias would require more collaborative international and multicultural efforts to promote and build better mutual and common knowledge and understanding.

I have been constructing a theoretical model for comparative cross-cultural studies that might offer some relevant guidelines.[1] Hans Georg Gadamer proposed the concept of a "horizon", a shared repertoire of cultural referents or references, that is common to everyone who forms part of a given sociocultural group in a given place in a given era (Gadamer, 1975). Members of such a group will share the same cultural references within (but not beyond) their horizon. By sharing these cultural references, they participate in the intertextuality of their own culture's texts or semiotic manifestations in a social construction of their shared reality. They also share a common ideology and geopolitical worldview (see Figure 1):

Western observers of social and political phenomena of the Rest commit strategic errors by applying theoretical models contingent on Western history and development as if they were universal models.

Figure 1. Cultural Horizon

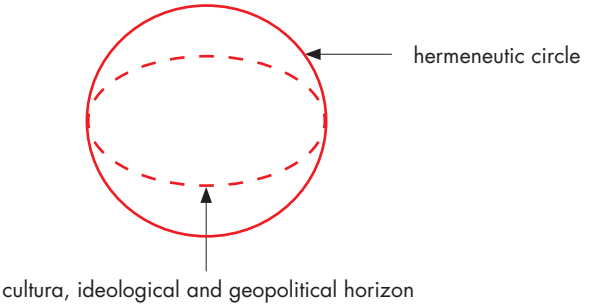


Source: Own elaboration.

1. For a fuller exposition of the following arguments, see Golden, 2020, 2023.

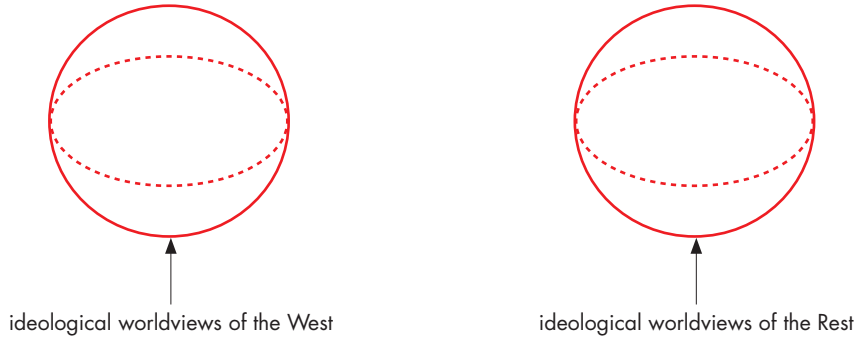
"Hermeneutics" refers to the interpretation of texts, the discovery (if not invention) of the different meanings contained in a text, implicitly as well as explicitly. Semiotics extends hermeneutics to the interpretation of non-semantic sociocultural manifestations as well. People who form part of the same sociocultural group in the same place in the same era will also (unconsciously, perhaps) share the same criteria for interpreting and understanding the cultural manifestations they share within the horizon of the social construction of their shared reality, creating a common ideology and geopolitical worldview (see Figure 2):

Figure 2. Hermeneutic Circle



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3. Different sociocultural cosmovisions

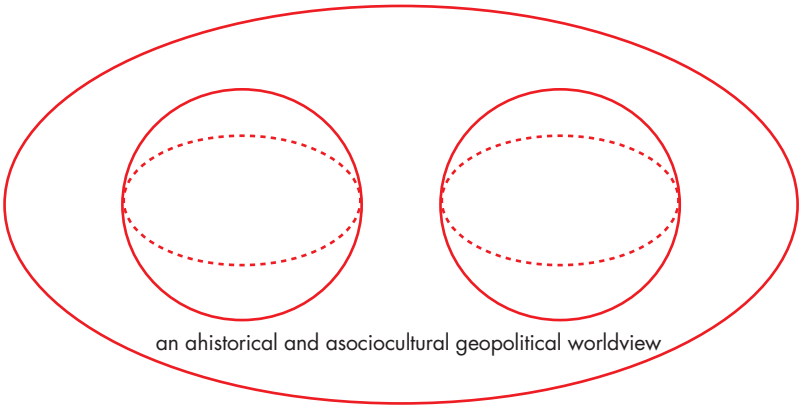


Source: Own elaboration.

This worldview characterises a particular sociocultural and geopolitical group. What happens when someone wishes to understand the worldview of a completely different group? The others have their own social construction of reality that could be quite different. In the case of Western cultures there will be a high degree of overlapping but in the case of other cultures there will be limited overlapping. They are different sociocultural and geopolitical complexes that do not share the same horizons or hermeneutic circles. They are to a large extent separate worldviews (see Figure 3).

A graphic representation of cross-cultural communication that tries to englobe both or all worldviews within a single (and static) perspective, posits an observer with a universal point of view or theoretical framework that is superior to any of the worldviews in question. It thereby raises ideological implications that would be difficult to defend — such as attributing to oneself an ahistorical and asociocultural omniscience; or the overbearing (and self-deluding) self-confidence of an imperial metropolis (see Figure 4).

