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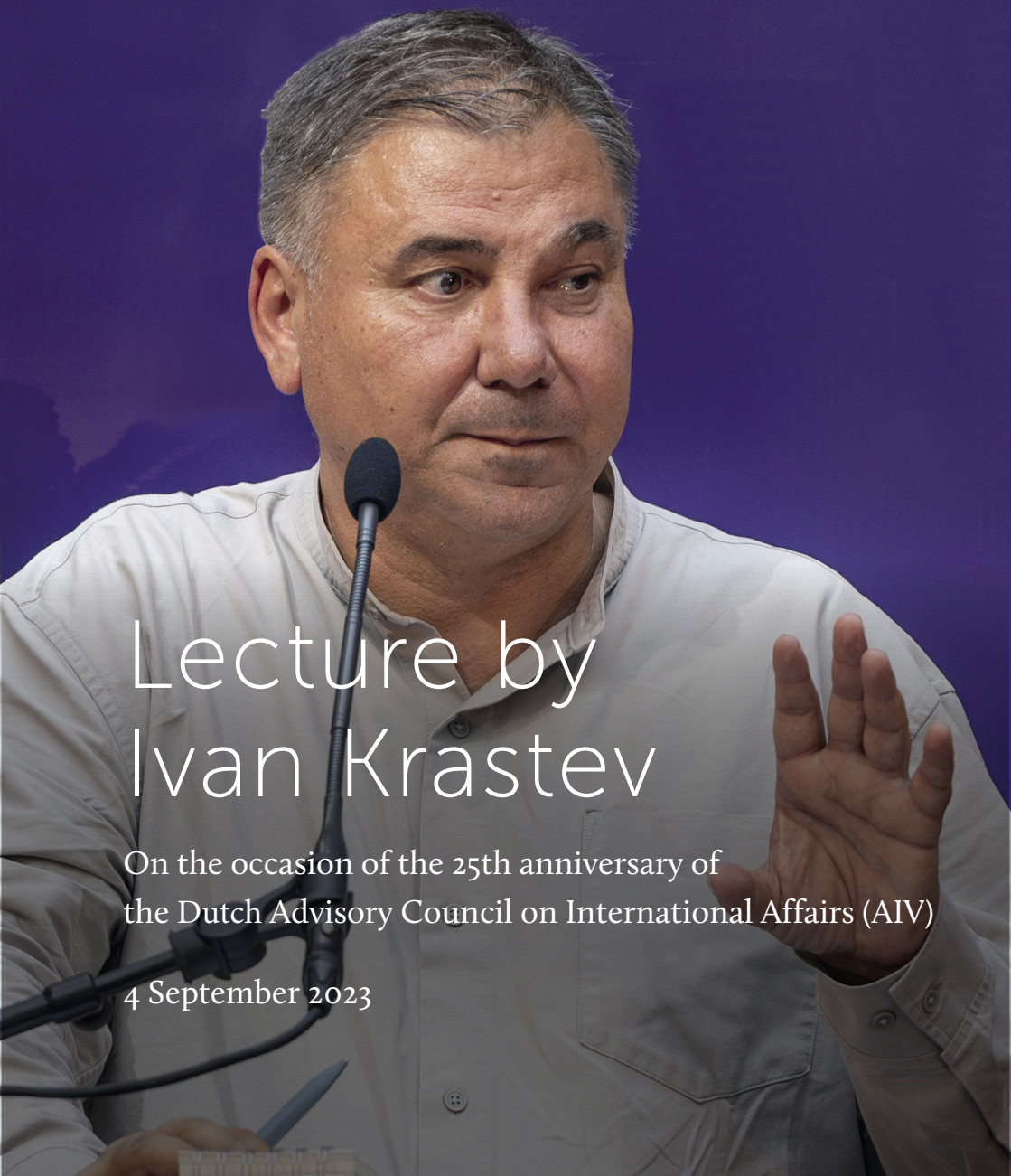

Lecture by Ivan Krastev

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV)

4 September 2023

Welcome address

by Luuk van Middelaar,
chair of the AIV European Integration Committee

Distinguished guests, dear colleagues,

On behalf of the Advisory Council on International Affairs, let me thank you for joining us for a festive occasion, a unique event. Today we are celebrating an anniversary: 25 years since the establishment of the AIV. And we are doing so with fireworks—intellectual fireworks—in the form of a lecture by Ivan Krastev.

