

Research Article

Geopolitical constructs of international politics – their cultural & ideological roots

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Today's geopolitical landscape is highly complex- involving a myriad of actors, factors and external conditions. Assessing this complex structure and its dynamics is a formidable challenge.

Most of the constructs advanced to explain it show that these are, however, rooted in specific cultural, historical and geographical experiences: namely that of the 16th-17th centuries in central Europe. The main model used is that of the Westphalian Peace of 1648: i.e., a very specific period in history.

In reverse, therefore apparently a vast portion of human history wittingly or not, is blended out. Unfortunately, disturbances in today's world include a myriad of cultures, regions, and historical experiences. To reduce this complexity to a specific phase in time (16th Century) and to a very tiny part of the globe (Westphalia in Germany) and draw general conclusions out of it is indeed an adventurous attempt- to say the least. This exclusion of a wider historical and cultural background is bound to lead to faulty conclusions and, *eo ipso* to faulty recommendations. In the current situation with the world armed to the teeth with formidable weapons of mass destruction – this attempt is extremely dangerous – to say the least. In this short paper, we intend to show that such historically and culturally narrow conceptualisations need to be extended including wider cultural and historical experiences- to arrive at palpable and useful explanations and solutions.

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1. Models and constructs assessing the current geopolitical context

Almost all usual constructs attempting to explain today's international political conflicts and geopolitical events are rooted in a very specific experience of world history: the post-medieval European society and politics of the 14th–15th centuries AD.

These are based upon very specific cultural filters and a particular historical experience of a “Western” European region. Insistence of applying this one specific historical and cultural construct to explain the political dimensions of the conflicts of the current wider world leads to an impasse.

We contend that we cannot extend these constructs to describe and explain events of today's wider world and the myriad of new factors, political systems and cultural contexts involved.

2. “Theology” of the Western IR Theories

These models of IR created in the wake of the Westphalian phase in Europe (after the 16th century) form the basis of the current geopolitical narrative. These Euro-centric constructs seem to be oblivious to a rich and eventful human cultural and political history and its completely different contextual backdrop (dating back at least 10 thousand years).

Lacking insight (or interest) in this ancient world, these Euro-centric constructs when extending these to understand the conflict dynamics of the *current, multi-ethnic world*. The political experience of the majority of the world's population cannot be pressed into the corset of a predominantly Christian (catholic or protestant) European worldview. Interpreting the political dynamics of **ancient pre-Christian** and today's **wider world** through the tinted glasses of medieval Europe – leads to distorted interpretations. However, according to the majority of the community of IT scholars (especially in the “West”), these constructs do provide the main template to assess all geopolitical events. *In this paper, we intend to contest this position.*

2.1. Quo Vadis: “Theory of International Politics” and Westphalian Treaty of 1648

Apparently, the contemporary IR constructs seem to have a blind spot: negating almost the entire history of humans and their ways of building relationships – prior to the **Westphalian Treaty of 1648**.

All virtues of modern statecraft and interstate relations are exclusively posited in the Western civilizational context during and after this eventful period. However, compared to world history, this is but a *very recent historical event*. Unfortunately, in the international mainstream literature, any other

course of history is blended out – either through ideological selection or through pure ignorance. And if this is occasionally done, it is attributed to the curiosities of anthropologists and a few historians, which need not be studied *or are not relevant* to the mainstream political discourse.

2.2. Political Conflicts prior to the “Westphalian Episode”

Well before this much-discussed event – societies, civilisations and human conglomerations were already governing and steering their relations to each other: either as “states”, empires, territorial and ethnic groups etc. The world encompasses a myriad of cultural, social and political experiences and has a vast and rich history. For millennia, civilizations and “states” coexisted and developed economic, political and cultural relations among themselves. They managed to coexist and settle their differences – through political negotiations and diplomacy, armed conflict, political solutions etc. (F. Fukuyama, 2012: 112–122).

