

BUCERIUS SUMMER SCHOOL



Threats of a Bipolar World 16–26 August 2024

Conference Report

ON
GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE

Threats of a Bipolar World

From 16 to 26 August 2024, the **ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius**, in cooperation with the **Karl Schlecht Foundation**, held its twenty-third annual Bucerius Summer School on Global Governance (BSS). The overall aim of the Bucerius Summer School is to foster leadership qualities in young professionals by involving them in an international dialogue on current political, economic, social, and juridical questions. Georg Mascolo, Journalist, and Eberhard Sandschneider, Partner, Berlin Global Advisors are the deans of the Bucerius Summer School. The Bucerius Summer School has always been more than just a high-profile conference. It is about building networks and enhancing cross-cultural cooperation of representatives from all walks of public life. To follow up on the annual meetings, we run an active alumni network.



An initiative of the **ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius**, Hamburg, in cooperation with the **Karl Schlecht Stiftung**, Aichtal

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Threats of a bipolar world – and how the next generation of leaders wants to tackle them

“Bipolarity” is a word from the Cold War, describing how the world was divided into two powerful poles, led by America and the Soviet Union, respectively. An alternative, third way existed with the large group of officially non-aligned countries, but there was little escaping the bipolar division on important political, security, economic, or cultural (including sports) matters.

With the deepening rivalry between the United States and China, the term is making a comeback, together with warnings of a “New Cold War” between the two. Critics, however, are quick to point to the fundamental differences between the period after World War II, when superpower competition kept the world in a tight grip, and today, when a much greater number of powerful actors is vying for influence.

Hence, part of the discussions at the Bucerius Summer School was about whether its title and the term “bipolar world” had validity. Some argued that the world was rather moving towards a multipolar system with different centers of power. Others felt that, while the American and Chinese quests for supremacy might lead to a bipolar world, their competition should not be construed as a “Cold War 2.0” due to the vastly different circumstances: A much more complex world with high environmental and technological risk that generates a lot of uncertainty, and an increasingly divided geopolitical landscape with polarizing tendencies in which populism is on the rise.



Still, the issue of how the changes to the international system currently underway need to be understood, points to what has been at the heart of the Bucerius Summer School since its first edition in 2001: global governance. It is therefore appropriate for this gathering to tackle the systemic questions around → **Bipolarity and Order** and how to interpret the ongoing changes. As the Italian author, politician, and philosopher Antonio Gramsci said of the interwar period in Europe, “The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.”

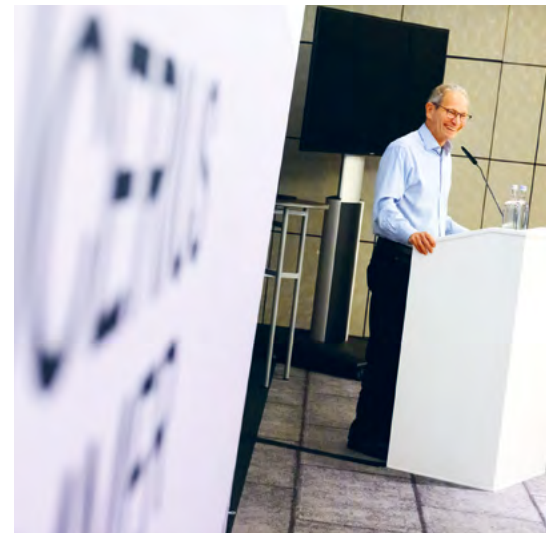
However, the challenge is not only that it's not clear how the 'new world' would look like (or, for that matter, how to

know when it has arrived), but also that the ‘monsters’ are so hard to fight. Wars and migration, demography and societal polarization, digitization and climate change — these are the → Crises and Trends that consume much of the day-to-day work of policymakers, business executives, journalists, and civic leaders around the world.

Dealing with these monstrous forces very often obscures the long-term view at how the fundament of global governance appears to be shifting. In the current interregnum characterized by volatility and uncertainty, → Agency and Leadership are more needed than ever, yet they appear to be in short supply.

Not a bunch of people to shy away from a difficult task, the 54 Bucerius Summer School participants from all corners of





the world dug right into the matter in roundtable discussions, workshops, simulations, and site visits in Hamburg, Lübeck, and Berlin. With their extensive experience in politics, business, civil society, academia, and the military, these young professionals challenged each other as much as their own views, explored new ideas and developed novel solutions through an informed dialogue on current political, economic, and social questions. And as they learned from a meeting with alumni over a barbecue in one of Berlin's hallmark backyards with stimulating architecture, they are now part of a tightly knit network of former participants that work on creating strong partnerships for a better future.

