
NSI's Jelena Vidojević in conversation with Professor Ayşe Zarakol

This exclusive interview is part of **Missing Voices: Critical Thinking in Times of Polycrisis**, a discussion series presented by the New South Institute (NSI).

The series seeks to offer a necessary and fresh contribution to current global debates on the future of the global order, bringing together diverse voices and perspectives that have often been marginalised, oversimplified, or silenced altogether. Here, NSI's Jelena Vidojević is in conversation with Professor Ayşe Zarakol.

Q Jelena Vidojević: There seems to be widespread agreement that the (liberal) international order is in crisis. However, there is less consensus on the primary causes of this crisis or the early warning signs that indicated the 'Western model' was breaking down. What were these early indicators, and which factors have contributed most to the current turbulence?

A Ayşe Zarakol: I think it is more than a crisis at this point, we are at the end of the period where we could talk about a liberal international order. To some extent the liberal international order was always an illusion, more of an aspiration than a reality. Its highpoint was in the 1990s, when the belief that liberal norms were going to become universal characterised much of the zeitgeist.

Since then this expectation has taken many hits, first gradually, then rapidly. The unilateral behaviour of the United States in the 'War on Terror' period and the flagrant violations of international law were an early hit undermining the legitimacy of the promises of the liberal international order. The global financial crisis of 2008 soured many constituencies, especially in the West, on the economic principles of liberal globalisation.

The first Trump presidency and Brexit together undermined our faith in the durability of multilateral agreements and institutions. The COVID period also weakened the notion that 'the West knows best', further damaging global toleration of an always hypocritical international order centred on the West. It also damaged global supply chains and gave impetus to deglobalisation.



Ayşe Zarakol

Ayşe Zarakol is Professor of International Relations at the University of Cambridge and a Politics Fellow at Emmanuel College. Zarakol's academic work is at the intersection of International Relations, Political Science and Historical Sociology. She is the author of more than sixty scholarly articles. Her most recent book, *Before the West: the Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (2022) advanced an alternative global history for International Relations focused on Eurasia. This book has won six international book awards. Zarakol is the 2023 recipient of the *Rahmi M. Koç Medal of Science*, given annually to one scholar of Turkish origin under 50 for outstanding contributions to their discipline. In 2024, she was elected to the British Academy and Academia Europaea.

While Biden's election in 2020 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 created a brief rallying effect in the core of the liberal international order, the Global South remained sceptical, especially after what happened in Gaza in response to October 7. And now with the second Trump term, it is more realistic to talk about the end of the liberal international order rather than its crisis. Given the Trump administration's many attacks on global trade, multilateral institutions, the Transatlantic partnership and the new Ukraine policy, it is difficult to argue that the previous order will survive. We are in a transition period.

Q Jelena Vidojević: We are witnessing an apparent growing divide within 'the West' regarding its approach to Russia and the future of the war in Ukraine. Paradoxically, the United States has shown a greater willingness to explore negotiations or a potential peace settlement with Russia, while many EU¹ leaders remain hesitant at best and outright resistant at worst. What do you think is driving this strategic divergence, and what could be its short- and mid-term consequences?

A Ayşe Zarakol: In recent memory, there have been three primary justifications for US involvement in and support for Ukraine. First that it is imperative to support Ukrainian democracy against Russia; second that if Putin is not stopped in Ukraine, Russia may invade other countries in Europe, especially in the Baltics; third that China may get ideas about Taiwan from the precedent of a successful invasion of Ukraine.

The first two are European arguments and concerns. The Trump administration does not care about the fate of democracies or prioritise possible threats to European security from Russia. They probably do not believe that Russia is likely to expand beyond Ukraine, but even if they did, they would not necessarily consider it a national security threat to the US.

Therefore only the third motivation still applies as far as the Trump administration is concerned, but they seem to think that making a deal with Putin over Ukraine may be more advantageous in the long run in their rivalry with China. An ironic consequence is that this, along with what is happening in the tariff negotiations, could be driving Europe closer to China as a result. Europe will have to figure out where it stands in this brave new world. There are not many good choices for them in the short term.

Q Jelena Vidojević: Predictions about the future are largely pessimistic, with the global order viewed as increasingly chaotic, disorienting, and dangerous. Many believe that Western involvement, if not dominance, is essential to prevent a complete breakdown ("all-powerful West vs. reactive Rest"). What are your thoughts on this perspective?

¹ European Union

A **Ayşe Zarakol:** I agree that, at least in the short term, we are looking at a period of global disorder and volatility. People may feel nostalgic for the days of Western leadership, but that will not be forthcoming. You cannot put toothpaste back into the tube. Countries used to dealing with unpredictability, like those in the Global South, are probably better prepared for this environment than many Western states.

Q **Jelena Vidojević:** **The global order is unambiguously undergoing a process of 'multipolarisation,' led by the rise of non-Western countries that long occupied an 'outsider' position in the Western-centred system and were often stigmatised as not being 'modern,' 'developed,' 'industrialised,' 'secular,' or 'democratic' enough. How will this shift shape the emerging world order? Will it lead to a more just and inclusive system?**

A **Ayşe Zarakol:** I agree that the international order is undergoing a process of fragmentation, but I want to caution that fragmentation does not automatically result in 'multipolarisation'. Multipolarity requires a degree of coordination and as such it needs to be arranged. I think it is a mistaken/simplistic reading of (European) history to assume it emerges organically. Something more inclusive and representative globally could emerge from such a period of fragmentation, but something even worse than what we had in the last fifty years could also be the outcome. We have to think hard about the choices we make and the leaders we support.

Q **Jelena Vidojević:** **Are there any clear visions (and/or blueprints) emerging from BRICS² countries regarding the future world order? If so, what key principles and strategies do they propose?**

A **Ayşe Zarakol:** If there is any common and clear vision emerging from BRICS countries, it is that the institutions of the next international order need to be more inclusive and less hypocritical. But it is easy to argue that when you were on the losing side. The real moral test always comes when one has power and has to share it, and very few pass it. I hope BRICS countries learn the lessons of history and act on them when they get the opportunity to lay the foundations of our next order.

² Brazil, Russia, Indian, China and South Africa