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A World in Flux

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Scholars and pundits alike have been qualifying our times as of “transition and turbulence”, “disorder” and “strategic unease”. Other concepts that recur in discussions on the present state of the world are ‘uncertainty’ and ‘unpredictability’. They all seem to point to a world in flux. Let’s see what that means.

This paper sketches a macro-political view of the current state of the world. The focus will be on the forces at work in shaping our world, on the underlying trends and tendencies. Not on the ‘events’ whose meaning depends on the strategic framework in which you place them anyhow.

In a world where power is shifting and a new but uncertain equilibrium is to be found, the State reclaim its own standing and strength, its full sovereignty, and becomes less dependent on and engaged with other States, in the process rewriting some of the rules of the game. The diffusion of power, the questioning of the rules-based system, the retreat from multilateralism, the growing isolationism and the absence of global leadership are as many facets of one single new reality: power politics is back.

DIFFUSION OF POWER AND POWER SHIFT

When you spread iron filings on a white sheet of paper, put a magnet below it and activate its poles, you get a neat pattern of well-ordered alignments. That is how the world map looked during the Cold War era, the era of the Bipolar World. Kinshasa was aligned on Washington. Luanda, just slightly below on the map, on Moscow. A transparent world. A world in which power was distributed among, and concentrated in, these two capitals.

While the Bipolar World might have been intrinsically a rather dangerous place, its doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction paradoxically led to stability and predictability. As Ronald Steel put it: “In its perverted way, the Cold War was a force of stability” (Temptations of a Superpower).

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union, disruptive forces which had been held in check by the ‘ordering principle’ of the bipolar logic, were unleashed. The lid went off the kettle. Ethnic tensions and national rivalries erupted in violence all over the place (South-East Asia, Central-Africa, Caucasus, Balkans, to name just a few). With the Cold War gone, many countries, particularly in Africa, lost their strategic interest. Not much people cared

anymore about where Kinshasa or Luanda were exactly located on the world map.

Enter the United States, the ‘sole remaining superpower’ and with it a new era: that of the Unipolar World. In the early 90’ we see a weakened Russia (Yeltsin), a China on the rise but definitely not yet a power to be reckoned with and finally a European Union unable even to address the challenges in its own backyard (the Balkans). The resulting concentration of power in Washington made Bill Clinton say in the mid 90’ that “if the US isn’t going to lead, the job will not be done”. And the US did indeed, by and large, show responsible leadership in world affairs during that period.

But that period was short-lived, a ‘unipolar moment’ indeed, as it has been remembered. A new Russia woke up under a strong leader, Putin, whose power base, however, seems rather thin. China made strident advances on the world scene, particularly in economic terms but increasingly also in politico-military terms, thereby gaining in restrained self-confidence. The United States, while remaining strong and resilient as always, lost some of its natural and unquestioned leadership role as it became more inward-looking, a trend set in motion under the Obama-administration and apparently reinforced by Trump (‘apparently’ because with Trump one never knows for sure, as words and deeds seldom seem to match). And the European Union, while overcoming its multiple crises (euro, terrorism, refugees), prudently starts exploring some hard power avenues (PESCO in the military field) supplementing its unquestioned soft power assets. The EU Member States, for their part, have finally started increasing their defense budgets.

Such is the somewhat uncertain world we currently live in, a world of powers – some rising, others slightly falling - in search of a new power-equation, a new balance that might

but not necessarily will result in a stable Multipolar World. It is a world where as a result of the diffusion of power a lot of testing and teasing is going on, just to find out how far one can go without going too far (Georgia, Eastern Ukraine, North Korea, South China Sea). No outright confrontation among the big powers seems to be in the offing. What we witness is a big game of ‘smoke and mirrors’, adding to the confusion. It is a world of power shift, not intrinsically dangerous, but where uncertainty and unpredictability reign unabated.

EROSION AND FRAGMENTATION OF NORMS AND VALUES

The post-Cold War world order on which the big powers seemed to have implicitly if not explicitly agreed in the early 90’, was a rules-based order. That order guaranteed a relative stability in the inter-State relations. International rules of conduct, among them the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, were felt not so much as external constraints on behavior than as factors of stability and predictability of behavior.