- i. The so-called **Amarna Letters – and Amarna Diplomacy of Egypt – (the “New Kingdom”)** – spanning a period of no more than thirty years between (1360–1332 BC).¹

These ancient states – the great powers of the Near East and the Mediterranean (especially Egypt and its neighbours)– initiated a formalized form of relations between the vying regional entities of that time. *Writing formed the core technology* of this new system. The Amarna Letters are enshrined in the clay tablets still existing today. These consist primarily of diplomatic correspondence between the Egyptian administration and its representatives in these states. They facilitated communication between vying entities, formalised their relations, by securing among others safe passage for the carriers (first diplomats) of this interstate communication, and paved the way for regulating diplomatic exchanges. This appears to be the first known attempt to develop a system of diplomatic exchanges between rival entities. (Jovan Kurbalija, IFDT)

- ii. **The so-called Treaty of the Battle of Kadesh – between Egypt and the Hittites– of Mesopotamia**
Another example is the conflict between Egypt and the Hittite Kingdom of Mesopotamia, which is well documented in the so-called **Egyptian–Hittite peace treaty – around 1274 BC (named after the famous battle of Kadesh)**. This embittered war – between **Egypt** (time of the Pharaoh Ramesses II, The Great – 1279–1213 BCE) and the **Hittite Empire** in Mesopotamia **and their allies and vassal states** – lasting for almost two centuries – was brought to an end by this treaty.² (cf. ARCE– American Research Centre, Egypt, <https://arce.org/> Battle of Kadesh). In fact, in this

treaty, the two big adversaries (*and the other parties*) – parted “as allies”! *They agreed to aid each other – against other adversaries who might threaten them.* This is the first written example of a treaty – *well over 5,000 years before Westphalia– that involved several states.*

This ended a long war between the Hittite Empire and the Egyptians, who had fought to gain mastery over the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptian–Hittite peace treaty is the earliest known surviving peace treaty.

iii. **Examples from China and India: between 3000 BC to around 300 B.C.**

The Chinese System – which existed around 3000 BC –had its own concepts of regulation of relations between various states and regional and ethnic groups. The central ordering concept used was ‘*tianxia*’ – depicting “*the entire world as it stands under the heavens*”. (Zhang Feng, 2010) Similarly, in East and South Asia, large empires rose, evolved multistate systems, waged wars and made peace arrangements – incorporating their own experiences, concepts and cultural orientations. The relations between these entities were formalised and lasted for centuries.

The Indian Empire of Maurya, (321- 185 BC) in Magadha/north India, was founded by *Chandragupta Maurya in 322 BCE*. It encompassed most of the Indian Subcontinent and had its own concepts of administering relations with vassal states and central authority. It boasted a highly efficient administration (civil service, bureaucracy and an army). One of these emperors, **Ashoka the Great**, adopted the concept of “*ahimsa*” (*non-violence*) to regulate inter-state relations and depicted this political concept on stone pillars – existing till today.³ To conclude, there is no dearth of highly significant instances of conflicts and **their regulation** – well before the 14th Century Central Europe (and the Westphalian Peace) – that could shed more light on current global conflicts– and provide alternative narratives.

3. The model of the Westphalian Peace of 1648 in Central Europe

The current attempts at assessing international relations rest overwhelmingly on the model of the so-called Westphalian Peace of 1648, signed in Westphalia, Germany in central Europe – (in the cities of Münster and Osnabrück). This was the epoch of the European theatre in disarray after the weakening of the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire as *the ordering factors* in the region. In the Pre-Westphalian system, the Church was the supreme authority from which the universal laws of governance and moral framework of organizing a society were derived.

Before the origin of the modern state system in Europe, medieval Europe can be characterized as a pre-Westphalian system. In this system, the Church was the supreme authority from which the universal laws of governance and moral framework of organizing a society were derived.

The collapse of the ordering factor (the Catholic Church) did indeed lead to a critical new situation. Most of central Europe was infested by the dissolution of the political and social authority of the Catholic Church and the emergence of a *plethora of vying and warring entities*. This encompassed tiny feudal kingdoms to large structures (such as the Holy Roman Empire –Brandenburg, France, Spain, Sweden, Austria, the Dutch Republic and others.)

In the **pre-Westphalian system** – allegiances and *identities* were more based on family and kinship ties, on feudal ties or religious identification (catholic or protestant).

