



Who Rules the World?

World Powers and International Order

Conclusions from an International Representative Survey
"World Powers in the 21st Century"

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New Constellations in World Politics

The international system of states stands at the threshold of another upheaval. The unipolar moment that succeeded the collapse of the bipolar order, and in which the United States assumed the central, predominant role in global politics, is set to pass in the coming years.

The international relations of tomorrow will be shaped by two broad developments. On one hand, economic globalization processes are intensifying political and social interdependencies worldwide. The effective management of these growing mutual vulnerabilities will be a central task for the political realm, in which the balancing of competing interests, new transnational actors, and the management of social and cultural conflicts will play an increasingly prominent role. On the other hand, the interests, ambitions, and tensions that characterize relations among individual great powers are having an increasing impact on contemporary international developments – a constellation that is reminiscent of the competition among European powers in the 19th century. In addition to the United States, the key actors in the 21st century will likely be China and India, as well as Russia, Brazil, the European Union and Japan.

This perspective on current trends in global politics is gaining ground in think tanks and governmental departments, and in certain policy areas that are central to the interests of current and future great powers, it already appears to be guiding political decision-making and action. Moreover, international public discourse on the rise of Asia has lent further resonance to these issues.

Against this background, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and EMNID decided to investigate public perceptions of the qualities, resources and objectives of world powers. How do the citizens of future world powers view the international role of their respective countries? What dangers and opportunities do they perceive? In what kind of international order would they prefer to live? On behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, in December 2005 EMNID conducted a representative survey of public attitudes and perceptions in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, India, China, Japan and Brazil.

The results of the survey will prove a disappointment to proponents of a “global community.” In contrast, foreign policy realists will feel vindicated. Despite a heightened awareness of the interlinkages among and transnational nature of current challenges, national perspectives predominate together with a tendency to favor national approaches – based on an individual state’s particular strengths – toward international problem-solving. The emergence of a common agenda in which the United Nations steers the international ship of fate is barely perceptible, if at all. Thus the unfolding history of the 21st century appears to be a continuation of old familiar patterns, driven by the rise and fall of great powers. For individual European states, the survey underscores the painful reality of marginalization: positioned well behind the United States, China, and Japan, their only chance to interact head-to-head with other great powers is within the framework of the European Union.

A Pluriversal World

Respondents’ worldviews are clearly shaped by the circumstances of the country in which they live. There is no “one world,” even among the populations of the largest and most influential states, and even among the Europeans themselves. In some cases, differences of opinion among European states are even greater than those with far-distant states with vastly different economic, political, social, and historical backgrounds. No clearly dominant criteria emerge from the survey, whether with regard to the necessary qualities and characteristics of world powers, the perception of security risks, or the objectives that world powers should pursue.

These diverse patterns of attitudes and perceptions are the sign of a new, pluriversal world. This world is significantly more variegated and complex than the epoch that preceded it. In contrast to the Cold War, the present age is not characterized by a rigid, bipolar understanding of the international system that divides the world into clear-cut sets of “friends” and “enemies.” As a consequence, perceptions no longer break down according to one’s position along a clear ideological divide. Rather, these perceptions correspond more directly and immediately to one’s own interests, fears, and desired objectives.

Multiple Threats

At the same time, the number of risks and threats has expanded dramatically. Today these risks and threats are more immediate: they directly affect the lives of individuals and span a broad spectrum that ranges from international terrorism to climate change to pandemic diseases. This fact is borne out by the survey. While international terrorism is viewed as the greatest threat (named by 51% of total respondents), the gap between this and the other most often cited challenges such as poverty, climate change, and environmental destruction is minimal. Even less often cited risks such as war, contagious diseases, weapons of mass destruction, and natural resource scarcity are mentioned by approximately 25% of total respondents.