Things changed some ten years ago. Core universal norms and values, meant to regulate international relations started being increasingly questioned, sometimes openly. Established principles regarding nuclear non-proliferation (Iran, North-Korea), the non-use of force, the non-intervention in domestic affairs of other States and the respect of the territorial integrity of States (Iraq, Kosovo, Georgia, Ukraine), rules regarding the protection of civilians in armed conflict (Syria, Yemen) as well as basic principles of the law of the sea (South China Sea) were repeatedly broken. Emerging norms such as the one regarding the responsibility to protect (R2P) were abused (Libya).

At the domestic level basic political rights (fair and free elections, fair trial) and fundamental freedoms (of assembly, press...) seem no longer unassailable (Turkey). Even within the

European Union some Member States openly question the validity of its foundational principles regarding democracy and the rule of law, such as the independence of the judiciary (Poland, Hungary). Presumably universal human rights are being “relativized” and “contextualized”. Respect for non-discrimination principles (gender, race, religion, ethnicity...) and basic norms regarding the physical and moral integrity of the person are disregarded in many places (China, Myanmar, Zimbabwe).

One should avoid exaggerating or dramatizing these developments. It is not as if the world has become in just a few decades an utterly nasty place. But some places in the world have definitely become nastier (Turkey, Egypt) as a rules-based order is being replaced by an interest-based system where the rights of States and citizens are made subservient to the (geo-)political interests of governments seeking primarily to perpetuate their grip on power (Russia, China). What we witness, as regards norms and values, is a transition, in some countries at least, from a shared universalism (the UN managed ‘Universal Declarations’) towards a local particularism (so-called Asian or African values) where the State fixes its own cocktail of rules as it sees fit. There is an unquestionable parallel here with the post-truth world of alternative facts, where the State (or individual) is allowed to fabricate its own cocktail of truths, those with which it feels most comfortable.

THE RETURN OF THE STRONG STATE AND THE RESURGENCE OF BILATERALISM

The State has never been away from international politics, contrary to what a trendy post-modern, post-Westphalian conception does want us to believe. Indeed, the State has remained center stage on the international scene, even when in the meantime other actors besides International Organizations have joined that scene, including the group of so-called non-state actors (in particular non-

governmental organizations and transnational corporations) or even anti-state actors (such as terrorist organizations or transnational criminal groups). But what is relatively new is the re-emergence of the ‘strong’ State, the self-assertive State, often linked to some kind of renewed or reinvented nationalism or patriotism.

One consequence of the return of the strong, sovereign and independent State is the resurgence of classical bilateral diplomacy, no longer as a complement to multilateral diplomacy, but to some extent as its replacement. The strong State has indeed less appetite to be just a member of a larger, often bureaucratic organization where its voice gets diluted in majority decision making processes. The strong do-it-yourself State prefers to either simply act by itself (unilaterally) or else in a direct State-to-State relationship (bilaterally).

William Hague, who joined the Cameron-government in May 2010 as its new Foreign Secretary, soon packed out with his ‘New Bilateralism’, predicated on the premise that what one does alone, one does better (heir of the older more cooperative principle: ‘acting together when you can, alone when you must’). Trump too is distancing himself of multilateralism in favor of bilateralism. Witness his unpacking of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) which he hopes to see replaced by a set of parallel bilateral Free Trade Agreements. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) too is up for a downward revision. Further signals pointing in the same direction are Trump’s refusal to nominate the US judge on the WTO Dispute Settlement Panel, thus disrupting this important mechanism for the maintenance of an orderly world trade system, his decision to have the US withdraw from UNESCO-membership and his threat of diminishing the US share of obligatory UN budget contributions.

Multilateralism is on the defensive. The concept of ‘effective multilateralism’, once a

key concept in European strategic thinking (Solana's 2003 European Security Strategy) is today mocked as an oxymoron: to be effective, diplomacy must be bilateral, not multilateral. Experience teaches that classical international organizations (UN-style) are poor at real time problem solving and crisis management (witness the UN management of crises in Rwanda (2004), Darfur (2006), Sri Lanka (2009) and Myanmar today). International Organizations should conversely concentrate on what they are good at: treaty-making and long-term norm setting (Sustainable Development Goals, Climate Change).