3.1. The Westphalian Treaty of 1648

This forms a watershed for this period. More than 100 parties (states, small entities, feudalities, representatives of the Churches, etc.) were involved. Indeed, the *Westphalian Peace*, with its *core concepts of territoriality, national sovereignty, and the nation-state* did manage to establish a new system of political order in Europe. This helped to remove the influence of external actors in the domestic affairs of national states and formed the basis of the *Westphalian Peace*. The new concepts of state sovereignty, territorial integrity etc. did manage to introduce some stability – and formed the fundamentals of a new System. The Westphalian sovereignty (or state sovereignty) forms the centerpiece of this treaty and is premised on the assertion that each state possesses exclusive sovereignty over the territory that it controls. The principles of *territorial integrity and state sovereignty* (i.e., the right of a state to decide its fate) *also form the foundations of current international law*. This was certainly a big step towards a more stable system in Europe at that time.

3.2. Impact on the social fabric of Europe

However, these new concepts of Westphalia also spawned instability in the new system. The quest for finding solutions to interstate conflicts, with the formulation of concepts of *territoriality, national sovereignty, and the nation-state* – led also to new conflicts among the denizens of the new “nation-states”. These concepts failed to address the questions of kin and group bonds, and ethnic and religious identities of the population within the “national sovereign state”! As a result, the conflicts and feuds between the various actors in the pre-Westphalian era were replaced by virulent *internal*

conflicts within the territorial states themselves. These spawned the World War 1 – which engulfed not only the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire but also most of Europe and its colonial dependencies. Similarly, the concept of the national state and national identity lead inadvertently to forms of extreme “nationalism”, **the rise of Nazi Germany** and consequently to World War II. ⁴

3.3. Significant events undermining this system

The colonization of Asia, Africa and South America- by post-Westphalian Europe – undermined its conceptual foundation: viz., mutual respect for state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference by other states. This process (of colonisation of the world by Europe) – which began well before during the sea voyages of the Spanish and Portuguese sailors and admirals Columbus and Vasco Da Gama (among others) – in the 14-15th Centuries was facilitated by the famous Catholic Church doctrine: **the Doctrine of Discovery issued by Pope Alexander VI** (1492 to 1503- pope Rodrigo Borgia). It legitimized the (the so-called “Conquista”) colonization of Ibero-America by giving *Spain and Portugal* the moral legitimization to conquer and colonize new lands, to subjugate and enslave the indigenous (non-Christian) populations. Later, Great Britain, the Netherlands, France (and others) followed suit – *albeit without the blessings of the Catholic Church*.⁵

The so-called Church “Doctrine of Discovery” was also incorporated into the US Constitution /law in 182 (and in the so-called Monroe Doctrine). The US then proceeded to put it into practice – especially in its relations vis-vis the indigenous population of North America. The Catholic Church rescinded this Doctrine as late as **March 2023** – especially by a Decree of the current Pope Francis.

The two World Wars of the 20th Century *gave the final blow to the very principles established at Westphalia (e.g., state sovereignty)* – and also gave rise to the emergence of great powers. A new world order consisting of two great powers and a myriad of other states emerged- in Europe and elsewhere.

3.4. Current challenges to the concept of state/national sovereignty

We contend that today’s conflicts and conflagrations have much wider and broader dimensions – *going beyond* this restricted context of Westphalia. States from regions *external to Western Europe* – specifically the Asian, Ibero-American and African regions with a different civilizational history – play a significant role here. Here transboundary Kinship ties, claims transcending the territorial boundaries of post-colonial states plays a significant role.

The contemporary “world order” (after the Westphalian episode) represents certainly a different entity. With the emergence of great and powerful states – the ideal of a stable multi-state system was faced with a potential threat. These emergent great powers extend their influence much beyond their territorial borders- attaching or attracting a medley of smaller state entities in their entourage. Furthermore, military, economic and media power (e.g., power to propagate narratives in one’s favour) play a decisive role in this fragile fabric. Clinging to the above historical model leads inevitably to a distorted view of the events and unusable explanations.