It's wonderful to see so many of you here, representing diverse sectors—from knowledge institutions and ministries to parliament, the private sector, and NGOs. We're particularly excited to engage with the youth present today as this marks the beginning of the AIV's enhanced collaboration with younger generations.

We're also privileged to be joined by some who were present at the inception of the AIV 25 years ago and have taken the time to celebrate this

milestone with us. A quarter of a century, a whole generation, has passed since the AIV's foundation in 1998, and we're especially grateful to those who have been with us since the beginning.

Over the years, nearly 300 individuals have dedicated their expertise and efforts to our joint mission, whether as members of the Council, its committees, or staff. Their main role has been to advise the Dutch government and parliament on the Netherlands' position both in Europe and globally, consolidating the country's foremost foreign policy expertise. Our contributions range from specific policy recommendations, like the acquisition of F-35s or optimising development aid allocation, to offering broader strategic perspectives on contemporary challenges such as migration, climate change, or our relationship with China.

In lieu of grand celebrations for our anniversary, we've opted to express the genuine spirit of the AIV by prioritising thoughtful dialogue and uniting people in a meaningful environment. Our focal point today is 'Europe's Stand in a New World Order'. Before I pass the stage to our speaker, let's briefly reflect on the pivotal moment we, particularly in The Netherlands, find ourselves in.

Our present moment is undeniably shaped by Russia's actions in Ukraine. This event has not only united the West in its support for Ukraine but has also showcased the challenges and limitations of Western influence. While the post-Cold War period hinted at Western dominance, recent events, including China's ascension and shifts in other non-Western countries, have demonstrated a more complex global dynamic. The recent expansion of the BRICS group and Putin's meeting today with Erdoğan in Sochi underline this shift. Our speaker will discuss these medium-sized powers, like Turkey, in greater depth.

Contrast this with the ambiance and global perspective 25 years ago—in 1998, when leaders like Bill Clinton, Yeltsin, and Jiang Zemin shaped the world stage. Europe was guided by figures like Chirac and Jospin in Paris, Schröder in Berlin, and Blair in London, and the Netherlands navigated its 'Third Way' with the 'purple coalitions'. Viktor Orbán was then a rising, liberal PM in Hungary. The Dayton Agreement was recent history, the Kosovo war was future, the EU's Amsterdam Treaty and the euro were still anticipations. Foreign affairs, a domain perhaps more reserved for policy experts with their toolkits and strategies, focused on building peace and driving trade. It was less entangled with impassioned debates, identity politics, EU political drama, or climate anxieties.

This late '90s world, with its optimism and a unipolar US power structure, suited the Dutch transatlantic affinity. The rise of globalisation and growing markets favored our longstanding, liberal trading history. And the robust multilateral institutions, coupled with a declining number of global conflicts, resonated with a country that is home to The Hague's Peace Palace and the rule of law traditions as symbolized by Hugo Grotius.

Following the end of the Cold War, positive shifts led to a reassessment of Dutch foreign policies in 1995. Now, given our current global context and guided by the insights of AIV, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment. This calls for a profound reassessment of the principles defining our global standing, inviting us to take stock, disband some illusions, confront new realities, and carve a new path forward.

And this, Ivan, is why we invited you. I hope you relish the challenge. Your distinguished career is testament to your knack for critically analysing our era's most profound beliefs. In your insightful book *The Light That Failed* (2019), you examine the crisis of liberalism and the West's missed opportunities post-Cold War. In *After Europe* (2017) you reflect on the EU's potential demise and the disruptive effects of migration on Europe's East-West relations. In your earlier work you address global protest politics and, more recently, the pandemic. You contribute very regularly to the *Financial Times*, and previously to *The New York Times*.

For those unfamiliar, Ivan Krastev is also chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia and holds a fellowship at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. Among his numerous roles, it's noteworthy to mention he is also founding board member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. Ivan's insights and ideas are highly sought after in major European capitals like Brussels, Paris, and Berlin. We're truly pleased to have you with us in The Hague today.


