The Wind of Change: Moving Towards an Era of Multi-polarity

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Abstract

The world is now moving to an era of multi-polarity, with the changing orientation of power with four major players emerging to lead the world. These four players are America, European Union (EU), China and India, and Russia. The emergence of these new polarities has triggered a new competition between these powers which is vital to progress. However, instead of confronting and snubbing each other, they should cooperate and collaborate for the greater good of humanity. Regional leaders throughout the world sought for new structures in which they could manage shared interests, threats and opportunities. ASEAN, in this case, is a good example of success.

Until recently, the West has, by large, determined the rules of the game on the global stage. It has been a world looked at in a bi-polar way—the West being one pole and the opposite pole being the rest of the world. Today the trajectory of change is towards a multi-polar world, where different discourses and concepts of governance can markedly clash in many ways. At the same time, the policy packages that have largely set the global agenda in recent decades—in economics and security—have had to be reconsidered. The Washington Consensus and Washington security doctrines have of necessity been questioned. Also we face new critical threats; the old threat was ‘the other’, the new threat is shared problems and collective threats such as financial market instability, terrorism, climate change, urban and rural poverty and the spread of global infectious diseases. All of these problems do not have just a bi-polar perspective to them but have multi-dimensional facets to them that require collective consideration.

Global Public Policy Working Group: Since one of the mandates of the United Nations is to address pressing global problems, the UN launched a Global Public Policy Working Group to discuss how public policy can become more of a reality at the global level. Keeping in mind what has been achieved at the national and regional levels in terms of public policy, this working group will bring together practitioners and theoreticians on a regular basis to map out the challenges of global public policy for think tanks and schools of public policy. The objective of these events is to address the importance of public policy at the global level, including better coordination, stronger institutional mechanism of compliance, and
greater allocation of resources, concerning international security, the environment, and development issues. As the current financial crisis shows, a global perspective is also badly needed in the field of international economics. The UN is supporting such global cooperation among nations rich and poor and attempting to find answers to such questions taking into consideration the many different perspectives that these problems generate in different parts of the world in many different ways.

Moving towards an Era of Multi-polarity

Have a look at the map of the world and with a little bit of insight you will be able to perceive the changing orientation of power with four major players emerging to lead the world. These four players all wish to flex their political muscle to influence the world policy. However, their motives may not be in everyone’s best interests and might run into lots of resistance especially from developing countries.

1) America, already in the lead role.
2) European Union (EU), signing treaties like Lisbon treaty and acting as a political and economical influential block of countries.
3) China and India, rising economic and military powers.
4) Russia, re-exerting herself in central Asia and the Baltic region to revive her past glory.

Multi-polarity doesn’t always mean multi-cooperation. Self interests and the desire to make their own decision might be the options that many countries will choose because self-interests still dominate the decision making among various countries.

As America is withdrawing her troops from Iraq, which many feel has been a misbegotten adventure, and struggling hard to establish her feet firmly in Afghanistan, the wind of change is quite palpable.

Russia having faced defeat in Afghanistan can’t forget or forgive America’s furtive and tacit support to the “Mujahideen” fighting against Russian invasion. For Russia, now is the time to settle the scores with America as she is trying assiduously to extricate herself from this morass.

On the other hand, America, fighting strenuously to sustain her uncontested hegemony on the world, is apprehensive of China’s exponential economic growth. So by increasing her sway over countries like Afghanistan, India, South Korea and others, she wants to keep China in check. Nuclear deals with India are also indicative of America’s intentions to support India as a regional power to balance out China’s growing influence.

General McChrystal’s assessment of the recent Afghan situation in which he, on one hand praised India for building civil infrastructure in Afghanistan, and on the other hand he criticized India for causing tension and fanning friction in the conflict riddled region. If India’s role is viewed in the context of her close connections with Russia, the hazy dynamics of power struggle becomes clear. The demand of 40,000 more troops by General McChrystal is also an endeavor on the part of America to salvage her flagging dominance on the world in general and on south and central Asia in particular.

For America it is the time to take revolutionary decisions to hand out an olive branch for peace and cooperation which is quite possible under the present leadership of President Obama who some feel carries both the charisma and the ability to change the world for the better.

No doubt the polarities are changing and America must realize that maintaining sole superiority over the entire world on the basis of military might be no longer possible in the 21st century, with these changing trends powers like Russia and China are demanding more space and roles in
world affairs. The emergence of these new polarities has triggered a new competition between these powers which is vital to progress but all these powers instead of confronting and snubbing each other should cooperate and collaborate for the greater good of humanity.

