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The Shifting Balance of Power and the Future of Sovereign States

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ABSTRACT

One of the key factors of the present global instability is the so-called “global war on terror,” which was unilaterally launched by the United States – with large-scale use of force against Iraq and Afghanistan and subsequent regional destabilization. This development has led to an escalation of tensions at the global level and may have undermined efforts at civilizational dialogue for a long time. The global financial crisis has injected further volatility into the international system and has significantly weakened the leading Western power’s strategy of “reshaping” the global order according to its own ideology and in conformity with its interests. The shifting balance of power we are witnessing today may also be due to an “imperial overstretch” of that country’s military and financial capabilities. The political and military developments triggered by the events of 2001 and the subsequent economic instability may have accelerated the development towards a *multipolar* world order in which national sovereignty will acquire a more important role than during the transitory phase of political *unipolarity* when – immediately after the collapse of the cold war’s *bipolar* order – the great powers in the Security Council rallied around the United States as global hegemon. An important aspect of multipolarity is the emergence of the “global regions,” which may create a counterbalance to the strategies aimed at the perpetuation of global hegemony. If the multilateral philosophy of the United Nations Organization is to survive the next decades, the world organization – and in particular the decision-making procedures in the Security Council – will have to be reformed along regional lines.

(I)

Shortly before the collapse of the Cold War's bipolar order, a British historian reminded a concerned international public of what he described as iron law of history, namely that great powers may trigger their own demise by what he characterized as "imperial overstretch."¹ While Paul Kennedy, analyzing the shifting power balance during the last five centuries, had predicted (in 1987) the decline of the Soviet Union and a relative decline of the United States, most pundits in the Western world thought that he was proven wrong, as regards the United States, when – shortly after his assessment was published – the Eastern bloc collapsed (in 1989) and, two years later, the Soviet Union imploded; this development left, it was said, the United States as the only superpower, as *global hegemon*.

However, as we know by now, the euphoria over the supposedly "new" world order, proclaimed by President George H. W. Bush after military victory in the Gulf war of 1991,² was premature and the celebration of what some had referred to as the (almost mythical) status of "hyperpower" was proven a false, indeed totally misleading, reading of history. The very developments that were interpreted as refutation of Paul Kennedy's thesis eventually triggered a chain of events that led to the "only remaining superpower's" getting entangled in a web of power projections which are most adequately described as "imperial overstretch" and which may ultimately prove the correctness of the historian's original assessment.

Naturally, great powers have always been in a state of denial as far as the sustainability of their predominant position is concerned. Unexpected "victories" in the global power game have almost always produced *imperial hubris*. Accordingly, a country seeing itself as global hegemon will proclaim that it will not accept a competitor's eventually reaching strategic parity, not to speak of superiority. (This was the constellation in which the U.S. administration had defined the country's security strategy in the wake of the events of the year 2001.)³ This kind of geostrategic approach was tantamount to a "political denial of

¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000*. New York: Random House, 1987.

² For details see Hans Köchler, *Democracy and the New World Order*. (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XIX.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1993.

³ The second Bush administration's strategic doctrine most drastically illustrates this iron law of power politics – and the imperial denial of reality that goes with it. See *National Security Strategy of the United States of America. September 2002*. Washington, DC: The White House, 2002, Chapter IX: "We must build and maintain our defenses beyond challenge"; our military must "dissuade future military competition." – See also the concise analysis by Robert Scheer (2002), "The arrogance of the Bush Doctrine: The President's new foreign policy will

reality” whereby the lonely superpower at the dawn of the third millennium – like all its predecessors over the last two millennia – tried to arrest the course of history, or to eternalize a beneficial power constellation.

We will now briefly try to reconstruct the developments that have brought about a second shift in the global power constellation – after the first tectonic shift that followed the events of 1989 – and we shall subsequently analyze the developments since the prematurely declared “New World Order,” which may eventually lead to a global rearrangement of power relations along multipolar lines.

In the early 1990s, triumphalism took precedence over sober analysis of the new geopolitical constellation resulting from the sudden, and unexpected, end of bipolarity. Commentaries in the U.S. and Western Europe in particular were full of praise of a newfound “unanimity” among the permanent members of the Security Council, which allowed the world organization, and for the first time since its foundation, so the pundits said, to carry out its mandate of collective security – after decades of paralysis due to the mutual “veto blockage” during the period of the Cold War. The Gulf war resolutions of 1990-1991 were quoted as examples of what can be achieved if there exists a sense of common purpose among the veto-wielding members.