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Lecture by Ivan Krastev

Thank you very much. I am very proud to be here, but I find myself in a difficult position, because the introduction might be better than the talk itself. Given that this marks your organisation's 25th anniversary, I was reminded that my own 25th birthday was in January 1990. I mention this because what I will attempt to present to you, and what I hope we will discuss, is deeply rooted in the unique Eastern European, and particularly Bulgarian, experience of that year.

The Bulgarian experience

Bulgaria was never Poland. Bulgaria was the most peaceful and uneventful province of the Eastern bloc. Even in the 1980s we had the feeling that we knew what the world was going to look like in 30 years. You could like or dislike the regime, but you basically believed that you were going to retire there, if you were lucky enough. And then in a matter of weeks, everything changed. Certain things that had been totally unthinkable on Monday started to seem inevitable by Friday. The change was dramatic and my own intellectual experience was shaped by the sense that certain things that we have taken for granted over a

long period of time, can change fast. From time to time, this can lead to an exaggeration of processes. But I do believe this is a major difference between the Eastern experience and the Western experience.

The Western European experience

Western Europeans of my generation have good reason to believe that the world is much more stable, and that when you see social or political turbulence, you tend to believe that it is temporary. Eastern Europeans are much more likely to believe that everything can change quickly. That we should be prepared for things you've probably never thought about. I do believe we are in a specific moment. The German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier is not famous for being particularly sentimental or emotional; he is a very sober-minded and serious person. But in October he gave a speech in which he said that on 24 February, Putin did not merely break the rules and the game; he threw the board itself on the floor. And then after meeting President Putin, the Chinese president made a statement saying that we were at a moment that had not been witnessed for 100 years. There are going to be structural changes. And if you go to the US, William Burns, the current head of the Central Intelligence Agency said that we are living in a 'plastic moment', where many things are going to be remade.

I am saying this because one thing that Europeans find especially difficult to believe is that we are no longer in the business of protecting yesterday. We are in a moment where up until yesterday, our major discourse centred on trying to protect the rules-based international order. My feeling is that this is very much embodied by Russia's fully-fledged war in Ukraine, but the new consensus is that we are beyond this. We should be very wary about putting ourselves in the position of defending a status quo that no longer exists. It is not that change is impossible. I believe that the change has happened. The problem is how to shape the next international order where we are not going to be the only shapers, as we were in the late 1990s. In my view this is the reason why, when the war started, the European Council on Foreign Relations was very interested in taking public opinion polls to try to see where the public stood on these major issues.

The voters decide

People never have foreign policy as their major priority, but people do have a political instinct. They understand when something is trying to move and they understand how it is moving. Our idea was to try to see how people in different places—in Europe, in Russia, China, India, the US, Turkey—seethe war in Ukraine as a changemaking event. It is my very firm belief that for at least the last few decades, modern wars have not ended with peace treaties. How many peace treaties have you had in recent years? Quite often wars end in elections. This is particularly true for colonial wars. It was basically the American elections that shaped the end of the Vietnam war. It was the Serbian elections in 2000 that heralded the end of the Yugoslav wars. And n France, de Gaulle coming to power was critically important for what happened in the French-Algeria tragedy.

In the next year we're going to have five elections that will be critically important in reshaping the international order, not on the level of lectures but on the level of realpolitik. Interestingly, on one level the war is going to affect how people vote, but conversely the way people vote is also going to affect the course of the war.

Five important elections

The first election is, and this may surprise you, the one in the Russian Federation. It is well known that in Russia there are two things that people cannot choose—their parents and their president. From that point of view, not much is going to change: we know who's going to be president. But this doesn't mean that the presidential elections in Russia are meaningless or that they are not important for the way the regime is trying to consolidate itself. To be honest, I believe that even the timing of Mr Prigozhin's death has a lot to do with the elections. President Putin did not want to tolerate any talk of Prigozhin running for office. He was never going to run, he was never going to register his candidacy, but the mere idea that people were talking about such possibility destroyed one of the most important effects of the Russian elections: to show to the people that there is no alternative to the Russian president. This is important because it transformed Putin's war into a Russian war. The

Russian public was not prepared for the war, because it was not meant to be a war. President Putin was telling the truth when he said that he meant it to be a special operation. But the special operation ended back in the summer of last year, and this is a war in which hundreds of thousands of Russians are dying. From this point of view the idea of the popular legitimacy of the war should be shown through the vote.