This report collates the participants' very individual views of the systemic changes underway, the crises and trends that they discussed, and the questions around agency and leadership that inspired them¹. Already advanced in their professional careers but with enormous potential to go further, they will need to come up with ways to shape the future world order — possibly with some guidance and inspiration as well as collegial support from their time at the Bucerius Summer School on Global Governance.

1 The author wishes to warmly thank Laura, Kristen, Mariangela, Saskia, Hamdi, André, Sebastian, Aynur, Diego, Anni, Karl Herbert, Hannah, Ndidiamaka, Amina, Barbara, Sara, Vigil, Max, Johannes, and Ting for their respective reports on one individual session, which together formed the basis for this overall report.

1. Bipolarity and Order

The world is moving into a new period of history, not merely at the level of superpower rivalry but also due to the transition from industrialism to the digital era. This shift fundamentally changes the world's power systems, reordering economic, political, and societal relations just as the industrial era did over two centuries ago. It also directly affects many people around the world, due to economic dislocations like job losses, wage stagnation, or precarious employment. This is a key reason why the political center is losing market share in many Western countries.

At the same time, major geopolitical shifts are occurring. As China and the United States deepen their rivalry for dominance, other countries — middle powers and smaller states — feel pressured to choose sides. Some refuse to do so, especially as some equalizing factors become visible: By the second half of the 21st century, the world's top five economies will be China, India, the United States, Indonesia, and Brazil,



underscoring the relative decline of the West. Why should New Delhi, Jakarta, or Brasilia — or Nairobi or Mexico City, for that matter — endanger their rise to the top by siding with either of the main contenders?



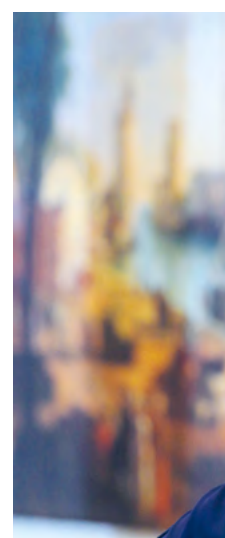
Still, bipolarity — if one is to adopt the term — doesn't just describe superpower rivalry, but also various other dichotomies: between North and South, between global and not-so-global powers, and between the economic sphere and security matters. All these were addressed during the group's discussions.

1.1 A “new Cold War”?

Some argued that the world faces the early stages of another ‘cold war’, characterized by the current lack of rules and agreements between China and the United States. In that sense, the situation would be comparable to the actual Cold War before the Cuba crisis in the early 1960s, i.e. before the two superpowers began to develop guardrails for their competition. However, today's China is much more capable, both economically and politically, and possibly soon also militarily, than the Soviet Union was back then.

Still, especially with the knowledge of that post-war period, and of the three decades following the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989/91, there are ways for the superpowers to cope with the present situation. Calm and sober analysis can help to avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy about armed conflict, because a hot war between China and the United States is not inevitable. This includes maintaining a minimum level of working relations in all possible areas. In economic terms, a certain degree of

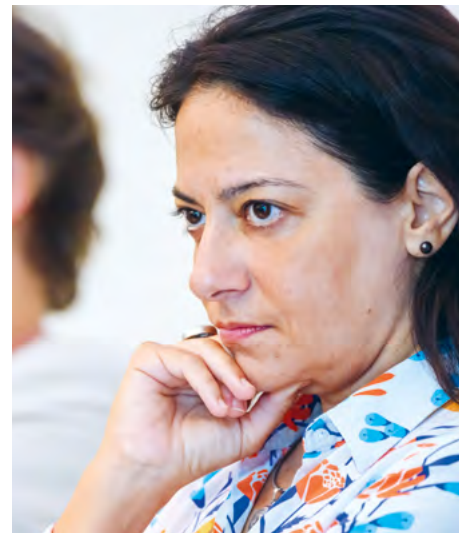
competition with China, on the development of value chains as much as on foreign aid, is even desirable, if it takes place on a level playing field. In the military arena, in contrast, arms control — as established between the Americans and the Soviets in the 1970s — is key, and China must be a part.



Whether the next ‘world’ can be called bipolar or multipolar may be too early to say, but for now several countries are taking a multi-alignment approach. Especially developing countries are learning to make their voice heard without alienating either of the big powers, often striking a balancing act of being ‘non-west’ but not ‘anti-west’. In contrast, even clearly Western-anchored Germany, it was said, a country heavily intertwined with others through trade and investments, has begun to debate whether it would need to choose sides.