They all should not only support each other but also join hands to help those under developed and developing nations where poverty, hunger, illiteracy and disease are not only rampant but also responsible for most of the unrest across the globe.

It is time for the US to sense the change and allow some space to other deserving contenders. For all these powers, future courses of action should be initiated to promote the general wellbeing of humanity and try to come closer to each other instead of drifting apart.

Bi-Polar World and ASEAN

As the seemingly fixed Cold War bi-polar world order came under threat, weak states started to fall into conflict and ethnic rivalry. Weakened borders aggravated organized drug traffic, people-trafficking and terrorism, which impacted security dialogues throughout the world.

Regional leaders throughout the world sought for new structures in which they could manage shared interests, threats and opportunities. Marginalized economies that had been excluded from the world market were increasingly seeing renewed opportunities in the collaboration with neighboring countries. Different actors (like non-state actors and ideological groups) also progressively entered the vacuum that was left in global governance.

Regionalism (the collaboration of (usually) neighboring states) since the 1990s has drastically changed compared to the Cold War regional cooperation, from being a merely security-driven organization, sponsored by nation-states, to dynamic and multidimensional integrations that deal with economy, culture, politics and social aspects. Today’s New Regionalism is a process of construction and deconstruction by different players and changes according to the global processes. The strategic goal behind the initiatives is the establishing of a firm, coherent region that can collectively react to global pressures, tensions and challenges.

ASEAN

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a perfect example of a fairly successful regional cooperation that responds to external pressures and common challenges. At its establishment in 1967, the reasons for cooperation came primarily from the outside. The US feared the spreading of communism to Southeast Asian countries and sponsored the creation of the association for stability reasons. After the Cold War however, ASEAN started to steer its own course, from within it further developed regional arrangements by expanding with Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar and adopting the ASEAN Free Trade Area to attract Foreign Direct Investment.

The Asian financial crisis that struck the region in 1997/98 made ASEAN increasingly aware of the importance of cooperation among members and non-members. One of the outcomes of the crisis was an Asian monetary policy that, despite its connection to the IMF, was a statement that Asia was enforcing their own financial framework for future crises and no longer wanted to depend on the US. Furthermore, ASEAN created bilateral agreements with China, Japan and South Korea (ASEAN+3), a framework that besides financial issues also includes deeper economic cooperation.

Other players in the region have not sit still as these transformations unfolded and a period of building other institutions and reinforcing other regionalisms, have up to today set the tone in the Asia-Pacific region. The primary regional cooperation that was set up was the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Other global forces that meet in the region are the United States, the European Union, China and Russia. The United States has promoted economic cooperation in the APEC, because it had no role in the ASEAN association. ASEAN is also a member of the APEC and has implemented its ‘open regionalism’ rhetoric, based on sovereignty, non interference and consensus in order to retain a certain degree of independence within the organization.
The SCO is a forum between China, Russia and five central Asian (oil rich) countries. This initiative is being closely watched and ASEAN has been trying to create a dialogue with the SCO, aware of the importance of its involvement in this cooperation.

Since 9/11, regionalism seems to have boosted once more in the region. The US discourse of the War against terror was also articulated in the APEC, forcing the members to take action towards their Muslim extremists’ population. ASEAN, not willing to awaken extreme responses in its population, acts with caution. In this new situation, ASEAN will have to assess its position that will not jeopardize the access to the US market, but neither grants a US influence in the association’s affairs. The war against terrorism is not fully backed by all countries; moreover, the reaction of the US during the Asian financial crisis has caused a lot of resentment and the unilateral world order that is advocated by the US is a much contested form in Asia, as in most other parts of the world.

Uncertainties about the shape of the world order have been an incentive to the ASEAN+3 framework (including ASEAN and China, Japan and South Korea). It may just be another sign for increased regionalism of the Southeast and East Asian region. In the words of Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, a wider regionalism, under auspices of ASEAN is “an idea that would not go away” (cited in Kim, 2004: 18-19). It may be still too early to predict the exact outcomes of Asian regionalism and ASEAN’s role in it, but the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area has been a sign for increased integration. Even though China poses a challenge to the region and the world, it will most likely benefit the growth of ASEAN.