By and large, the various responses tend to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the particular states in which respondents live. Issues that are perceived as particularly important for one's own country are positioned correspondingly high on that country's ranking of world problems or challenges. For example, more than in any other country, the Russian population views war and state failure as key threats, perhaps due to the Chechnya conflict and other nationality issues. Similarly, Brazilians view the fight against corruption as the second most important objective that world powers should pursue. In turn, Brazilians view fundamentalism as the least important global threat, possibly due to their lack of immediate experience with the phenomenon. In contrast, the French are disproportionately sensitized to the issue of fundamentalism: the recent riots by Muslim youths in the suburbs of Paris and elsewhere may likely be responsible for the high ranking of this risk among French respondents.

Interestingly, there is no longer a "risk hierarchy" that ranks "hard" threats above "soft" threats. For example, the risk presented by contagious diseases is perceived as slightly greater than the risk presented by war – both are viewed as ubiquitous threats. The boundaries between external and internal security have also become increasingly blurred.

As mentioned, risk perceptions differ according to the extent a particular country feels directly affected by a particular threat. Despite these national variations, however, populations across all continents express a strong awareness of the global dangers posed by terrorism, poverty and environmental destruction. Thus despite the present lack of a common global agenda, there appears to be an incipient consensus that might make such an agenda feasible in the future. If this observation were to prove true, this would be particularly promising for such items on the international agenda as the Kyoto process and the UN Millennium Development Goals. In addition, this would also lend support to joint efforts to combat terrorism.

The multiplicity of opinions revealed by the survey with regard to perceptions of risks and challenges can be construed as a consequence of the end of the Cold War. Populations are no longer chiefly focused on the threat of nuclear war between East and West.

The Decreasing Significance of Military Power

When asked which quality they associate most with world powers, the populations surveyed ranked (a) economic power, (b) political stability and (c) an effective research and educational sector – each with cumulative response totals of approximately 50% – clearly ahead of all other possible answers. Military power ranked next to last, receiving only 21% of cumulative responses.

This outcome reflects the economization of nearly all aspects of life, a development that is reinforced by accelerating processes of globalization. As a result, the issues of economic growth, innovation and education have become central themes to which populations across the world attribute increasing importance. After all, job security and the education of one's children are concerns that affect nearly all people and have a considerable impact on everyday experience.

The decreasing importance of military power can also be understood in connection with the role of the United States. It has not escaped international public awareness that U.S. military superiority has proven to be of limited effectiveness in, for example,

the fight against terrorism and the intervention in Iraq. For purposes of clarification, it should be pointed out that “military power” was not listed as a possible answer in the survey conducted in India.¹

However, a closer look at responses from individual countries provides a more differentiated picture. It is above all the losers of World War II – Germany and Japan – who attribute low value to military power. In Germany, only 7% of respondents viewed military power as a necessary quality of a world power (less than half the already low percentage of Japanese who gave this answer).

The numbers are quite different for the victors of World War II and the permanent members of the UN Security Council. Populations in these countries continue to view military power as an essential element in the “toolbox” of world powers. It is the rising power China that – just ahead of the United States – attributes the greatest importance to military power.

Soft Power in the Ascent

The highest-ranked qualities of world powers – economic power, political stability, and an effective research and educational sector – reveal that international public opinion views softer factors as decisive in determining world power status.

What is also striking here is that the populations surveyed ranked most highly those qualities that remain part of the domestic – i.e., national – policymaking agenda. It is still primarily the individual state that determines the political and economic characteristics of a particular country. These characteristics depend most of all on the political will and governing ability of the state; the capacity of administrative institutions; the productivity of the private sector; and the extent to which the state enjoys popular legitimacy. This is equally true for the fields of research and education

¹ The reasons for this are unknown. We were also informed that questions concerning both state failure as well as democracy and human rights were censored from the survey in China.

– it is primarily the responsibility of national states to establish conditions conducive to the maintenance of an effective research and educational sector.