More fundamentally, the conversation explored whether and how multilateralism could continue to exist in a bipolar world. The arguments made in favor of the current system no longer appear convincing to many who perceive injustice and hypocrisy within it, historically and into the present day. Some of the founding members — and primary beneficiaries — of today’s multilateral system no longer act in good faith, it was argued, which has led others to lose confidence in the entire scheme.

In short, and in addition to the Sino-American rivalry, a trust deficit between the Global North and Global South is weighing on international institutions.



1.2 North versus South?

Originally introduced by German chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1970s as an alternative to the (slightly pejorative) “Third World”, the concept of a “Global South” has regained traction over recent years. Contrary to the earlier categorization based on economic status and political systems (and, obviously, a geographic marker), today’s term increasingly recognizes a societal divide, impacting income, development, education, and gender.

To understand how pervasive the concept has become, suffice to consider South Africa’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justice. By challenging the selective application of international law by some states, and doing so at eye level, the case underscores that the division between North and South is not one between supporters or challengers of the global order. To the contrary, it was argued, the consistent application of international law requires constructive engagement from all countries regardless of their geographic location, political system, or development status.

While some speakers and participants specifically pointed to the West's credibility loss due to its inconsequential implementation of international rules in the ongoing Gaza conflict, its decline in the eyes of the Global South has deeper roots. For one, China's increasing global footprint has shown that new dynamics of cooperation are possible, not least in building infrastructure. Its investments in Africa have stimulated economic growth more effectively than many efforts from the West. More than that, although initially excluded from the Group of 77 representing the 'non-aligned block' at the United Nations, Beijing has positioned itself as a champion of the Global South in an attempt to bolster its own anti-Western stance. Russia's presence, in contrast, which focuses on military intervention in West Africa, demonstrates shifting models of conflict that require new strategies for resolution.



While these new players do not necessarily have better intentions than their predecessors from Europe and the United States, it still means that countries from the Global South now have choices with whom to cooperate. They are beginning to ask what they are getting from a partnership, and exercising reciprocity when the arrangement does not appear to be just. Western countries will therefore have to devise better cooperation models that also build on civilian participation to change the political landscape. If instead they maintain a

security perspective only, especially in their concern about migration, and fail to offer development-oriented cooperation, they will not win over governments in Africa or elsewhere.

Interestingly, the North/South divide is not only present at global level but also within countries, it was remarked. From Europe, where Italy's internal division may be most widely known, to India, where a similar divide significantly influences political discourse and socioeconomic views, geography matters also in domestic terms. And, even within countries of the Global South, one speaker from that part of the world poignantly observed, some people live with the privileges of the North — which only further complicates the divide.

1.3 Global and not-so-global actors

Looking at the major players within the international system, China repeatedly came into focus, but also the EU and Germany received a mention.

Undeniably, China is a rising power, which can be viewed through different prisms: partner, competitor, or rival, or any combination of these three. After America was the center of the post-Cold War world, now governments worldwide have to



re-orient their relationship with Beijing. For Western countries, maintaining a collaboration-competition relationship appears advantageous, as their economies are too intertwined with China's for a rupture-like "decoupling". Instead, a "de-risking" strategy would focus on areas with cooperation potential, including non-sensitive trade and the green transition, while disagreements over international rules, including human rights violations, are dealt with in a different arena.

Conversely, mainly relying on a "China threat theory", like some American politicians do, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is especially evident in the case of Taiwan, where the raising of tensions, whether from the mainland or the island democracy and its partners, risks turning a lukewarm dispute into a hot conflict — with potentially wide-ranging effects.



Europe, in turn, which appears particularly torn over the China question, also has its own problems to deal with. For one, the political balance within the EU has shifted with the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic parties after the recent election. For another, there is a gradual decline in the continent's demographic and economic weight vis-à-vis emerging powers. And, more urgently, the Ukraine war and Europe's flagging support has highlighted the shortcomings of its domestic arms procurement. Thus, forming global partnerships around shared

values and collective budgetary support for Ukraine were mentioned as key elements of a successful defence strategy.



Moreover, the pandemic as well as ongoing conflicts in different world regions have exposed bottlenecks in global supply chains, particularly in strategic sectors, highlighting the need to boost the competitiveness of European industries. Strengthening relations with third countries will therefore be crucial in terms of economic security (e.g. through more targeted trade agreements) and for a renewed and more effective approach to migration (e.g. through comprehensive partnerships).

