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Below is the summary from the memo of a briefing (on 11.14.22) entitled “Is America ready for a multipolar world?” The briefing consisted of two panels, the first called “Conflict, Competition, or cooperation? The U.S., Russia, & China at a Crossroads” and the second “The Global South and the ‘Rules Based Order’”.

In Washington, the dialogue that happens surrounding Russia and China is restricted to the line of either containment or competition. The panelists believe that the US cannot conceive of itself as anything but the global leader. While politicians in Washington do not make the argument that China poses an existential military threat to the US, they have no reservations arguing that China is competing for their own rules-based order, and economic, institutional, and commercial dominance.

We have to put ourselves in the shoes of the global south to understand how they see the world. When people look at western newspapers, there is often an impression of China as a dark monster, never committing any mistake, never facing any problem, and moving towards domination of the world. However, if we look at the world from the view of Beijing, Beijing sees borders that are more or less unstable, threatened, or facing unfriendly countries. Any defensive measures from countries near China are viewed by Beijing as offensive toward them, and vice-versa..

Asia doesn’t want to be the Europe of the cold war. Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines do not want to choose between the US and China, and the panelists argue that the US should not demand they choose their camp. These Asian countries have to live with China, and urge China to be less aggressive. We need a way of talking to the Chinese, trying to understand their interest and not defining their interests in the maximalist perspective of trying to maintain western hegemony.

The United States is trying to prevent China from becoming an advanced economy. It is economic warfare. However, the sanctions put in place against Russia are different. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Europe and the US had to react and economic sanctions made the most sense. In this case, the surrounding countries, like those in the Balkans, have little interest in Asia and are happy about US support of Ukraine. Unlike the countries surrounding China in Asia, they are not torn, and are likely to side with the US.

The briefing also discusses the issue of double standards. Some countries believe they should be exempt from certain parts of the rules. For example, when it comes to the war in Ukraine, allies cite rules-based international law, respect for territorial sovereignty, and human rights, etc.. Then, when it comes to the treatment of Palestinians, the same countries think that international policy no longer applies. This rules-based concept is being utilized in a very subjective matter and is seen as not being applied equally to all citizens of the world. The panelists believe that there should be international law, and multilateral instruments that seek to promote it. It is important that all persons and all nations must benefit. We should be as vigorous when it comes to Palestine as we are when it comes to Ukraine.

It is not in the US’ interest to divide the world into democracies and autocracies. This is a simplistic black and white division of a world that is multicolored. The US must realize that the rest of the world has become intelligent. When the US says it is against China because it is an autocracy, but then allies with Vietnam, an autocracy, against China, the world sees our hypocrisy. We should not underestimate the intelligence of the rest of the world. And for China, they have a good chance at winning over a lot of the world to their cause, but first China has to stop claiming that they are still a developing country.