This shift away from classical multilateralism is also felt in the so-called 'supranational' governance of the European Union itself, where the increasingly prominent role of the European Council has given a boost to the 'intergovernmental' method to the detriment of the orthodox so-called 'community' method centered around the Commission. As the EU had to face multiple crises hitting it simultaneously (euro, refugees, terrorism), the shift towards 'intergovernmentalism' was not just an option, but a necessity. It remained, however, a shift within (be it at the margins of) the existing Lisbon institutional framework. More significant is the fact that EU policies are also increasingly being shaped by European capitals, in particular Berlin and Paris, but this time outside of the institutional framework.

These developments are compounded by different forms of Euroscepticism promoted by populist parties (France's Front National, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, Hungary's Jobbik Party, Finland's True Finns) that openly question if not the existence itself of the EU, at least parts of it such as the Euro- or Schengen zone, thus contributing to its unraveling. Brexit – the outright withdrawal from the EU - will be remembered by history as a major break in multilateral diplomacy.

One can either lament these developments or conversely try to understand them as reflecting

a new political reality, one in which the strong State has come to reclaim its sovereign powers.

GROWING ISOLATIONISM

Let's start with a platitude: we live in a complex world. Many people simply cannot catch up with the rapid technological developments (Artificial Intelligence, robotics, autonomous vehicles, big data-mining) nor with some of the new social norms (LGTBI, euthanasia, even abortion) which they find disruptive and unsettling. For them the world has become opaque. They feel disconnected from it and increasingly disoriented in it: estranged, disenfranchised and disempowered. They feel uncertain about their identity, their future. As a result, they turn inward within the narrow confines of a self-constructed, often self-imagined world of Selfies,Whatsapps, Facebooks etc. Add to it the unequal and unfair distribution of globalization's benefits (with income inequality its most visible expression), and you got all the ingredients of frustration and discontentment on which the populist politician fully capitalizes, often fueling these feelings through politics of fear and hatred.

This inward movement is replicated at the State-level: States withdraw from the world at large within the domestic safety of their national borders, which take the shape of walls (Trump's US-Mexico border) or fences (Hungary, Austria). The narrowly interpreted local interest comes first (Trump's 'America First') and with it protectionism and anti-globalism. As globalism turns into localism and cosmopolitan liberalism into populist illiberalism (Le Pen, Orban, Kaczynski) new forms of aggressive nationalism, sectarianism and xenophobia come to the fore, as we saw with the refugee crisis in Europe.

With this new nationalism come identity politics. With the closing of the borders comes the closing of the minds. A strong, narrow and exclusive sense of belonging to a nation or a particular group carries with it the perception

of distance and divergence from other nations or groups. Within-nation solidarity fuels between-nation rivalry. Sometimes, moreover, these identities are mere political constructs (being Hutu or Tutsi in Burundi, being Roma in Slovakia, being Rohingya in Myanmar) based on, if not illusory or fabricated, at least grossly exaggerated beliefs in presumptively unique ethnic, religious or other characteristics. In many places, not just Europe (the Balkans), latent (Kashmir) or manifest (Myanmar) conflicts are sustained by the illusion of one such single, unique identity (Hindu vs. Muslim, Muslim vs. Christian, Sunni vs. Shia...).

In parallel to the space-related withdrawal from the larger world into the smaller confines of the nation-state, there seems to be a time-related withdrawal from the long-term (LT) and structural to the short-term (ST) and incidental, a phenomenon known under the pedant name of 'short-termism'. Granted, humankind has always been prey to the so-called Hyperbolic Discounting Fallacy, but short term thinking seems more prominent today than in the past. Necessary LT policies, focusing on structural inter-generational issues (such as climate change, food security, demographics, pension schemes) are sacrificed for the ST electoral advantage by giving in on the immediate gratification of a capricious electorate. The politician in general, and the populist politician in particular has a ST horizon: he works for the present and has no key to the future. Long term strategic interests or investments (such as energy infrastructure or major defense platforms) are neglected in favor of short term tactical advantages or pet projects.

