

# Current Concerns

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## Power and World Order\*

by Professor Dr Dr h.c. mult. Hans Köchler

“It cannot be the irrevocable fate of the human species to sacrifice reason – which is given to the *individual* – on the altar of the *collective* action for the preservation and increase of power of sovereign states that see each other as foes (as threats to their existence).”

Another year in the global political struggle to redefine power relations is about to end. Although philosophically *every* day is a day of contemplation – and not just a symbolic date defined by a unit of measure like year, decade or century – I am taking this point in time as an occasion to investigate the background and leitmotifs of actions guided by the “logic of power.” To do so, I am not going to cite the vast literature on the subject – in the sense of *relata refero* [I tell what I have been told, editor’s note] – but develop my own “phenomenology of power.” I will do so in the spirit of *Husserl’s* method, as a description and analysis of what I have learned in my experience dealing with nearly 50 years of global “realpolitik”.<sup>1</sup> I am first of all not concerned with *prescription* but with *description*. To sharpen our vision of how the world is *supposed to be*, we must first know how the world *is*. Wishful thinking blocks our view of reality, making effective action impossible. A phenomenological description of the logic of power naturally accords particular importance to psychological analysis. It attempts to reconstruct the motivations of both individual (i. e. a politician’s) and collective (i. e. a state’s) action.

### Anthropological constant of power

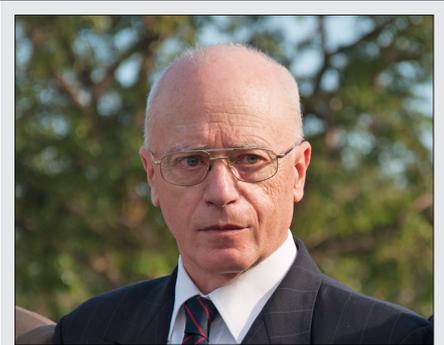
I call things that persist through all historical eras the anthropological constant of power. This refers to the drive for self-assertion (including the need for personal recognition) of the *individual* and subsequently of the *collective* – the state – as an association of individuals for securing first the survival and subsequently the “good life” of its members. A classic

example of this is the modern welfare state. For the state as a legal entity, power is the means of generating the conditions for these goals to be realized by each individual member of the collective.

To this end, the state needs (1) a monopoly on the use of force *towards the inside* (to avoid a free-for-all, and thus fend off anarchy) and (2) the capability to secure the life and survival interest of its represented community *towards the outside*. This gives its meaning not only to the military but to foreign policy and diplomacy in general. In its concrete incarnation, this capability becomes the power (the potency, *potentia*) to express the national interest in a global framework so that the polity is not taken over by other polities and in particular does not become a pawn in the power struggle of third parties. It is all about power as an expression of sovereignty, as the capability of the state to self-determination. This is the *essence* of power in the international domain – as long as power is defined *rationally*, taking into account the fact that the state is *not alone* in its struggle for self-determination but that other collectivities organized as states in principle want the same. Power can thus rationally only be exerted on the basis of a non-absolute understanding of sovereignty.

### The “logic of power” in everyday global politics

We have to confront the *idea* of power in its rational understanding – as a means to self-realization for the state in the context of an international community of equals – with the *reality* of politics, to ensure our analysis is relevant. Indeed, power is even in the present not only exerted in this enlightened sense but according to the traditional mechanisms of power politics – in spite of the provisions of the UN Char-



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(picture [hanskoechler.com](http://hanskoechler.com))

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ter and the numerous vows of “friendly relations and cooperation among States” (in the language of the General Assembly of the UN).<sup>2</sup> The “logic of power” in everyday global politics is rather skewed towards securing the national interest in a way that President *Trump* called “America first” not too long ago. This slogan asserts the primacy of one’s own state and – before strategic reflections set in – ignores the principle of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup>

Against this background, the state as an international player assumes the “working hypothesis” that securing the community has to be pursued on a basis of strategic mistrust. It can’t be taken as given that the other players act according to the princi-

\* Speech delivered to the reading circle of the *Zeit-Fragen / Current Concerns* newspaper on 30 December 2021. © International Progress Organization, 2021. All rights reserved including translation.