However, the unanimity which enabled the Council to act according to the priorities set by the “only remaining superpower” was hollow, artificial and, thus, short-lived. Under the shock of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and with its imminent disintegration in sight, the Gorbachev-era Soviet Union did not carry the weight necessary to confront the United States; nor did the People’s Republic of China consider it opportune to challenge the proclaimed “New World Order” by a behaviour (namely use of the veto) that would have been “punished,” by the superpower of the moment, as obstruction of the Security Council’s mandate of collective security.

This was the background against which the United States was able to get endorsement for a “war authorization resolution” that allowed it to use “all necessary means,” or to act at its discretion, to bring to an end Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait. Under the cover of this resolution, not only Kuwaiti sovereignty was restored, but also Iraq’s civilian infrastructure was destroyed to the extent the intervening power – together with her “lesser” allies – considered appropriate, i.e. conducive to her strategic interests in the region. That the use of

only anger other countries, and provoke them to take their own ‘preemptive action.’” *Salon.com*, 25 September 2002, at dir.salon.com/story/news/col/scheer/2002/09/25/doctrine/index.html, last visited on 3 October 2009.

armed force was backed up by punitive sanctions (which were equivalent to a medieval siege),⁴ which resulted in the death of up to a million of innocent civilians, has demonstrated to the entire world that, when it comes to the aim of securing strategic supremacy, a triumphant superpower accepts no limits, neither in terms of the means used nor in regard to moral principles. Under conditions of unipolarity, whether actual or perceived, the *arbitrary* exercise of power, including the dubious privilege of a use of force with impunity, is the rule rather than the exception.

The unipolar constellation during the 1990s nurtured, on the part of the self-declared victor of the Cold War, an “anything goes” mentality – encouraging the major global power to effectively act unilaterally (as in the case of the Gulf war coalition of 1991), but with the full authorization of the United Nations Organization as embodiment of multilateralism. In the short period in which the former rival superpower of the U.S. and, subsequently, that power’s successor state, the Russian Federation, did not make use of its procedural rights under Art. 27 of the UN Charter, the illusion of omnipotence grew on the part of the dominant global player. In the prevailing atmosphere, the U.S. was able to use the Security Council to get endorsement for the (legally questionable) creation of a war crimes tribunal with territorial jurisdiction for the former Yugoslavia,⁵ which enacted a New World Order-version of victor’s justice according to which mostly personnel and leaders of “adversarial” countries were prosecuted, while the conduct of NATO officials – some of whom were accused of large-scale violations of international humanitarian law during the Kosovo war – was not even investigated. Carla del Ponte’s admission in her recently published memoir speaks volumes and needs no further comment.⁶

The unanimity among the great powers in the Security Council effectively came to an end when the United States – in unison with her NATO allies – decided to attack the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia without authorization of the United Nations Security Council (in 1999). The New World Order’s first war of aggression made two *contradictory* facts obvious:

⁴ For details see the author’s analysis: *Ethische Aspekte der Sanktionen im Völkerrecht. Die Praxis der Sanktionspolitik und die Menschenrechte.* (Studies in International Relations, XX.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1994.

⁵ On the legal problems of this tribunal see the author’s *MEMORANDUM on the Indictment of the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the President of the Republic of Serbia and Other Officials of Yugoslavia by the “International Tribunal for Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since 1991.”* International Progress Organization, Caracas, 27 May 1999, at i-p-o.org/yu-tribunal.htm, last visited on 3 October 2009.

⁶ “I quickly concluded that it was impossible to investigate NATO, because NATO and its member states would not cooperate with us. (...) I understood that I had collided with the edge of the political universe in which the tribunal was allowed to function. (...) it was impossible to go on politically without undermining the rest of the tribunal’s work.” (Carla del Ponte with Chuck Sudetic, *Madam Prosecutor. Confrontations with Humanity’s Worst Criminals and the Culture of Impunity. A Memoir.* New York: Other Press, 2009, pp. 60f.)