Success of ASEAN

ASEAN is often referred to as the example of successful Third World Regional cooperation. It is remarkable that a region so diverse—with “Unity in diversity” as a slogan in the region—has been able to agree on common issues within a regional governmental framework. It is also remarkable that ASEAN has put its stamp, norms and visions on organizations such as the APEC, the ASEAN-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN+3 (APT). If ASEAN is able to keep hold of its role in the contested world order, US’ pursuit for unilateralism and advancing Chinese economy, remains to be seen. But the signs so far show that ASEAN is willing to start negotiations with the SCO, that it is interested in extending relations with the EU and through the ASEAN+3, it will continue to strengthen the relationships with its Eastern neighbors. ASEAN knows it does not provide its own regional hegemony within the organization and therefore it will seek relationships with its contenders, envisioning a new world order of multi-regionalism and multi-polar hegemonies of which ASEAN will possibly be part. ASEAN is a good example of how a multi-polar cooperative can work on a regional level. If this model can be expanded into other areas of the world, the replacement of the bi-polar world model with a multi-polar one might have a chance to work.

The Past World Order?

Numerous theories abound attempting to explain world order. The most popular are: balance of power, bi-polarity, multi-polarity, and hegemony. Other models have been considered relevant also (Marxism, anarcho-syndicalism, end of history, perpetual peace federations, and the clash of civilizations). For the purpose of this discussion, we are just going to focus on two of the most popular and recently debated templates of World Order:

Bi-polarity and multi-polarity signify two theories extended from the balance of power model. Bi-polarity theories argue that world order is maintained when two powerful nations counter-balance each other’s influence and the rest of the nations either choose sides, remain neutral, or play both powers off each other. The most recent example of the Cold War featuring the US and the USSR underscores the bi-polarity model yet seriously overlooks numerous factors. First, while bi-polar world order may prevent large-scale war from occurring, proxy conflicts, regional violence, and other problems can occur (revolutions based on ideology or religious affiliation).
Today’s World Disorder?

A world order must confront and attempt to alleviate numerous conflicts in international affairs. These problems include but are not limited to: WMD proliferation, terrorism, environmental degradation, human rights, economic trade, the militarization of space, the North vs. South gap, health problems, population explosions, radical ideology, lack of education, mass starvation, and failed or failing States. World problems also include massive movements of drugs, sex slaves, money laundering and other criminal activities sometimes linked to terrorism. Other serious problems include the return of smallpox, the spread of HIV and AIDS throughout Africa, as well as the demographic of radicalization where young males without job prospects gravitate toward extremist ideologies. This is enhanced in radical Islamic environments where poor economies in conjunction with radical education and extremist religion produce aggressive movements. Furthermore, the ability of the North countries to integrate the South may help mitigate a host of problems including: water wars, disease, lack of education and literacy, and poor human and women’s rights. Yet some economists argue that even enhancing economic cooperation and trade may not prevent conflict or the numerous ills plaguing the South. Moreover, the role of foreign aid, representation in the UN, and the disproportionate allocation and utilization of world resources are significant problems. Extended conflicts exist in poor regions such as Africa where debt crisis, a lack of skilled leaders, military coups (from 1958-1994 over 60 military coups took place) have occurred, and even a more developed country like Thailand has seen 18 military coups or coup attempts since 1932.

These problems signify intimations of world disorder and require extensive coordinated efforts to assuage. Due to globalization, problems in regions of the world now have the capacity to affect the entire world, or at least significant portions thereof. Thus, a model of world order is perhaps more necessary than ever. The latest drama shows how the poorest and least developed country like the Somalian pirates can create havoc to the world economy including the most developed country like the US, European Union and ASEAN alike which calls for an international force to patrol the waters off the Somali coast, this mirrored the country’s collapse into lawlessness and civil war over the last two years.

Such is the current risk from piracy that it threatens the entire shipping industry through Suez Canal to the north, which is one of the world’s busiest maritime traffic routes and which connects Europe with growing markets in Asia and the Middle East. Last week, the NATO military alliance announced plans to send seven frigates to the area to combat piracy and provide escorts for aid ships. The move followed a request from the World Food Program, which says its efforts to help famine-struck Somali refugees are being jeopardized. (Freeman, 2008)

Conclusion:

Like it or not, the world is Moving Towards an Era of Multi-polarity. Representation in government and standardized laws are requisite first-steps in creating order and unfortunately, great powers historically have not promoted these trends in consistent ways. Economic cooperation and cultural exchange may follow, but will not necessarily mitigate conflict. The disparities in wealth, power, and the assertion of “national interests” must be addressed. These are long-term goals with mammoth short-term problems. While world order is currently carried out by US “hegemonic globalization” future trends should shift toward polyarchy and multi-polar world order to represent the diverse needs of a complex world. World order may function in cycles where first, Empires and regional powers are necessary to provide stability, shifting toward multi-polar, balance of power, and bipolar models, followed by a hegemonic power which may enable and empower the assertion of polyarchy and multi-polar order on an unprecedented scale.

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References


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