Role of boundary transcending trends today on “sovereignty and territoriality”

Furthermore, with the *emergence of new trends transcending state boundaries*, such as “*the globalisation of trade and commerce, communications, and the rapid interstate transfer of people, ideas, and capital*” etc., the classical concept of the “sovereign state” has lost much of its relevance – and applicability. Similarly, “territoriality” itself has undergone a profound change. (Trudy Jacobsen et al., 2008)

In the aftermath of the Cold War and the collapse of *one* major great power contender (*the Soviet Union*) in 1989/90 on the world stage, the remaining power, the US as the sole survivor – decided to double down on its sudden hegemony position. It blocked any effort at coming to an arrangement with other contenders (principally PR China and Russia). It tried to project itself as a benevolent Hegemon- but unfortunately utilised instead all opportunities to oust other contenders out of the arena. This new “Order” was named the “**Rule-based order (RBO)**” and the US- the remaining power –declared itself as its “protector”. Just as a word of caution – international law and the inherent legal principles – **do not recognise “rule-based orders”** ⁶ This concept is a recent entrant – coined by the USA and used frequently by friendly European states in its entourage. We could see it as a concept developed by political scientists and politicians that is sometimes vaguely intended to be synonymous with international law. As John Dugard (former member of the International Law Commission) has clarified, it has a specific political origin in the post-war period. It lacks clarity and a foundation in the classical domain of international law. (John Dugard, 2023)

In short, the *templates* for the study of international relations originated in the post-medieval Europe reflect the experiences of this relatively small region of the world. *It is restricted in time and content to this period.* “This (European) constructed international system emerged at a relatively very late moment of human history (14th century AD and later). That is, it was confined to a *limited territorial demarcation*- namely central Europe- and a *certain moment of history* (the *post-medieval Europe*)” (Bernhard Badie, 2020)

4. The current world political arena

This has resulted in a hostile and divisive international arena. There appears to be an unwillingness to consider *power-sharing* arrangements with other contenders. The *outcome* is the current perilous situation of interstate warfare since 1950 culminating recently (2022) with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

We can say that the world has, so to speak, made a full turn and is now ironically at the same juncture as in 1648- with a multiply fractured world arena, extending well outside the confines of medieval Europe.

The difference was that in 1648 with the decline of the Hegemon - the Holy Roman Empire - the world was faced with a power vacuum and the rise of a myriad of contending and warring entities: small feudalities, city-states, Church dioceses, and other small entities. Faced with this fractured regional structure, Westphalian Negotiators were under pressure. In this context, they created a plethora of sovereign states of all sizes and types- and granted full territorial sovereignty to these actors. This was a “stroke of genius” and more than fulfilled its purpose.

Currently, about 350 years later, we have a different scenario consisting of a few great powers wielding enormous military, economic, and political - as well as power over the media (information power). These “means” are utilised relentlessly over lesser adversaries. The emergence of this system seems to have given the final blow to this 14th-century system of Westphalia.

To conjure up this former historical frame” as the ultimate “peace template” and apply it to the current *scenario is a noble but irrelevant attempt*: like “fitting a square nut into a round hole”.

What remains now is the empty shell of the original “peace template”. A semblance of an international system of state of sovereign states (in theory) - in which a few big powers and their allies (medium and small states) - *are arrayed in confrontation with each other*. The rest of the actors take the back seats as powerless observers or reluctant participants. It is an unstable platform, where military and economic power and wielding influence are the major drivers of interstate relations - and not necessarily territorial and national sovereignty.

Conjuring” territorial sovereignty” - at this juncture -as the holy grail of International Politics- is a hollow attempt which neglects the core interests of the contending global powers: extending and consolidating their sway over this system.

5. What are the viable alternatives today?

Once again, efforts are needed to create a viable and useable framework, which can make concrete and tenable offers to the adversaries – and take into account the driving vital interest of the great powers involved. This is not primarily “territorial sovereignty” – but the creation or recognition of viable spheres of influence which separate the great powers from each other – and keep them at a safe distance.

The missing part of the current geopolitical game is expounding and establishing *specific guarantees for states in the near vicinity*. An adapted form of sovereignty and territoriality integrity. Required are creation of **neutral and robust institutions**, which can monitor and enforce these guarantees.