In contrast, respondents placed less emphasis on those qualities of world powers that lie primarily outside the domain of domestic policymaking, that are associated with a state's social competencies, or that focus on maintaining good relations among states. For example, only about 20% of respondents selected (a) the demonstration of leadership in setting the international agenda or (b) the provision of a social and cultural model that other societies seek to emulate as necessary characteristics of a world power. Yet it is precisely these qualities that are classically understood as constituting "soft power."

This observable emphasis on domestic/national capacities throws a different light on the question of whether the different countries of the world share a transnational agenda. If states rely chiefly on their own strengths to solve problems and to enhance their international status, then the priority of international cooperation may fade into the background while solutions are sought primarily in the maximization of national capacities and opportunities. Should this be the case, international relations may revert to a zero-sum game in which gains by one country automatically mean losses for another. International constellations of this kind would be highly unstable and would possess considerable potential for conflict. Such a situation would certainly not be guided by a common global agenda – or if so, only in the negative sense.

The American Hyperpower

When respondents were asked to rank those countries they currently perceive as world powers, one of the most striking outcomes was the stark difference between self-perceptions of the world power status of one's own country and external perceptions of that country by others. Congruence between self-perceptions and external perceptions occurs only in the case of the United States. Survey respondents overwhelmingly rank the United States as the leading world power, with nearly 40 percentage points separating it from the second-ranked power; U.S.

respondents concur with this assessment. China follows in second position. While Chinese respondents also view their country as the second-leading world power, a higher percentage of respondents from Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States view China as a world power than do the Chinese themselves. It is ultimately the vote of Western countries – not the vote of its neighbors Japan and India – that lead China to be ranked second among world powers.

Among all other countries, large discrepancies can be observed between self-perceptions and external perceptions. Most countries tend to overestimate their own weight on the world stage: this includes India, Russia, and the U.K., all of which rank themselves second among world powers. In the cumulative totals, however, India ranks tenth, Russia sixth, and the U.K. fourth. There is also one case of self-underestimation, however: Japan, ranked third in the cumulative totals, sees itself only in sixth position. Another country for which self-perceptions are nearly in agreement with external perceptions is Germany, which is ranked seventh by its own population and eighth in the cumulative totals.

On the whole, then, all other countries admit that they currently are not playing in the same league as the United States. In a “second” league, China leads Japan and Great Britain, closely followed by the European Union. A “third” class would be comprised of Russia, the United Nations, Germany and France. India follows these countries at a considerable distance. Finally, Brazil and South Africa are not viewed as world powers by populations from other surveyed countries.

Respondents were also asked to name the countries that in future should play a stronger role in securing peace and stability in the world. The results are quite revealing, particularly in light of the world’s perception of the United States as described above. In this question as well, the U.S. is ranked first. Thus despite the negative image of the United States that is reflected in numerous international surveys, and despite the popularity of “America-bashing” throughout the world, the U.S. is still in demand as a force for order. Thus the world’s attitudes toward the “indispensable nation,” as Madeleine Albright put it, appear to be characterized by a certain schizophrenia.

Champions of the Future: China and India

When respondents were asked which countries will be world powers in the year 2020, however, the picture becomes quite different. The ranking for 2020 is much more level than the current ranking, as the United States' lead over the rest of the world is expected to shrink dramatically. China is still ranked second but nearly pulls even with the U.S., not only because its own position improves by ten percentage points, but also because of the much lower percentage of respondents who believe the U.S. will be a world power in 2020. Japan retains its third-place ranking.

One of the real expected "movers" in the future is India, which improves from tenth place in the current rankings to sixth place in 2020. Other countries or organizations whose rankings improve include the European Union (from fifth to fourth) and Russia. Both profit from the decline of the United Kingdom which, along with the United States, is among the main anticipated "losers." The U.K.'s ranking slips from fourth to eighth, where it finds itself the leader of the European troika (the U.K., Germany, and France). The marginalization of Germany and France is expected to continue. France, in fact, falls to nearly the same level as Brazil, whose position moderately improves. Respondents continue to believe that, even in 2020, South Africa will not play the role of a world power.