(a) The power of the global hegemon was not any more strong enough to prevent the opponents from withholding their consent in the Security Council, which meant a first crack in the post-Cold War edifice of unipolarity; (b) nonetheless, the most powerful member in the Security Council felt emboldened enough “to go it alone,” namely to engage in a unilateral use of force, in outright violation of the United Nations Charter, and without apparent fear of repercussions. In a much more dramatic fashion, this *modus operandi* was again applied in the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Although, in that instance, influential NATO allies did not join the “coalition of the willing,” the “only superpower” tried to use this war of aggression in order to reshape the strategic constellation in the Middle East and, through this measure, to eternalize U.S. hegemony at the global level. As we know by now, this geostrategic design proved unsustainable; it has indeed been one of the factors that triggered a shift of the power constellation away from the unipolar model and towards a new multipolar order.

In order to understand the “ideology” that underlies a global power’s actions such as those of the U.S. in and against Iraq, we have to be aware of the circumstances under which the war of 2003 was prepared, and of the events that preceded it. A pattern of *deception*, and subsequently *self-deception*, has characterized the actions taken by the invading country prior to March 2003. An edifice of false accusations (about Iraq’s possession of arms of mass destruction, links to the so-called “Al-Qaeda” organization, etc.) was constructed, and the UN Security Council was presented with entirely false statistics and forged documents – in that by now infamous appearance of which then Secretary of State Colin Powell later said that it is a “blot” on his record.⁷ It has become public knowledge that Iraq was attacked under more than one false pretext.

What must not be overlooked, however, is that all these “imperial” disinformation activities were preceded by the colossal and tragic events of September 11, 2001. Only a few days after the attacks, calls for the invasion of Iraq were heard in the United States; and immediately after the tragic events the U.S. succeeded in the Security Council to get endorsement for a war against Afghanistan, which was launched shortly thereafter. A large-scale media campaign about the supposed threat Islam and Islamic civilization poses to the West and Western civilization accompanied the military preparations for and the conduct of wars first in Afghanistan and later in Iraq.

⁷ “Powell regrets UN speech on Iraq WMDs.” *ABC News Online*, Washington DC, 9 September 2009, at <http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/common/printfriendly.pl?http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200509/s1456650.htm>, last visited on 23 October 2009.

It is to be recalled that up to the present day no comprehensive investigation of the events on that day has been undertaken and no indictment has ever been issued by the FBI against the person officially named as the main instigator of the crimes of September 11, 2001. Whatever the reasons for this prosecutorial inactivity may be, there exists no undisputed public account of the sequence of events that led to the tragic incidents on that day. The report issued by the United States Congress offers no convincing explanation in any way since it completely omits important facts such as the collapse of the WTC 7 building. In the absence of credible measures of criminal investigation and prosecution by the competent authorities of the country directly concerned, a colossal effort would have to be undertaken to ascertain the facts, something which is beyond the scope of our analysis and, frankly speaking, beyond any individual's capacity.

What we have to be aware of, however, in this geopolitical analysis is the fact that these events led the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to invoke – for the first time in its history – Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which contains provisions for collective self-defense.⁸ According to media reports in late 2001, former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, when asked about this unprecedented step, said that he would support collective action by the NATO countries if there were irrefutable proof that the events were indeed an attack on the United States.⁹

It is a historical fact that, subsequently to these events, the “international community” was effectively “taken hostage” for a campaign that the United States initially characterized as “global war on terror” and which it justified by reference to the events of September 2001 although no undisputed record has been presented of these events, neither in the Security Council nor to the United States public. Notwithstanding the lack of full knowledge about the

⁸ “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.”

⁹ “Proof had to be delivered that the September 11 terror attack came from abroad. [Yet,] that proof still has not been provided.” (Transcribed and translated from German.) Schmidt reportedly made the statement on German television on 10 December 2001; see the Webster Tarpley segment in the video by Barrie Zwicker, “The Great Conspiracy: The 9/11 News Special You Never Saw” (2004) at <http://www.filetube.com/source.html?url=http://rockthetruth.blogspot.com/2009/06/great-conspiracy-911-news-special-you.html>. (N.B.: The author cannot independently verify the veracity of the claim.)

actual causes, all UN member states were expected to rally behind the United States in a mythical global war “against evil” which, according to its rationale, can never be ended.¹⁰

The developments on the fronts in Afghanistan and Iraq will by now have made obvious even to the most naïve observer that it is impossible to define the criteria of victory in those conflicts, not to speak of the chances of “recreating” the political make-up of these two countries and the balance of forces in the wider regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, a goal which – if we pay attention to Zbigniew Brzezinski’s earlier comments¹¹ – may anyway have been the undeclared long-term strategic aim behind those military adventures.