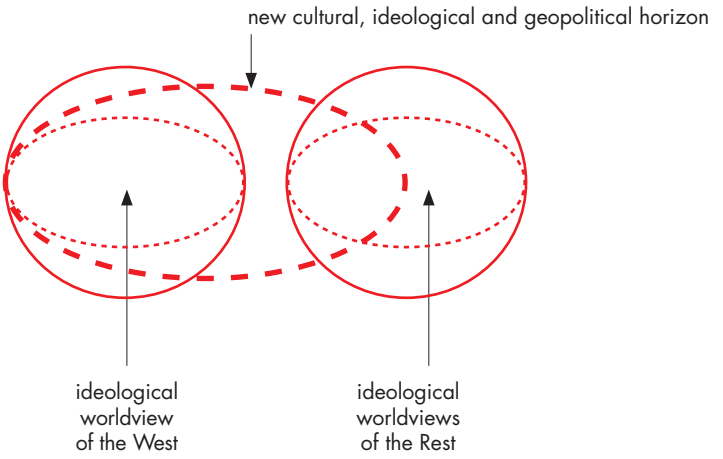
Figure 4. An absolutist perspective



Source: Own elaboration.

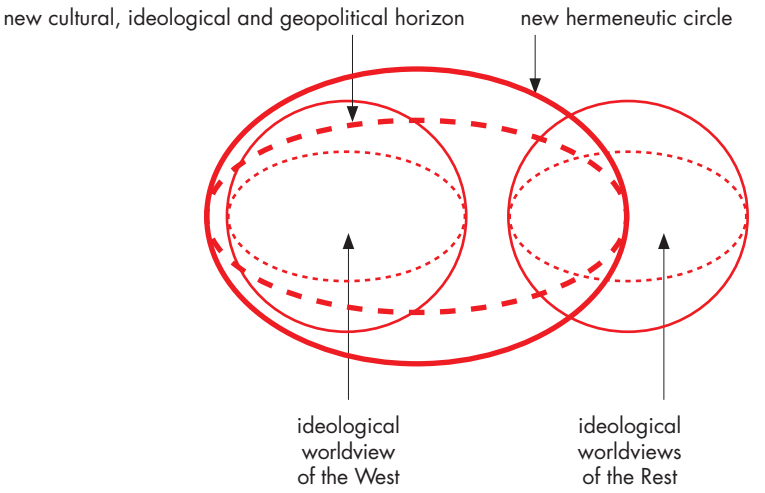
Someone from the West would have to try to understand the bases of the worldviews of the Rest by broadening their own Western cultural horizon in order to include a minimum of overlapping with the repertoire of cultural references within the cultural horizons, common ideologies and geopolitical worldviews of the Rest (see Figure 5):

Figure 5. An enlarged Western cultural horizon:



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 6. A new hermeneutic circle



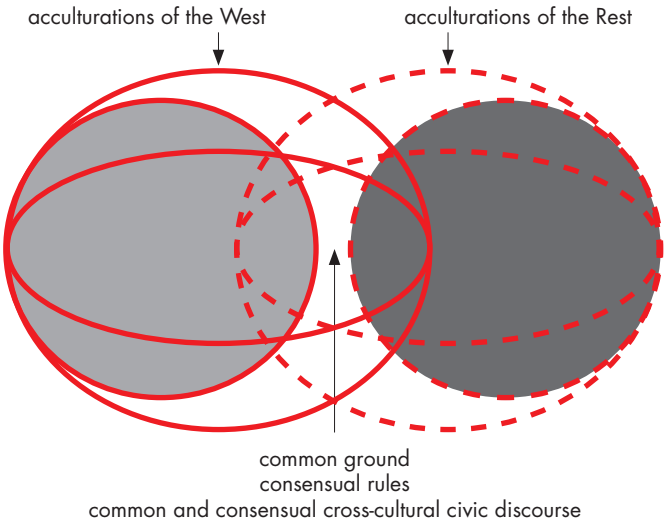
Source: Own elaboration.

Interpreting these cultural referents according to one's own hermeneutic circle is likely to produce misunderstandings or distortions. This is a danger inherent to ethnocentrism (and to nationalism). To avoid this danger, one must broaden one's own hermeneutic circle through acculturation so that it includes a minimum of overlapping with the other's hermeneutic circle to be able to understand the bases of the other's culture, ideology and geopolitical worldview on their own terms, without imposing one's own ethnocentric cultural or nationalist ideological imperatives or filters (see Figure 6):

Were it possible to promote cross-cultural dialogue in this manner, it might be possible to construct a common ground, with common consensual rules to facilitate a common and consensual cross-cultural civic discourse that constructs a binding rules-based world order. Mutual respect requires mutual knowledge and could lead to more innovative and productive paradigms and more meaningful cooperation. This could lead to Wang's set of negotiable yet binding communicative rules and values, and world opinion that would give cross-cultural civic discourse the binding power of an international norm.

This would be necessary for any case of cross-cultural communication or comparative cultural studies. Someone from the Rest would have to do the same (see Figure 7):

Figure 7. Common ground



Source: Own elaboration.

Towards a cross-cultural civic discourse

Such a methodology could facilitate workshops or laboratories where experts from different cultures could discuss what they mean by the key words of the international debate. For example, the West says that China intends to destroy the "rule-based order". China does want a rules-based order, but neither China nor India nor the Rest can accept the status quo of the current rules (e.g., the current quotas of vote distribution in the World Bank or the IMF) and are asking for more 'global democracy'. On its own behalf, the West tries to convince the Rest to defend the current order as if it were universally accepted when they really want the Rest of the world to accept rules favourable to the West that may be unfavourable to the Rest. To truly discuss these matters in a cross-cultural context, one would need to look for common ground, not take as "self-evident" the classical liberal democratic worldview. Understanding the underlying political philosophies of the Rest does not necessarily mean endorsing them. But understanding them and their ramifications could facilitate a constructive debate on what the nature of the emerging world order would or should be and how it could be constructed.

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