Russian elections have another purpose: to put pressure on Ukraine to hold their own elections. Because according to the electoral cycle, Ukraine must hold elections next spring. It is not easy to have elections when 30% of your territory is occupied, when 6-7 million of your people are out of the country, and when many others are at the front. So the Ukrainian government faces a very difficult choice about whether to hold elections or not. But believe me, if Russia holds elections and Ukraine doesn't, President Putin is not going to miss an opportunity to tell everybody that he is not afraid of the will of the people. This is why I would not be surprised if Ukraine ultimately decides to hold elections. Having an election in a war situation—legally, this means that legislation will have to be amended—is going to be of critical importance. These two elections are going to affect not only what is happening on the front, but also how people outside understand what is going on.

Then you have the election in Taiwan in the beginning of next year. This election is going to be critically important for how China views its role in the war. For the moment it is quite clear that the Chinese have a very strong interest in ensuring that Russia is not defeated, and there is good evidence that they are providing financial and technological support in order to stabilise Russia. Nevertheless, they are trying to keep a distance, and rather than simply siding with Russia, they are seeking to assume the position of the leader of the non-Western world. But if a pro-independence president is elected in Taiwan, this could dramatically change the time frame of the Chinese decision-makers, and they could decide to do something they haven't done up to this point, namely supplying weapons to Russia and getting much more involved in the war. So these elections will have a major impact on what is going to happen.

And then there are the European elections. When we conducted our opinion polls in Europe, it was interesting to see how European public opinion shifted over the course of this one year. When the war started—the first polls were done in late spring of 2022—people were of course in moral shock. They said it was an unexpected war. Basically, Russia has lost, and I think it will take decades for Russian-European relations to recover. It is a generational story. But then suddenly, fear took hold, and many people said it would be better to end the war right now, rather than wait for Ukraine to recover all its territories. Poland was the only country we polled where there were more people saying: 'Even if this is going to mean more victims, even if this is going to be a long war, it is very important for Ukraine to recover all its territory.' Eight months later, there was a major shift in European public opinion towards this position. This does not mean that it came to be a majority position in many countries, but suddenly there were more Europeans who believed that we should allow Ukrainians to try to recover what they have. In my view there are three reasons explaining this shift of the public opinion. The first is the Ukrainian military successes of the summer and autumn of last year. Many people, particularly in Western Europe, who said at the beginning of the war that it was more important to end the war immediately, did so because they believed that the Ukrainians could not win. It was not that they were pro-Russian or anything like that. And then, during the summer and autumn of last year, when Ukraine managed to recover sizable parts of their territory, the idea became, 'We should give them a chance to do it'.

Secondly, at the beginning of the war, when we did our opinion polls, we were shocked by the East-West divide on what people fear. In a nutshell: the Germans and the French feared nuclear war. Poles and the people of the Baltic countries feared occupation. Suddenly, our long history came back. But in the last six or eight months, partially thanks to pressure from the non-Western world (including China), the fear of a nuclear war has been slightly reduced. The Russian government stopped talking about the nuclear aspect of the war. Now we don't know to what extent the only partial successes of the Ukrainian counteroffensive will affect

public opinion in Europe. From this point of view, the European elections are going to be extremely unpredictable on three different levels. For the national elections in most countries, one common thread is the war and support for the war. Secondly, there is the question of whether Ursula von der Leyen is running for re-election. Because of her strong support for Ukraine and the fact that she is strongly identified with the war, her presence will strongly catalyse certain types of processes. And for the first time you are starting to have European leaders who publicly question the strong support for Ukraine, saying that *how* the war will end is less important than *when* it will end. The Hungarian prime minister made a very strong statement last week in which he basically said that Crimea can never be part of Ukraine, and the most important thing is to start peace negotiations now. In European elections, normally, the protest parties, the anti-mainstream parties are overperforming for different reasons in different places. So the impact of this election will be determined by how the European elite interpret the public stance on the war.