Contrary to the (declared as well as undeclared) goals of these effectively unilateral operations – the Security Council blessing for the operations in Afghanistan is vague and disputable –, what has been achieved is the destruction of the political order in the targeted countries and a large-scale destabilization of the affected regions. The invading country and her, by now, deserting allies appear to have no clue as to how to remedy the situation and stabilize the polities, which they had first dismantled. With “victory” nowhere near and the road to a face-saving way out, or “disengagement,” effectively blocked, the meaning of Paul Kennedy’s notion of “imperial overstretch” has been demonstrated to the entire world: the simultaneous conflicts in two regions have put a severe strain on the conventional military capacities of the intervening countries and have become an increasingly felt burden on the U.S. economy in particular. In Central/South Asia, the spilling-over of the war into nuclear-armed Pakistan has revived a scenario of an even wider conflict with a much larger destructive potential. In spite of frantic efforts at readjusting the respective military strategies and doctrines, conventional strategic wisdom has failed.

At the same time, the country that pursues a military effort not only on the two above-mentioned fronts, but also – because of the nature of the “global war on terror” – virtually everywhere and *perpetually*, has been at the center (and origin) of the most serious economic crisis since the Great Depression. In the eyes of the international public, the United States has in fact not been able to ensure the stability and sustainability of the global economy for which, especially since the end of the bipolar world order, it had proclaimed the basic principles and over which it had claimed effective leadership. The United States had indeed

¹⁰ For a critique see Michael F. Scheuer (“Anonymous”), *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s, 2004, and Hans Köchler, “The Global War on Terror and the Metaphysical Enemy,” in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *The “Global War on Terror” and the Question of World Order*. (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXX.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2008, pp. 13-35.

¹¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York: Basic Books, 1997.

prescribed principles of economy and finance that were proven not to be sufficient to guarantee stable economic exchange, neither domestically nor at the international level.

Combined with the global financial and economic crisis, the military adventures in distant regions of the globe – continents away from the region of the Americas – have triggered a process of erosion of the unilateral power constellation that prevailed since the end of the Cold War, and have substantially weakened U.S. power in a multidimensional sense. This development will not only affect the country's military superiority, but its claimed leadership position in the economy as well as in the socio-cultural domain; above all, a power that slips into a situation in which “the emperor has no clothes” loses its leadership qualities in the eyes of the international community and, accordingly, will lack the moral authority on which any claim to global leadership is to be based.

(II)

The two parallel developments – on the military and economic fronts – may signal the end of global unipolarity in essentially two different respects: (a) the exhaustion of resources due to what has been characterized as “imperial overstretch,” and (b) the mobilization effect resulting from the overbearing “thirst for power” that was expressed in the claim to global hegemony. Countries that – under the slogan of “newfound unanimity” – were expected to subordinate themselves to the dominant power did gradually realize that their status as sovereign nations cannot be sustained in an essentially unipolar framework of power relations, and that neither the security nor the economic well-being of their populations can be ensured under such conditions.

Thus, the “imperial denial of reality,” or the illusion of omnipotence, has brought about a constellation in which a “reality check” has become unavoidable for the country that saw itself as the guarantor of an – apparently short-lived – unipolar system, idolized as “New World Order.” History teaches us that overbearing power eventually, and inevitably, produces a *reverse effect*; it provokes and steadily invigorates resistance to the respective hegemonic claim. It appears to be in the very nature of power that it ignores conventional wisdom and does not draw on the collective memory of nations. However, so the saying goes, those who ignore history are condemned to repeat it. This exactly describes the situation in which the second major shift of the global power constellation since World War II appears to take hold.