RELUCTANT GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

It is no surprise that in an uncertain and unpredictable world where States turn inward and seem less concerned about the larger world around them, leaders feel less inclined to stand out and assume part of the responsibility that world governance would require. In a

world where the big players are testing each other out to see what new power equation may emerge the prevailing attitude is one of wait-and-see. Hence the sense of paralysis as regards global leadership.

Contrast Clinton's 1996 statement already mentioned ("if the US isn't going to lead, the job will not be done") with Obama's 2015 statement, referring to the Middle East turmoil, that "the people of these countries are going to have, you know, find their own way". And Trump's retreating from world leadership is no less clear: "we are not going to fight wars in countries we even don't know the name of".

So, who is going to fill the gap left by a disengaging America? No other power seems willing (Russia, China) or able (EU) to step in. Not Russia, which is not primarily interested in securing peace and security in the world anyway, but rather in securing and extending its own power base, perhaps at the expense of other's insecurity. Would China be prepared to do some of the global lifting? Not sure. Although under Xi there are clear signs pointing in the direction of a willingness to increasingly assume international responsibilities (climate change, UN peacekeeping), China remains a stern defender of the principle of non-interference in other countries' business, naturally leading to a policy of non-engagement and therefore non-leadership. North Korea has been for too long a case in point, but here too things are changing. And what about Europe? The EU as such seems to lack both the required political unity and political will to assume responsibilities beyond its immediate (Eastern and Southern) neighborhood. If not the EU, then perhaps some European capitals: but London has outflanked itself through Brexit and Paris, although naturally inclined to engage internationally (Libya, Mali, Syria), cannot do it on its own, while Merkel's Germany will most probably continue to give priority to European unity, perhaps in partnership with Macron,

including in the field of defense now that Europe can no longer outsource its security across the Atlantic.

We could perhaps try to look for leadership roles at other advanced countries such as Japan, Canada or Australia, but not much seems yet to come from them. At some stage emerging countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa, either separate or as a group (within the BRICS), seemed promising candidates for leadership, but we have come to understand that the BRICS concept is an artifice rather than a genuine power to come. So-called pivotal states, great countries to be reckoned with such as Turkey, Pakistan and Egypt seem more to be in need of responsible leadership than in a position to provide for it.

A similar retreat in leadership is apparent at the level of global governance structures such as the G7 (G8 minus Russia) and G20 that were specifically meant to provide for leadership over and above individual countries. But as of late their clout has been fading away so much so that we seem to have landed in Ian Bremmer's G-Zero world defined as "a world order in which no single country or durable alliance of countries can meet the challenge of global leadership".

CONCLUSION: THE RETURN OF POWER POLITICS

The diffusion of power, the questioning of the rules-based system, the retreat from multilateralism, the growing isolationism and the absence of global leadership are all facets of one single reality, they are convergent threads that mutually reinforce and explain each other: in a world where power is shifting and a new but uncertain equilibrium is to be found, the State must reclaim its own standing and strength, become less dependent on and engaged with others, in the process rewriting some of the rules of the game. Somehow, we seem to have come back to what some have called the billiard-ball world, a system of self-

contained States playing a power game: power politics is back.

"What we are seeing" – writes Paul Wilkinson – "is evidence that, far from witnessing a strengthening of multilateral institutions and global political integration, what we are really seeing is the enduring reality of our system of sovereign independent states: rivalry and conflict between the major and even the medium and minor powers; continuing effects of the security dilemma; and perpetuation of the balance of power as a central feature of the system, both at global and regional levels" (International Relations, Oxford, 2006, p. 27).

As the post-Cold War, rules-based world order is increasingly and more openly questioned, people realize that history has not come to an end, indeed that history is reversible and, collaterally, that security should not be taken for granted nor the steady progress of democracy and the rule of law to be guaranteed.

Nations are waking out of the soft slumber in which the fall of the Berlin wall and the implosion of the Soviet Empire brought them. The much prized so-called 'peace-dividend' has been short-lived. What the Putins, Erdogans, Kim Jung Uns and Trumps of this world are telling us, all in their own way, is that complacency is a self-defeating recipe and that the time has come to stop dreaming, to get real. Diplomacy is no charity.