This brings us to the most important election for the war, and that is the US presidential election. What we are seeing now is that not only former president Trump, but also the Republican Party and some of the three leading candidates have dramatically shifted their position. While the American public in general is supportive of Ukraine and there is also a certain amount of anti-Russia sentiment, the idea that America should have a much more limited role, that this is very much a European war and that the costs of the war should be borne by Europe, is going to be quite popular with Republican voters. The European Union's response to the war was quite amazing, but it's not clear to me that this support can survive a change in American policy. I hope I am wrong about this. In a certain way, part of the strength of Europe's support was the role played by Biden and the United States. Also in purely military terms it was quite clear that Europe was not prepared for this war. I will give you one piece of data which is not particularly inspiring: when the war started Ukraine had artillery ammunition for six weeks, Germany for two days. So to that extent we are taking peace for granted.

Fragmented opinions

What also emerged very strongly from our survey was that non-Western powers don't share either our support for Ukraine or our estimation of how important the war is. (Non-Western countries differ greatly from one another, so putting them all in one box is the type of generalisation that can undermine an argument.) Take a country like India. In response to the question 'How do you perceive Russia?', 65% of Indians said 'as an ally', and to the question 'How do you perceive the US?', 64% of Indians said 'as an ally'. For them, this war is very different from how it is for us. One of the things that interested us is to try to figure out why. Again, talking about non-Western countries as a bloc can be very misleading, and of course traditional American allies such as South Korea, Japan and others have been standing very strongly with Ukraine, but obviously we are seeing a certain degree of fragmentation, and it is interesting to look at it. I will start with the situation in Europe before moving on to the non-Western countries.

Fragmentation in Europe

When the war started, we witnessed a major difference in the way East and West reacted. To be honest, those of us in Eastern Europe took the opportunity to enjoy our 15 minutes of moral superiority to the West. The narrative goes that starting in 2014 and with Crimea, most Eastern Europeans were telling Germany and France that things were not going to work out the same way as between Germany and France after the Second World War. Obviously, we are in a different moment now. The fact that one is buying gas from Russia is not enough to guarantee that they are not going to start a war. The only thing this guarantees is that we're going to have a huge problem with the gas supply. As a result, at least some Eastern European countries have the feeling that they have had a place at the table but were not given a microphone: they were not listened to. There was this initial moment, in which the Eastern European position was basically: 'We told you so.' This was also very much the case in Ukraine. There is a certain brief pleasure in this, and the West has done it many times to the East, but it does not solve the problem.

When the war started, different tensions and dividing lines emerged, and paradoxically, one was within the East itself. If you go by opinion polls, even on government policy, and ask which countries are most reluctant to support Ukraine, it's not the countries of Western Europe. It's places like Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia. In Hungary it's very much the position of the government, and in the case of Bulgaria and Slovakia it is much more public opinion than the government, but how to explain this? One of my arguments is that Russia's war in Ukraine, which was very much a classic case of recolonisation, brought back a long history. Countries that were part of the Russian Empire—not the Soviet one—are the ones standing with Ukraine as if this were their war. This is true for Poland, the Baltic republics, Finland and to a certain extent Sweden. For them, this was the return of a long history. Overnight, Poland—which had been debating whether to accommodate 20,000 Syrians—was able to host more than a million Ukrainians. Eight per cent of Polish households ended up hosting Ukrainians. This is quite spectacular. Then you have the countries of the former Ottoman Empire: Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia. For them, Russia traditionally was the ally, not the enemy. So even with governments providing support and with public opinion opposed to what Putin is doing, the idea was still to try to find a way of appeasing the Russians. The Habsburgs are always in the middle, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia have very different views. I am saying this because it is not simply an East-West divide. There are also divisions within the East and within the West. For example, France underwent a very important revolution in its policy towards the war.