As we have noted earlier, UN member countries, and especially permanent members in the Security Council, have been pushed to realize their own potential (in terms of realpolitik as well as their statutory rights) when confronted with the crass assertion of hegemonic power in a unipolar context; their political survival instincts have actually been sharpened because they increasingly became aware that national sovereignty, and with it the freedom to act as a member of the “international community,” will be continuously eroded in each and every instance when the hegemonic power is allowed “to get away” with unilateral action, including the use of force. As demonstrated in the cases of the Yugoslavia-Kosovo war of 1999 and the Iraq war of 2003, other great powers were eventually prepared to make use of their statutory right under Article 27 of the Charter, thus denying those unilateral actions the semblance of legality. Those countries gradually began to define and assert their interests in a multilateral framework, insisting on respect of the UN Charter’s principle of sovereign equality and on the reactivation of the world organization’s system of collective security, something which had been impossible under the conditions of the unilateral order.

If we look back at the developments since the collapse of the “East bloc,” the “unipolar moment” may not have lasted longer than a decade. The euphoria over a supposed “New World Order” and the prematurely declared “End of History”¹² eventually proved counterproductive from the perspective of the self-proclaimed victor of the Cold War. Contrary to what had been hoped for, these proclamations contributed to the emergence of a new awareness of the “virtues of multipolarity,” namely of the fact that unipolarity can neither ensure a just nor a stable global order. Because of the inherent tendency towards an arbitrary use of power, it may, as we know by now, even lead to a state of global anarchy in the long term. During the era of East-West bipolarity, Hans Morgenthau had already made the point that the most stable international order is guaranteed by a multipolar balance of power.¹³

Parallel to the reassertion of sovereignty and of national interests on the part of the real international community – namely all the member states of the UN, and not only a few self-proclaimed leader nations that want to prescribe the standards to be applied by the “rest” – was a gradual *process of regionalization* in the context of conditions that have been described as “globalization,” but in actual fact meant the claim of essentially one country to global hegemony.¹⁴ Not least because of the experience with the detrimental effects on

¹² Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” in: *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), pp. 3-18; and: *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press, 1992.

¹³ *Politics among Nations: The Pursuit of Power and Peace*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

¹⁴ For details see also Hans Köchler, “Regionalism in the Context of Globality,” in: Simon Dalby (ed.), *The Impact of Regional Groupings on International Relations*. Vienna: Jamahir Society for Culture and Philosophy,

regional stability and security of unilateral wars and of the instrumentalization of the United Nations Organization for coercive measures against “non-obedient” countries, many states began to realize that they could not confront a global hegemon “in splendid isolation.” The formation – or strengthening, where those existed – of regional groupings has become an imperative of a policy that is aimed at safeguarding sovereignty and freedom of action in a volatile situation which is characterized by the absence of a balance of power. As the fate of countries targeted by coercive measures, including the use of force, that were instigated by the most powerful country has made painfully obvious, smaller countries have virtually no space to act in a unipolar environment.

The UN Charter’s guarantees of the right of individual and collective self-defense under Article 51 mean nothing in a situation that is characterized by a drastic imbalance of power relations. As has also been recently demonstrated in the economic domain, the interests and long-term viability especially of a smaller polity can be better protected, or ensured, if that country is part of a regional organizational structure. If such a country has to act entirely on its own and without co-ordination with regional partners, it may easily fall victim to the age-old political tactic that is described in the maxim “*divide et impera!*,” and it will definitely not be in a position to protect its population in a credible and efficient manner. As recent (post-Cold War) history has demonstrated, the alternative is often one between occupation and régime change on the one hand and “surrender” to the political demands of the empire on the other.

It is an irony of history that the process of regionalization we have described here may eventually bring about the end of the global order the consequences of which it was meant to protect against: the greater the number of regional groupings of states and the more efficient and sound their organizational structures, the weaker will the unipolar power structure become. Regional organizations will indeed be the cornerstones of a new multipolar balance of power – a goal that, so far, has been beyond the reach of the United Nations

2004, pp. 7-11. – On the notion of globalization and that process’s impact on national sovereignty see the author’s analysis: “Philosophical Aspects of Globalization: Basic Theses on the Interrelation of Economics, Politics, Morals and Metaphysics in a Globalized World,” in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *Globality versus Democracy?* (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXV.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2000, pp. 3-18.