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ple of reciprocity. It is not the *principle of trust*, but rather the *principle of mistrust* that applies. This explains the prominent role of the secret services, in particular for medium and major powers. Part of the unspoken self-image of the state – basically in the collective subconscious – is the constant struggle to survive when trying to position itself for global competition. Civil servants swore their oath on the well-being of their own community, on their own constitution – and not on the well-being of the global community or even their neighboring states. In this context, lies – as deception of competitors in the struggle to assert interests – traditionally form part of the arsenal of politics, and not only in times of war. That is what the Janus-facedness of intelligence work consists of: *towards the inside* – in terms of information collection for its own community – bound by the truth but signed up for deception and camouflage *towards the outside* whenever it is important to give one's own state an advantage over the others or avoid a disadvantage. This duality naturally comes into particular effect in the defense politics of major powers.

**Perpetual peace  
through perpetual dominance?**

In this respect, the logic of power competes with the ideal of equal cooperation, based on the principle of trust, which, as history shows us, only makes sense if *everyone* adheres to it. The fragility of trust can be seen in innumerable strategic constellations since antiquity. It can be illustrated, for example, by the erratic alliance politics in the time of *Henry VIII* or, in more recent history, the circumstances of the *Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact* during World War II. Naivety and good faith are no common currency in world politics.

The logic of power – founded on mistrust – means that major powers are (and must always be in their calculation) concerned with perpetuating their advantageous status quo, as it often (but not always) results from war. It is therefore not about "perpetual peace" in a Kantian sense but the absence of war guaranteed by the enduring dominance of one's own state. The motto is thus: Perpetual peace through perpetual dominance!

**Losing touch with reality  
through insatiable power politics**

This was expressed particularly concisely in *George W. Bush's* "National Security Strategy" of 2002, which stated that the United States should exert every effort so that no other state would ever reach strategic parity, and be equal in strength. Simply put: "We must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge."<sup>4</sup> Part of

the logic of power is a *making-absolute* of the state's own position. This means that in the case of a unipolar constellation, foreign, defense and economic policies are guided by the sole goal of preventing the formation of a new balance of power, whether bi- or multipolar, for all time – thus expressing in a sense a Faustian "Beautiful moment, do not pass away!"<sup>5</sup> The progress of time can however never be stopped, not even by the current most powerful player. There is no "end of history." Denying reality – losing touch with reality – in such insatiable power politics has always led to a sudden, sobering wakeup. Only the time scale on which this process takes place varies.

**The delusion of power**

There is a loss of reality in two different ways.

1. *Individually*: State leaders who have achieved an unchallenged position in their domain (domestic), suffer a *change of personality* in the short or long term. Sealed off in servile surroundings, they tend to feel irreplaceable. (This is an empiric finding corroborated over several decades of my observation.) The corrective of this

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loss of reality is often not a domestic development but comes from the outside; it is the dynamics of *international* relations that can't be controlled by the affected politician. Through strategic miscalculation – because the delusion of power hides or falsifies facts – the state represented by such a person can suddenly and for the leader unexpectedly lose in the international power struggle, most of the time followed by domestic consequences – all according to the old popular wisdom of pride coming before a fall.

2. Analogous to the individual one is the *collective* delusion of power. A state which tries to perpetuate its position of predominance in the manner described before tends to see its position (wrongly) as indispensable – in a way similar to the spirit of self-estimation of the USA displayed by *Madeleine Albright* in her famous appearance in the *Today Show* of *NBC* (19 February 1998).<sup>6</sup> Such a state legitimizes its actions through a self-proclaimed moral, quasi-eschatological mission as American politicians' rhetoric of "A New World Order" after the end of the Cold War has shown.<sup>7</sup> The apologetics of a strategy guided by such wishful thinking are always fast to react. A typical example for this was – three decades ago al-

ready – *Francis Fukuyama* with his thesis of the "end of history." With his prophecy he turned out to be an – albeit feeble – disciple of *Hegel*, who had seen the embodiment of the "Weltgeist" (world spirit) in the Prussian state at his time.

**"Imperial overstretch"**

In the denial of reality, the struggle for power and dominance has proven to be the *collective delusion of global politics* that has been the cause of war and conflicts through the centuries. Politics guided by the "logic of power" oriented towards the unattainable goal of perpetual dominance is also counterproductive. It continually creates a resistance that finally brings down the hegemon, as it – because of its claim to absoluteness – has to defend itself *everywhere* and *on all sides*. US strategists from the CIA community have coined the expression "blowback effect" for this.<sup>8</sup> *Paul Kennedy* ("The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers," 1988) has characterized this issue with the expression "imperial overstretch." He means the conditions, which – because of their overreaching aspiration – turn power into powerlessness.