'Realpolitik' is back. 'Power Politics' got new credentials. 'Strategic Thinking' is in the lift again. All this can be seen in the shifting vocabulary of diplomatic discourse: power vs. authority; hard power vs. soft power; power projection; containing vs. engaging; constraining vs. influencing; disincentives (sanctions) vs. incentives; vital or enlightened interests vs. values; effectivity vs. legitimacy. With this renewed vocabulary comes a shift from declarative policies to action-oriented

strategies, or to put it in Stalin's words, from the "algebra of declarations" to the "practical arithmetic".

POSTSCRIPTUM

A macro-political analysis of the kind presented here necessarily proceeds by making some simplifications and generalizations. Before closing, let me very briefly and on a more personal note, make some qualifications and self-critical remarks in this regard:

- On the Diffusion of Power. I have implicitly assumed the EU to be, or rather to possibly become part of the 'great power' game. Perhaps that is not correct, and also misleading. Does the EU see itself as a great power? I doubt it. And I doubt even more that outsiders see it as a great power. One could make a strong case, I think, that only States can be great powers, not International Organizations (IO), even when recognizing the hybrid character of the EU, neither a State (which it will never be) nor (no longer) an IO, but more State than IO. This question is not without importance in terms of expectation management: if you (over-)sell the EU as a 'great power' and don't live up to the challenge, as is to be expected, the cost in terms of credibility will be larger than whatever benefit gained by the self-labeling as 'great power'.
- I have explicitly stated that the ongoing power-shift forth and back, up and down, among the 'great powers' may, but need not necessarily have to result in a Multi Polar world order. I could imagine, for instance, that we end up with a Bipolar World, perhaps by default: a great Europe not being a power, a powerful Russia not being great. A Bipolar World, that is, with the US and China as players, engaged perhaps in a mildly cooperative rather than starkly competitive game. The ongoing power-shift could also result in a messy

situation, one of muddling through. As they say, success in politics is not perfection; it is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm. Is a 'dark scenario' to be excluded, with tension accumulating to the point of great power armed conflict? No, it is not, but unlikely for the time horizon we can currently oversee.

- Neither have I said anything on how we will go from here to there. Most probably this won't be just a linear process. It is quite possible that on the road to a possible Multi Polar world order intermediate, perhaps temporary, structures or processes (BRICS-style, or recent QUAD-style, i.e. US, India, Japan, Australia) will contribute, or conversely hamper, the shaping of the final formula, if final formula there ever will be.
- On the Erosion of Norms. When I spoke about the transition, as regards norms and values, from a shared universalism towards a local particularism I have entered a minefield of contested East-West positions. For one, the existence itself of so-called universal values is a very Western concept; the Asian concept of values is indeed much more particularistic. The Chinese, for instance, are at ease with the belief that what is right for China is not necessarily right for the world, and vice versa.
- Similar ethno-cultural considerations could be made as regards the Return of the Strong State and the Withdrawal from Long-Term to Short-Term thinking. Chinese communitarianism (the interests of the community prevail on the rights of the individual) almost logically implies the State to be strong. Being strong is its natural state; so there is not much to return to here. A similar remark can be made as regards long-term thinking. The very long history of China has a direct effect on how

the Chinese scale time: what we consider to be a long term (say 25 years), is for the Chinese just their short term. So no exceptional foresight is involved in the Chinese capacity for what we in the West see as long-term planning. It's just in their genes, or better: memes.

A final self-critical point concerns the dynamical dimension of the story presented here. Power shifting, norms getting eroded, the strong State returning, isolationism growing, power politics being on the way back... An easy objection to all of this is that we've been there before. Isolationism? Has this not been a recurrent feature of US foreign policy? The return of the (strong) State: but the State was never gone anyway, and the Chinese State, as we saw, has always been a strong one. The return of power-politics? Only the naïve (European) could have

thought that international politics could do away with power. Such objections are in themselves unobjectionable indeed, but they miss a point. One can always refuse to see the forest and stick to its trees.

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