Finally, we can see today a process where a unipolar world has propelled the transformation of this unstable structure to a “multipolar” system with accompanying conflicts. The objective should be to create viable mechanisms to stabilise this volatile environment and pilot its transition to a “multipolar” world.

5.1. Search for viable models – adapted to the current state of the world

These aforementioned models of political conflicts borrowed from unique historical instances therefore may not be able to provide the necessary and useful solutions. Or may even lead to false conclusions when applied without caution to the current geopolitical conflicts, which are rampant with aggressive actors from a much wider international field – extending much beyond Europe and including actors from diverse cultures and histories. The open question is – in this context – what or which authority is well equipped then be able to settle disputes and maintain order.

6. The contours of an emerging new world: the multipolar world order

This conflict-ridden system of one Hegemon and two other Contenders (China & Russia) is – as we can witness today – a dangerously unstable system. Its actions are not bound by robust legal structures, recognised by all, and having the power and the required institutions to enforce its decisions. This deficit system is augmented with a plethora of weak international agreements *called international treaties (called Conventions)* – which are supposed to constitute an essential feature of international law. Among these are the Law of the Sea Convention, the 1977 Geneva Conventions on the Laws of

War, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, etc. However, unfortunately, **the US is not even a signatory to this Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court-** and other essential statutes.⁷

None of the three great powers is a signatory to all these rules. Their participation in one or the other is based on their particular interests: for example, neither the US nor China are a signatory to the Law of the Seas. (John Dugard, 2023)

In conclusion, we do not have an effective and enforceable system of international law in place. In this Arena of Great Power Competition, we have today **other emerging powers** demanding a place. In short, we see today a “multipolar world “ in a nascent state of emergence” (Cf. Henry Kissinger, World Order, September 2014, Penguin Press) – **without adequate enforceable laws, rules and robust institutions.** In this situation, the challenge for International Politics and International Relations is to build safe and robust structures **to accommodate these diverging interests.** There is urgent need for such a structure to propel the current world forward- without ending in conflict and disaster. It will not be a stable system – but at least one, which can accommodate and negotiate divergent interests without one-sided recourse to arms.

Conjuring up the peace template of the Westphalian System of the 16th Century from Europe is *certainly not the blueprint for a new world Order* consisting of multipolar relations.

Footnotes

¹“The Amarna letters (or the Amarna correspondence or Amarna tablets) are an archive, written on clay tablets, primarily consisting of diplomatic correspondence between the Egyptian administration and its representatives in Canaan and Amurru, or neighbouring kingdom leaders, during the New Kingdom, spanning a period of no more than thirty years between c. 1360–1332 BC” (Amarna letters, Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amarna_letters)

². This ended a long war between the Hittite Empire and the Egyptians, who had fought to gain mastery over the lands of the eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptian–Hittite peace treaty is the earliest known surviving peace treaty.

³. In this period, the Indian political philosopher Kautilya (alleged to be the Chief Minister) wrote his famous treatises of “Arthashastra”- resembling the work of N.Machiavelli “The Prince”- about 1800

years before .[cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, Mauryan empire ,Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauryan-Empire>].

⁴ The Balkan region of South East Europe presented a very volatile theatre for ethnic and religious conflicts – and ignited World War I; World War II brought the new ideology of nationalism and racism to its height – and eventually destroyed the system.

⁵ In 1455, Pope Nicolas V issued a Papal Bull titled *Romanus Pontifex*, under his authority as “Vicar of God” and authorized King Alfonso of Portugal to “invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue pagans and other enemies of Christ whosoever placed. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI (known as Rodrigo Borgia) issued a **new bull**, titled *Inter Caetera*, to the same effect. (cf. Doctrine of Discovery 1493)

⁶ The RBO (**Rule Based Order**) is not an integral category of International Law. “This phrase was coined by the US-to justify many of its actions- since the United States is not a party to a number of important multilateral treaties that constitute an essential feature of international law...” (John Dugard, 2023)

⁷ The United States is not a state party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute) – which founded the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_and_the_International_Criminal_Court

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