**History taught us nothing**

Because of the logic of power, which – as a delusion of power – is always concerned with *maximizing* a state's strength and represses inevitable failure, states gamble away the chance for a new start when a power constellation suddenly changes – a new start that could in the end break the cycle of self-destructive competition for power. The examples are beyond counting. We only have to look at the developments after World War I and II, but also after the Cold War. Instead of upholding the ceremoniously proclaimed right to self-determination, the winners in World War I helped themselves to the debtor's assets or acted in a classical Machiavellian manner according to the motto *divide et impera*. It is enough to refer to the fate of Tyrol or Hungary and especially the consequences for the Arab world (keyword: *Sykes-Picot Agreement*). The two superpowers that emerged from World War II tried to divide the world between them. The proxy wars that were fought to secure the spheres of influence (Korea, Vietnam) demanded an enormous death toll. Nothing was learned from history after the "Cold War" either. After the end of the Soviet Union, in-

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stead of aspiring for a balance between the Euro-Atlantic and the Eurasian areas based on partnership, the superior side bet on an expansion of dominance in the sense of a permanent hedging of its advantageous position by encircling Russia. The logic of power meant in this case that after the dissolution of bipolarity, with the disintegration of the Soviet state and the disappearance of the *Warsaw Pact*, its western counterpart, NATO, did not dissolve. Despite losing its *raison d'être* as an alliance of collective self-defense, NATO reinvented itself as an instrument of global intervention for the self-proclaimed winner of the Cold War. To conceal the transition from the *defensive* and regional concept of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949) to an *offensive* alliance with a global mandate, the euphemism of "non-Article 5 crisis response operations" was coined.<sup>9</sup>

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**Boundless claim  
to global power – a helpless UN**

In constellations of this type, the insatiable striving for power threatens to give rise to new conflicts. As previously intimated, this is not only proven by the course of history after both world wars, but also after the events of the 1980s. The boundless claim to global hegemony of the single superpower emerging from the Cold War did not only lead to the destabilization of entire vast regions. It also resulted in a type of global anarchy in which the United Nations Organization, created for the maintenance of peace, is reduced to the role of a helpless spectator, capable of no more than admonishments, as it was construed not to get in the way of the powerful due to the will of the dominant players at the time.

Again, this shows how a chance for a geopolitical restart was shortsightedly thrown away. Instead of creating an organization for global peacekeeping based on equal partnership between *all nations*, the victorious powers formulated a statute to permanently protect their reign. In hindsight, this lastingly *destabilized* the global order and *delegitimized* the world organization from the start. This is another example that clearly shows the futility and irrationality of such a strategy. The privileged position of the founders of the United Nations, which they wanted to enshrine in the Char-

ter forever,<sup>10</sup> couldn't stop the course of history. The special statute for the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) could not prevent the fundamental shift in the balance of powers since 1945, nor the position of strategic submission that some of the former victorious countries now find themselves in.

**"Logic of power" –  
Logic of "hybrid" warfare**

Against the background of historical experience, it could be said that the "logic of power" ultimately means that the state (1) extends its *domestic* (and thus undisputed as being part of the constitutional state) monopoly on the use of force to the *external* domain, meaning the projection of its claim to power onto other states – and in the case of a superpower, the whole world. It also means that the state (2) mobilizes all forces to defend this claim in the name of "national interest" or "national securi-

ty." This comes down to a "total mobilization"<sup>11</sup> exploiting all military-industrial potential<sup>12</sup> including the power of the media. The significance of this under current circumstances can be seen clearly in the already mentioned "National Security Strategy" of 2002. To use a currently widespread term, one can compare this approach to the logic of "hybrid" warfare.<sup>13</sup>

**Dangerous cycle  
of mistrust and exorbitance**

All of this shows the excessiveness of the use of force under the pretext of national security. It is fed by the mistrust between states as sovereign actors as discussed above. Thus a dangerous cycle of *mistrust* and *exorbitance* develops that resulted in, among other things, the "mutual assured destruction" between nuclear powers in the 20th century. As *one actor* assumes being threatened from the beginning by *the other* – who is ultimately aiming to eliminate his competitor to avert a threat himself – *everyone* mobilizes all their forces which in turn requires new steps of mobilization, inevitably further increasing structural mistrust ad infinitum. The paradigm of this vicious cycle of mistrust is the idea developed by *Carl Schmitt* in "The Concept of the Political": In contrast to the personal domain, in the political sphere the *other* is from the out-

set perceived as foe (*hostis* as opposed to *inimicus*), thus as a threat to one's existence as such. The "hostile" in Schmitt's conception is situated beyond all moral categories. In the end it is not about a struggle *between* world views or ideologies. We see what this can mean in the so-called arms race of the Cold War, in which ideologies were only a pretext.