Organization;¹⁵ for obvious reasons, the world organization has been unable to accommodate the global regions in the decision-making processes in the Security Council.¹⁶

By now, it has become common wisdom that the United Nations Charter effectively perpetuates the power balance that prevailed at the end of the Second World War, which means the *de facto* exclusion of large regions of the globe (especially Africa and Latin America, but also in Asia) from decision-making in the Security Council. Thus, the only universal organization of inter-state relations is effectively out of tune with the emerging new power balance at the global level. This process not only leads away from the “unipolar moment” of the 1990s and the bipolar power struggle of the Cold War, but also from the concert of powers that had initiated the establishment of the organization in 1945. The over-representation of Atlantic countries in the Security Council (with three out of five permanent members) is a relic of a bygone era that cannot in any way be justified under today’s geopolitical conditions – and that further delegitimizes the organization as an agent of global order, not to speak of “global change,” and as guarantor of the international rule of law.

At this point in time, the process of regionalization – which has been accelerated due to the “unilateral excesses” in the absence of a balance of power – cannot be reversed. Apart from the new dynamic this development brings into the global power equation, allowing again a rearrangement of inter-state relations along multipolar lines – something which was originally envisaged in the UN Charter, if one reads the “Purposes and Principles” –, this development could indeed provide the decisive impetus for a structural reform of the United Nations Organization. Since the end of the Cold War, the author has called for a reorganization that recognizes the emerging multipolar balance of power.¹⁷ In the case of the Security Council, this would mean the redefinition of permanent membership in such a way that the global regions are equally represented.¹⁸ The exclusion of large areas of the globe with huge populations from decision-making in the fields of international security and peace is a constitutional monstrosity that will further contribute to the organization’s becoming

¹⁵ For details see the author’s analysis: “Regionalization, Transnational Democracy and United Nations Reform: How Can Regions Contribute to the Strengthening and Democratization of the United Nations?”, in: Hans Köchler, *World Order: Vision and Reality. Collected Papers Edited by David Armstrong*. New Delhi: Manak, 2009, pp. 280-286.

¹⁶ For details of the United Nations’ predicament as regards Charter reform see Hans Köchler, “Quo Vadis United Nations?”, in: *Law Review*, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, College of Law, May 2005, pp. 49-65.

¹⁷ Hans Köchler, *The Voting Procedure in the United Nations Security Council: Examining a Normative Contradiction and its Consequences on International Relations*. (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XVII.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1991.

¹⁸ For details see Hans Köchler, *The United Nations and International Democracy: The Quest for UN Reform*. (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXII.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1997.

irrelevant unless the reform talk of the last decade produces tangible results. There will be no way around the thorny issue of a *redivision of power* in the Security Council, a measure of reform that must reflect the constellation at the beginning of the 21st century, and not the one that existed at the middle of the last century.

Integrating the global regions will not only save the United Nations Organization from the fate of irrelevance; such a process may contribute to the badly needed “reinvention” of the organization on the basis of its founding idea – namely to provide a framework of collective action for the common good of mankind on the basis of the sovereign equality of all member states.

Since the end of the Second World War, UN member states have formed regional organizations for different kinds of purposes such as co-operation in the fields of security, economy, and culture – something which is also acknowledged, even encouraged (as far as security arrangements are concerned), in the United Nations Charter (Chapter VI). Depending upon the goals set by the member states, those entities have reached different stages of organizational density and political maturity. Some have been phased out in the meantime, others have merely been functioning under parameters set by powers from outside the region. However, in the bipolar era until the end of what has also been called the East-West Conflict, all ambitions and activities of regional organizations were overshadowed, and often marginalized, by the struggle for control over spheres of influence between that era’s two superpowers. Memberships in regional and inter-regional organizations were often overlapping. Simultaneous membership in regional and superpower-affiliated organizations (such as NATO) had caused numerous conflicts of interest due to potentially contradictory obligations and loyalties. As in the case of the then European Economic Community (EEC), this also created a serious credibility and identity problem, something which has not been resolved even under the new organizational parameters of the European Union after the end of global bipolarity.