If we take these assessments at face value, we find arguments both for and against a multipolar world order by the year 2020. According to the survey, the U.S. by 2020 will have lost its position as indisputable leading power. But no real "balance of powers" appears to be in the making, since a wide gap separates the U.S. and China on one hand from all other potential world powers on the other. The surveyed populations thus appear to expect an international system that is marked by a new form of bipolarity whose "force field" will require corresponding adaptations and alignments on the part of all other states. However, since the power gap between the two poles and the other remaining powers is expected to remain relatively small, relations among the various powers are unlikely to be characterized by clear-cut dominance.

The Asian-Pacific Century

Surely, the survey provides a snapshot of only a particular moment. Nevertheless, it captures a dynamic moment, one that reflects the emergence of India and China. This moment is underscored when specific data in the survey are examined more closely. These data reveal not only that it the West, above all, that attributes increasing power to China. Rather, China's self-confidence in its own inexorable rise is reflected in the fact that the percentage of Chinese respondents who believe China will be a world power in 2020 is nearly double that of Chinese respondents who view China as a current world power. In fact, Chinese respondents are confident that China will leave the United States far behind by the year 2020. In their worldview, other states will by then play only a supporting role.

The situation is similar in India, which appears to be bursting with self-confidence. However, it is mostly only the Indians themselves who attribute such strength to their country. Perhaps this is necessary because the rest of the world is apparently prepared to pay less attention to India, even in 2020, than the Indians expect or believe is appropriate.

Respondents in the United States have become increasingly aware that they are already living in the Pacific era. Europe no longer draws significant interest among Americans: they even rank the United Kingdom, which has diligently maintained its special relationship with the U.S., far behind Japan and China. The extent to which China has absorbed the attention of the United States is particularly striking: American respondents appear to view China as their new and sole challenger. Furthermore, the U.S. preoccupation with China appears to increase in direct relation to the extent to which Americans lose confidence in their own position as the world's sole superpower. Russia plays no role either now or in the future in the eyes of Americans, who rank their former great adversary at about the same level as Germany. And France threatens to fade into complete insignificance.

What Role for the European Union?

In the survey, the stagnation or even decline of individual European powers is compensated to some extent by the global role attributed to the European Union. The EU is ranked fourth in two questions: (a) who will be a world power in the year 2020 and (b) who should play a greater role in securing peace and stability in the world.

The fact that the EU ranked only this high – despite the particularly high scores that three EU member states, especially integration-friendly Germany, gave the EU – does not improve the outlook for Europe. These scores demonstrate that the EU has no real advocates among non-European states. This reality is not fundamentally altered by the fact that a high percentage of respondents from nearly all countries surveyed expressed support for closer cooperation with the EU.

If it is true, as the survey suggests, that economic power and political stability are especially important qualities of world powers, then the EU should be able to look toward the future with a certain amount of confidence. On the other hand, it is cause for concern that even in the fields of its greatest strength, the EU is currently ranked lower than Japan. The results of the survey are clear: even the combined economic power of the EU receives less international recognition than that of Japan. One can speculate whether a different result would be achieved if European states were to engage on the world stage as a single actor.

When we look at the future potential of the European Union from an internal perspective, we are struck by the dissonance in answers from the three EU member states that were included in the survey. On the question of qualities that world powers must possess, respondents from the three member states actually agree on only one quality: economic power. However, their assessments of risks and challenges are less divergent. This is true at least with regard to the most important threats – terrorism, poverty, and environmental destruction. But this consensus already begins to dissipate in answers to the associated question regarding the main objectives that world powers should pursue in response to these risk perceptions. It is obvious that such differences in assessment will have important implications for the

formulation of common strategies and positions within European foreign and security policy.