**... leads to an illusion of power**

In the nuclear age the cycle of mistrust and exorbitance – of total mobilization – becomes completely dysfunctional in a way apparently not easily understood by its actors: the drive for power leads to the *illusion of power*. The accumulated potential for destruction which could annihilate the adversary not only once but several times (key word: "nuclear overkill") signifies that an attacker is risking his own existence. In a constellation of "mutually assured destruction" the logic of power reaches its limits. If an accumulation of means of power ultimately signifies the danger of one's own annihilation, and if the only way to avert it is the *rational* (in the sense of self-preservation) behavior of the competitors, then all amounts to nothing. It would simply be more reasonable if everyone could agree on *renouncing* nuclear arms *simultaneously*.

The logic of power prevents this as shown by the fate of the *Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT) as well as the continued non-entry into force of the *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty* (CTBT) whose "Preparatory Commission" celebrated 25 years of existence last year in Vienna. Concerning the goal of nuclear disarmament in the NPT, apparently no one wants to take the first step. – That some nuclear powers, namely China, India, Israel, North Korea and the United States, whose ratification would be necessary for the CTBT to enter into force, so far decline to consider a general ban on nuclear testing, shows that nuclear weapons remain a strategic option. Structural mistrust between the states appears unsurmountable. It seems that no state that possesses nuclear arms wants to deprive itself of their use as a last resort.

**A guarantee of peace instead  
of "mutually assured destruction"**

You can see how deeply this nearly eschatological drive to self-assertion is anchored in current international thinking through the example of France reserving – by means of an "interpretative declaration" upon ratification of the Rome Statute – that acts of war involving the use of nuclear weapons do not fall under the jurisdiction of the *International Criminal Court* (ICC). (France deposited this effective "nuclear reservation" under the

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guise of an "interpretation" despite the explicit exclusion of reservations at ratification according to the ICC Statute).<sup>14</sup> This proves the intrinsic inconsistency of the politics of power. Everyone agrees that crimes that are committed using conventional weapons can be sanctioned as "international crimes." However, considering the use of weapons of mass destruction as such is supposed to be taboo. The most extreme (international) means of power that a nuclear state thinks of as an assurance of its survival when used as a deterrent is in some way supposed to stand *outside* of law and be *neutral* according to all legal and moral categories.

Missed (or repressed) by those who do not want to reign in the nuclear option – of which France is not the only state – is that because of "proliferation" that has already happened and is still happening, their status as a nuclear power does not grant them a strategic advantage anymore. Instead of the dubious security provided by "mutually assured destruction" the major nuclear powers could, as already suggested, obtain

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a *guarantee of peace* much more cheaply: by renouncing their nuclear potential *simultaneously*. This dilemma seems, however, to be irresolvable at the moment. As long as a mutual (nuclear) disarmament can only be enforced through coercive measures whose threat must be futile simply because of the powers' available potential for destruction, there is no escape from this vicious cycle of disarmament. The doctrine of collective security is doomed to failure.

What I called the illusion of power politics, by reference to the example of nuclear arms, shows itself as well in the fact that with the capacity for nuclear "overkill" there comes no increase in security for the state. This is because at any moment there is the danger of activating the weapons by error or misunderstanding (for example, a faulty interpretation of data) as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 has shown. For humanity as a whole, it is indeed a regrettable circumstance to have to live under the sword of Damocles, the constant threat of collective self-destruction because of a will to self-assertion exceeding all boundaries of a (still) relatively small number of states. Here the *logic* of power becomes the *folly* of power politics.

**Reason, cooperation and idealism over delusions of power**

What was called the "Tragedy of Great Power Politics" (2014) by American political scientist *John Mearsheimer* should however not lure us into defeatism. It cannot be the irrevocable fate of the human species to sacrifice reason – which is given to the *individual* – on the altar of the *collective* action for the preservation and increase of power of sovereign states that see each other as foes (as threats to their existence).