Within Europe and at global level, Germany strives to maintain its positive image as a cooperative player. Various government representatives vowed to support Ukraine for “as long as it takes” and reiterated that the country would continue to be guided by values and defend basic human rights — a position that was openly questioned regarding its stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More broadly, Berlin aims not to stand alone, but to act in lockstep with its European partners, especially in terms of defence, foreign policy, and international trade. It does not count on the perceived ‘stability’ of a bipolar world order but is aware of the need to increase its own military capabilities, both within the EU and NATO.

While not very popular at home these days, development policy could prove to be an area to reconnect with global partners. China, it was noted, often reacts more quickly and straightforwardly to the needs of, say, African states than the West. In response, there should be stronger German and European involvement and better financing options to secure political and economic influence in Africa. Also, given the lack of progress on the sustainable development goals, Berlin could contribute to a rethink of development cooperation in favor of strengthening institutional capacities in recipient countries. Such a cooperative approach could help Europe regain a role in bridging the South and North, even becoming a pivotal player in shaping a new world order.

1.4 Security versus Economy

Lastly, there is tension between a global economy that is inextricably knit together, making it hard, if not impossible, to isolate individual economies, and a growing securitization of economic relations, i.e. seeing trade and investments mainly through a national security lens. This is evident in the increased use of sanctions, the introduction of investment screening mechanisms, or the widespread resort to tariffs and non-tariff barriers to protect domestic industries. Policymakers face the challenge of securing critical supply chains and fostering domestic industries while avoiding protectionism and maintaining the benefits of globalization.

In addition to striking a balance between strategic autonomy and free trade, another critical issue is how to achieve inclusive growth. This means not just lifting countries out of poverty, as global trade has done over past decades in different places, but also helping them overcome the middle-income trap and distributing trade benefits more equally. Finally, the green transition poses an overarching dilemma. While it appears to be a necessity in the face of global warming, it also raises complex issues, such as the environmental cost of green technologies, from resource extraction to rebuilding supply chains to ultimately cementing global inequities.



2. Crises and Trends

Among the different crises dominating the news, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza stood out in the group's discussions. Beyond these, participants addressed some of the underlying global trends, among them climate change and urbanization.

2.1 Russia's war against Ukraine

Among the most touching presentations was a testimony from a Ukrainian parliamentarian in times of war: how everyday work inside democratic institutions can and must be upheld even during an existential crisis, and at great personal sacrifice. It included, more worryingly, a reminder of how the current war could have been avoided if only Western leaders had acted more assertively towards Moscow's systematic breaches of the European security order during the preceding decades — be it in Moldova in 1991, in Chechnya during the 1990s and 2000s, in Georgia in 2008 or with Crimea in 2014.

While Russia's systematic policy of creating conflicts and pursuing territories of other countries has long been visible in many parts of the former Soviet Union, it was not taken seriously enough in the West. Ultimately, the failure to hold an aggressor accountable would only feed their appetite, it was argued. Yet, if rules can be broken with impunity, this has severe



consequences for global security. This does not, however, exclude negotiations to end the war. However, it does make a difference under what conditions these take place and what message they send to the party responsible for the breach of commonly agreed rules.

China's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine also received some scrutiny. On the one hand, the country bears economic losses, fears for its many investments in the region, and faces the risk of sanctions due to its ties with Moscow. On the other, Beijing sticks with its Russian partner, even though observers believe it could end the war through a hard stance. In a big-picture geopolitical view, it looks as if China does not want to see Russia lose, lest this strengthens the West.

2.2 (Un)Peace in the Middle East

The other war agitating global public opinion, after coming up in various conversations throughout the seminar, was then treated more thoroughly by way of storytelling. A panel discussion aimed at bringing different viewpoints to bear, both among speakers and participants. The picture that emerged was one of overlapping, not necessarily contradicting tales which, however, each require exclusivity. For Israelis, the horrendous attacks of 7 October plunged many compatriots into a fight-or-flight response, refreshing traumas reminiscent of some of the



worst horrors humanity has ever witnessed. For Palestinians, decades of injustice, expulsion and oblivion have piled up as the international community appears to have quietly agreed to the status quo with selfish lassitude.

In the end, the session allowed for a shared agreement to be human where this next generation could break the dichotomies of history: one speaker imagined a future scenario, farfetched, certainly, but so heart-warmingly human that it was difficult for the audience not to dream: that one day the shared trauma binds people on the two sides together in solidarity, and that the rediscovery of the human in the other breaks the cycle of violence. Two tribes, who perhaps are not that different, united in a confederation sharing one land, to which all are welcome to return. A land, which simply cannot absorb a single drop of blood anymore. A dream, possibly, but certainly worth striving for.