Paradoxically, the war in Ukraine was Europe's moment, because Europe managed to demonstrate unity, but it was also a nationalist moment. Suddenly, Ukraine was the best demonstration of the mobilising power of civic nationalism: people fighting for the territorial integrity of their country. As a result, the war made many pro-European liberals much more sensitive to security issues, and it made some of the far right much more reconciliatory when it comes to the European objectives. Of course, Giorgia Meloni is the best example of this. This realignment is an important element in understanding what is happening, on the level of both domestic politics and international politics.

Non-Western opinions

When it comes to the non-Western world, I'd like to point out five issues that go a long way to explaining this unexpected reaction to what happened.

The first is, there was this very beautiful speech by the Kenyan ambassador to the UN, in the first days of the war, where he said, in essence: We Africans understand best what is going on because this is one of the colonial wars that we know so well. But you know what, in Paris in 1919, when Eastern European countries were getting their independence, the Vietnamese, the Indians and others tried to ask for a meeting with President Wilson, saying, 'We also want our self-determination,' and the message was: 'This is not for you.' So now, we're getting the same answer from them: 'This is not for you. You are white, you are supported by Americans, you are supported by former European colonial powers. Don't ask about solidarity'. This shows something very important. Anti-colonial and anti-imperial solidarity works particularly well when you share the same villain, when the imperial power is the same. It doesn't work so well when you have different imperial enemies in your history.

The second issue that was critically important was the very strong reaction from some of the countries towards the Western sanction policies. This was perceived to be in response to the high price of food, but more generally, the idea that the West, particularly the US, has the power to impose sanctions was something that scares many countries, and they started to look for coalitions to minimise the effects of the sanctions on them. I do not have problems with our sanctions regime, but it's quite important to know how it was perceived outside of our countries. Listen, in the financial world, freezing the foreign assets of a state is the nuclear option. Suddenly all these people started to say, 'Should we keep our money under our mattress? Could this happen to us? How is this going to happen?' You have this nervousness which, in my view, has been exploited quite handily by the Chinese in the last year and a half.

The third issue, especially when you talk with people from Africa, is that Europe's lack of generosity in the initial months of the COVID period, had a very strong effect. Anytime you talk about Ukraine, they are going to say: 'Do you remember how it was then?' And by the way, being Bulgarian I remember what happened in the Balkans. The European Union, for very good reasons, decided in the beginning of the pandemic to focus on supplying vaccines only within the EU, and you ended up with the Serbian president kissing the Chinese flag, because it was the Chinese who were sharing their vaccines, and it was the Serbs giving the vaccines to Macedonia and other countries. This was not a great look, strategically speaking. At that moment the European Union showed a deficit of imagination. And we're not talking about millions of vaccines; honestly, it was a matter of symbolic politics.

And then, what is also quite important in my view, and this is really the thrust of my argument, is that while we've been greatly shocked by the end of what we perceived as the international liberal order, for many of these countries, the international liberal order was always a fiction. They believed it was all talk, but not necessarily reality. People asked, 'Why do Europeans believe that they are more important than anybody else?'. And: 'Just because something is happening in Europe, should it be much more important than, for example, thousands of people being killed in Ethiopia and other places?' Call it geographic envy, but it has a good historical explanation.

No return of the Cold War ➡ the clout of medium-sized powers

I am going to make a possibly controversial claim, and I will be very happy to discuss it. This is my last and perhaps most important policy conclusion about what I have been seeing. It is popular here, I mean in the West, particularly in the US, to talk about the return of the Cold War. You have certain things that very much resemble it. On one side you have classic authoritarian regimes (China and Russia), and on the other side you have a group of democratic countries (NATO, but also countries like Japan, South Korea and others), that the war managed to consolidate. I am very sceptical that this is going to work. I am sceptical because the nature of the political regime is important, but it does not necessarily define a country's foreign policy. Brazil is not an authoritarian state, particularly now that everybody is in love with Lula, but his position on the war in Ukraine has nothing to do with democratic solidarity. And the Indians, as we said, are not going to break off their relations with Russia because of the nature of its regime, regardless of the fact that they look to the US for very strong strategic reasons, due to their tensions with China. During the Cold War, there was always a polarisation strongly driven by the Soviet-American rivalry, and there was a fragmentation that came with the birth of the new nation states as a result of decolonisation. Back then, polarisation was able to discipline fragmentation.