The essentially *anarchical* state resulting from the mutual mistrust of nations – and often also their peoples – which has caused innumerable wars throughout history must be replaced by a *cooperative* approach that goes beyond exclusive power politics oriented solely towards the national collective. The *realism* in the expression of national interest – to secure the survival of the community – needs the corrective of an *idealism* working towards the survival of humanity. Only the interplay between idealism and realism secures the well-being of *all*, including the most powerful actors.

World order is never possible as a state of anarchy between the currently most powerful, but only based on a balancing of power between sovereign states. In the 21st century, this is also *mutatis mutandis*, the necessary idealist "counterpoint" to the "realist" clinging to the status quo, which is ultimately always doomed to failure. •

<sup>1</sup> Compare my earlier evaluation as well: "The Politics of Global Powers" in: *The Global Community*. Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 173-201.

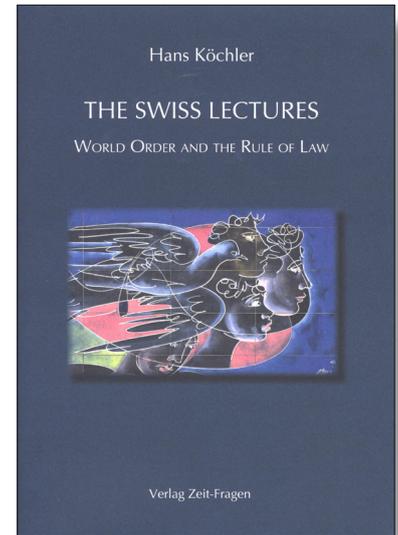
<sup>2</sup> *Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations*. Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, October 24, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> In connection with an appeal to Iran, *Donald Trump* put this principle in his speech in front of the UN General Assembly on 22 September 2019, in a way that is valid for *all* states in the *same* way, which implies an, although unspoken, negotiation of interests in consideration of reciprocity: "Wise leaders always put their own people and their own country first."

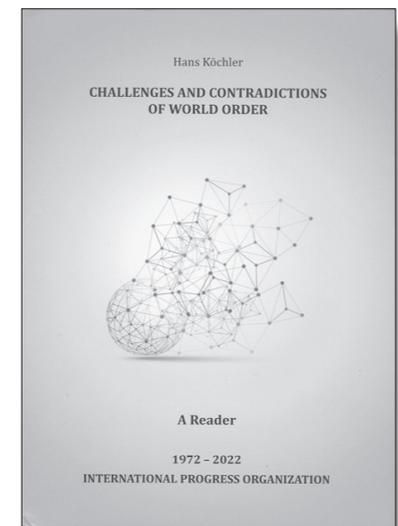
<sup>4</sup> *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 17 September 2002, chapter IX: "Transform America's National Security Institutions to Meet the Challenges and Opportunities of the Twenty-First Century."

<sup>5</sup> Goethe, *Faust I*, verse 1700

<sup>6</sup> Madeleine Albright's answer in Matt Lauer's NBC interview has become somewhat proverbial for the delusion of power that always sets in when a country sees itself in a position of unchallenged hegemony:



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on: "[...] if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us."

<sup>7</sup> See Hans Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> See Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty defines the task of NATO in the sense of collective self-defense according to Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

<sup>10</sup> For the relevant provisions of the United Nations Charter, see Hans Köchler, *The Voting Procedure in the United Nations Security Council*. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> The term "totale Mobilmachung" was coined by Ernst Jünger, *The Worker: Dominion and Form*, 1932

<sup>12</sup> For the totalitarian aspect see as well Friedrich Georg Jünger (his brother): *The Failure of Technology: Perfection Without Purpose* (written in 1939, released in 1946, translated in 1949).

<sup>13</sup> For the terminology see Hans Köchler, *The New Threat: Hybrid Wars as Tool of Subversion*. Rhodes Forum 2015, [i-p-o.org/Koehler-New\\_Threat-Hybrid\\_Wars-Rhodes%20Forum2015.htm](http://i-p-o.org/Koehler-New_Threat-Hybrid_Wars-Rhodes%20Forum2015.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Hans Köchler, *Global Justice or Global Revenge? International Criminal Justice at the Crossroads*. Vienna/New York 2003, pp. 223ff.

(Translated from the German by *Kaspar Rothenfusser*)  
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