2.3 Megatrends

Beyond and beneath those violent conflicts, a handful of “megatrends” are changing the way humans live — and, quite literally, altering also the face of the earth. From digitization



and AI, urbanization, demographic and social change, to climate change and resource scarcity as well as global growth markets, they heavily impact on modern societies, especially Western democracies. Decision-makers there tend to have incorporated a mindset that focuses primarily on the duration of the respective legislative period or, worse, the next quarterly earnings report. Yet, it takes clear decisions with a long-term vision to tackle the already apparent negative social consequences of these trends.

This becomes apparent when looking at three major challenges, which relate to those megatrends and are compounded by the emerging global divide. On climate change, it was said that 80 percent of future CO₂ emissions are expected to come from the Global South, making their efforts to go green ever more important. At the same time, the onus is on countries in the North to make climate finance available to the developing world to effectively address these issues. Yet, one seems to depend on the other, as both sides refuse to move unilaterally, thus hampering overall efforts to combat climate change.

Second, the fragility of the international order, rooted in a colonial legacy, is becoming more pronounced. The exclusion of the Global South in the formation of the United Nations — and, in particular, the Security Council — highlights this ongoing divide. The existing rules-based global order will only survive

if the two sides can find a more equitable distribution of power within the multilateral system. Finally, the changing nature of societal values is leading to a fragmentation of long-established social contracts, just as technology, while a globalizing force, exacerbates the disparities between rich and poor. Again, without a more balanced approach that brings together countries from both the Global North and Global South, people will be further driven apart from one another.

One important and useful distinction can be made by using the two different words for 'future' in French: *l'avenir*, the reasoning goes, describes phenomena that just happen, and which one cannot escape, whereas *le futur* is what can be influenced by human intervention. That said, even the above-mentioned megatrends are not God-given, nor do they come out of nowhere. They are social phenomena in that they are the result of human action and interaction. In this sense, *le futur* is about tackling the very root causes of these megatrends and altering them for the better of mankind.

Yet, who could do this?



3. Agency and Leadership

The ultimate question is one of agency, both at institutional and personal level. Institutionally, participants were seeking inspiration from architecture and urban planning to devise new approaches to global governance. And personally, the focus was on individual leadership and how it could be nurtured in a group of aspiring young professionals.

3.1 New thinking for global governance

Architecting for the future is similar to global governance, the proposition went. This is said to be particularly true in the current complex times, as both concepts heavily rely on collaboration for success. In city-making, for example, everyone plays a role regardless of their profession or background. Civic engagement, including through non-governmental organizations, as well as education, research, and participation all play a significant role in driving positive change. Moreover, collaboration with new and old stakeholders, discovering willing partners, and persistence are key to overcoming these challenges, including those that involve navigating the bureaucracy. Only a truly participative process, whether in architecture or governance, is both democratic and sustainable.

3.2 Personal leadership

The group's approach to leadership included a demarcation regarding power. While the two are certainly not equal, the former needs some of the latter to exert influence, to make a change. However, power in the sense of 'power over' can easily be misused. Or it can be construed in purely hierarchical terms, especially within an organization, whether public or private. Also, the many "pleasers and yes-only people" often surrounding a leader can easily disrupt a healthy leadership model.

Instead, the profile of an actual leader should involve traits like authenticity, belonging, and control — in addition to being

visionary, charismatic and self-confident. Leaders should use their imagination, courage and critical mind to determine a group's direction, based on shared values and principles. Leadership is a matter of responsibilities and of genuinely caring about one's followers. Then again, there is no dichotomy between leader and follower, as one can be either, depending on the circumstances. Moreover, one does not have to be a leader in a formal sense to make change: Nurses, for example, were mentioned as not being leaders per se, but having an important impact on people.



Self-aware as they were, participants also acknowledged that the youth of today are more privileged, educated, and with closer access to knowledge. Yet, there appears to be increased hesitation or even reluctance on their part to become leaders. But when they do, they may be more thoughtful leaders: They

emphasized the importance of solitude as an opportunity to communicate with oneself and critically reflected on how academia creates conformity. As so often, people speak a common language in their group, but the question is whether they are getting the relevant information from outside of their own bubble?

Such traits will help this group of young leaders to foster cooperation in a world that is ideologically diverse. Rather than fall for simple truths and black-or-white thinking, they will need to tackle transnational issues like climate change, migration, and the impact of technological change in hitherto unknown ways. Doing so within a network of like-minded peers that inspire and support one another is one important first step.

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