The “Euroskepticism” of the United Kingdom is patently visible throughout the entire survey. U.K. responses reveal remnants of the British imperial consciousness, whose frame of reference encompasses the entire world – Europe occupies only a part of this worldview. The U.K. sees itself, not the EU, unequivocally in the role of global actor. In contrast, German responses reflect practically the opposite tendency, such that the European leitmotif permeates nearly all German assessments of power and policy. This goes so far that even when asked who should take greater responsibility for securing peace and stability in the future, the Germans rank the European Union – albeit just barely – ahead of the United Nations. Finally, the sick man in Europe today is France. French respondents’ pessimism regarding the future of their own country is also transferred onto the EU. They express less trust in the EU than even the British.

The United Nations between Aspiration and Reality

The United Nations, which is involved in confronting many of the challenges deemed globally relevant according to the survey results, is regarded by respondents as both an independent actor as well as an important framework for ordering international relations.

According to the survey, the multilateral framework of the United Nations offers the best organizational structure for regulating international relations. In the cumulative opinion of respondents, peace and stability in the world can be better achieved in an international system led by the United Nations than in a system dominated by regional powers, and far better than in a unipolar or bipolar international order. This is reflected in the fact that the UN is ranked second among actors who should play a more important role in global affairs in the future.

Nevertheless, a significant gap remains between preference and reality. While respondents express support for the United Nations, they do not attribute much

power to the organization: the UN is ranked only seventh among current world powers. Even more important is the fact that respondents do not appear to believe that the UN possesses the potential to improve its status in the future. The UN remains in seventh place among anticipated world powers in the year 2020, and is named by a lower percentage of total respondents than in the question concerning current world powers.

In short: survey respondents desire a strong United Nations that possesses significant global influence, but they do not appear to believe that this wish will really materialize.

Implications for European Policy

The survey demonstrates that, while Europeans are aware of a shift in the distribution of world power, they lack consensus in their assessment of key challenges and appropriate strategies. While the data underscore the importance of bundling European resources in the global arena, the general moods and attitudes of Europeans continue to be marked by national interests and patterns of perception. Absent the impact of decisive events or outstanding political leadership, Europe is likely to continue along its familiar path: integration at the European level of certain policy fields, the retention of national prerogatives and control in other areas, multilateral action within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in some cases, and crisis-driven coalitions without a clear European mandate in others. From this perspective, the European Union will remain a “world power in waiting,” with many of the required resources at its disposal, but without the necessary decision-making or procedural framework to achieve the effective bundling of capacities.

The intensity and naturalness with which other leading actors think and speak about power, interests and global politics should signal to Europeans that they can make a comparable impact only by acting jointly. Recognizing this fact and putting it into concrete action represents one of the most difficult tasks of European policy in the coming years. Due to the internal composition of the EU and the divergent interests,

capacities and ambitions of its member states, strict communitization of all areas of European policy is no longer an option. At the same time, strategies of differentiation are circumscribed and hindered by existing treaties.

Larger member states must become more prepared to engage in effective common action, and many of the smaller member states still need to develop the willingness to engage in policy and strategy fields that befit a great power. The European Union as a world power cannot take the form of a return of the British Empire, nor can it mean an oversized expansion of small-state diplomacy.

Following up the *economy of scale* of the European Single Market with the *diplomacy of scale* of a truly European foreign policy would enable the European Union to have an impact on more than just traditional security policy. If the EU were to assume its role as a leading power, then European monetary, energy, technology, research and development policy, etc., would focus on the global level rather than on internal, self-referential variations among member states. At the same time, Europeans would be required to clearly delineate common interests, values and preferences in a manner that is reliable for third parties, thereby abandoning the usual tendency toward vague, lowest-common-denominator foreign policy formulations. In this way, both its neighbors as well as the global concert of powers would better know what to expect from the EU.

The opinions documented by our survey demonstrate that the European Union certainly has the potential to develop along these lines. However, the attitudes of European respondents show that they have not yet taken the mental step toward viewing the EU as a world power. If the Europeans can achieve this shift, they can become part of the global concert of great powers. If, instead, they remain standing on the threshold, they will certainly feel the immediate effects of global developments, but they will not be able to have a decisive impact on them.