My argument is that this time, that's not going to be the case. Some of these medium-sized powers are much more powerful economically, much more numerous, and much more self-confident. So, in the crisis of the international order, they see a risk but also an opportunity. While everybody is focusing on what the Americans and the Chinese are going to do and how they are going to shape the world, my feeling is that in the next decade we are going to see a hyperactivity among various medium-sized powers that is going to run in all different directions. They are not necessarily going to be very strategic, but they are going to try to impose their relevance and their importance on the international order. In the beginning people were telling me that Turkey is sitting on the fence. Does anybody have the feeling that President Erdoğan is sitting anywhere? He is running all the time. He is running in different directions. This is the new kind of contagious activism, because this is not the Non-Aligned Movement. These countries are very different. They are very different ideologically, they have very different interests, but all of them are fighting for recognition. All of them are fighting to impose their relevance. As a result, they are becoming hyperactive. Turkey is going to mediate between everybody and everybody. The Saudis and Iranians made an agreement, and they invited China to be the best man at the wedding, because they had the feeling that something important is changing. This moment, this type of activism is giving them a premium, and this is true for many different countries. From time to time, they enter into previously unimaginable coalitions in order to achieve a certain goal and increase their bargaining power with respect to the United States or China. From this point of view, looking at BRICS and BRICS+

is interesting. On one level, for sure, this is a Chinese success that they managed to push through this enlargement. Obviously the Indians were not particularly happy about this, but on the other hand there is much more of a desire on the part of these countries to have options, to play a game of their own. This is not a new alliance, this is not the Warsaw Pact. Europe finds itself at a very, very important moment because we need to make a choice about how we behave in this world. When I was thinking about the world, I remembererd the children's book, talking about some world, where the characters run out of the room, jump on the horse and start riding in all directions at the same time. So you have a world that is not just going in one direction, but basically it is changing directions.

Important questions for Europe

Our initial instinct was to try to maintain the importance of a transatlantic alliance, and it worked very well in this year and a half. The first question is not 'To what extent Europe is going to change its position?', but rather: 'To what extent could the United States decide to change its position?'. A different administration could decide that these alliances are reducing America's room for manoeuvring rather than helping it achieve what it wants in the world. Secondly, this type of transatlantic alliance has its economic costs. The Inflation Reduction Act led to a major outflow of European investment in the United States. Europe is going to have to make some tough choices because if there is going to be a technological decoupling between China and the United States, we cannot choose a third way, because there is no third technology. You either go with American technology or with Chinese technology. This is the reality that Europe is facing, in my view. If this level of fragmentation continues, how will it affect Europe itself?

Speaking of elections, you have probably seen that Poland, which was Ukraine's biggest supporter in the beginning of the war, has decided to stop importing Ukrainian grain to Polish territory in the last three months, in the run-up to its own elections. This is a dramatic shift. Grain export is for Ukraine what gas and oil is for Russia. Fifty per cent of their earnings in foreign currency comes from exporting grain. This is dramatic. This is how they earn their money. Suddenly, Ukrainians

realise that in these three months, Ukraine does not border on Poland, it borders on the Polish elections. We are going to see a lot more situations in which countries don't know what they border on, another country or that country's elections. These types of choices for Europe are not going to be easy, especially when you keep in mind that they need to be made collectively. But different countries are betting on different things. And the truth is that the Europeans do not have much trust that, for example, Germany and France have the capacity to defend Europe. This was one of the things that became quite apparent with the war. On the other hand, I believe that some Western countries cannot be sure of how Eastern Europeans will act when they become net contributors to the European Union and money is no longer flowing from the West to the East. Keep in mind that if Ukraine is going to join the European Union, every single other country, including Bulgaria, will become net contributors.

So, we are really facing major radical questions, and I am going to conclude with one sentence. People always believe that when you have a dramatic moment, the questions remain but there are different answers. My definition of a dramatic moment is the moment in which the questions are changing. And I do believe we are facing questions that we did not face before.

Thank you for your attention.

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**A video recording of this lecture,
followed by a Q&A session, is available at
https://www.youtube.com/@internationalevraagstukken**