Under conditions that are characterized by the failure of one of the most ambitious unipolar projects to date, namely the Bush (I + II) eras’ “New World Order” and the related blueprint for a “New American Century,” regional organizations have acquired new and crucial importance. The emerging balance of power will most certainly be structured along regional lines. The outcome of this realignment of power relations – in terms of the multipolar order of the future – will also be determined by the specific organizational structure and political outlook of these entities. Certain organizations have been established with a strictly

regional, “inward-looking,” scope; those entities aim at assisting the member states to successfully compete under conditions of a globalized economy. Some organizations include among their goals issues of regional security and counter-terrorism. Other organizations transcend the framework of mere interest politics at the regional level towards the definition of a *global mission* or outlook that gives the co-operation between the countries of the respective region a wider meaning and geostrategic dimension. This is definitely the case with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) whose Heads of State, at their summit in Yekaterinburg on 16 June 2009, have declared that the member states are open to a dialogue that facilitates “the building of a more just world order.”¹⁹ In their joint declaration, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have put special emphasis on the newly emerging balance of power.²⁰ In Article 1, they state that “[t]he tendency towards true multipolarity is irreversible,” adding that “[t]here is a growing significance of the regional aspect in settling global problems.”²¹

The reemergence of multipolarity and the shift in the balance of power from the Euro-Atlantic region towards the East and countries and regions of the Global South have also been evident in the meeting of the leaders of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China) that was held simultaneously with the summit of the SCO in Yekaterinburg.²² The co-ordination of efforts between the two groupings has not only implicitly established the important linkage between regionalism and globality, indeed the aspect of *global responsibility*, but has cemented the redivision of global power relations on the basis of intra- and inter-regional co-operation.²³ In their declaration, issued on the same day as the SCO declaration (16 June 2009), the BRIC leaders have made clear that their concerted efforts are not merely determined by the politics of the national interest, but are ultimately directed at the establishment of a *just global order*. Underlining their “support for a more democratic and

¹⁹ *Yekaterinburg Declaration of Heads of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, 16 June 2009, published by The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=87, visited on 3 October 2009.

²⁰ For an assessment of the organization’s outlook in the context of today’s geopolitical constellation see, *inter alia*, Rick Rozoff, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Prospects For A Multipolar World.” *Global Research*, 22 May 2009, at www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=13707, last visited on 3 October 2009.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² See also the analysis of Vladimir Radyuhin, “Changing order,” in: *Frontline. India’s National Magazine*, Vol. 26, Issue 14, July 4-17, 2009, at <http://www.thehindu.com/fl2614/stories/20090717261405700.htm>, last visited on 5 October 2009.

²³ On the linkage between intra- and inter-regional co-operation see also the author’s lecture at the International Conference “Countries of the Caucasus and the Middle East – possible partners in the process of formation of a regional system of security” in Yerevan, Armenia (7 February 2008): “Global Security in the Absence of a Balance of Power: The Importance of Inter-regional Co-operation,” at <http://hanskoechler.com/Koechler-Inter-regional-cooperation-Caucasus-ME-Feb2008-V3.pdf>, last visited on 3 October 2009.

just multi-polar world order based on the rule of international law, equality, mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making of all states,”²⁴ the BRIC leaders expressed their support for a fundamental reform of the system of international organization on the basis of *multilateral* diplomacy.²⁵

The sovereignty of states cannot be preserved in a unipolar framework or in a system that, as in the case of the United Nations Organization, incorporates the power balance of an earlier era and, thus, will be increasingly marginalized because of the ever-widening gap between statute (Charter) and reality.

A multipolar balance of power will provide the framework for the respect of *sovereign equality* of all states (as enshrined in Art. 2[1] of the UN Charter) – and in a more adequate and stable manner than a system based on the rivalry between only two powers (as during the Cold War). In the same way as national sovereignty is actually strengthened, not absorbed, within a framework of regional cooperation, making individual states better prepared to compete in the harsh “globalized” environment, the existence of regional groupings of sovereign states on all continents will be an effective bulwark against the emergence of a new hegemonic power.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor of the United States during the bipolar era, whose strategic considerations we briefly referred to at the beginning of this essay, may well have been aware of the unavoidable “imperial overstretch” under conditions of increasing interconnectedness and co-operation between newly emerging global regions, and of the resulting tectonic shift in global power relations. More than a decade ago, when commentators still celebrated the American empire, he wrote in an analysis of U.S. geostrategic imperatives in Central Asia: “In the long run, global politics are bound to become increasingly uncongenial to the concentration of hegemonic power in the hands of a single state. Hence, America is not only the first, as well as the only, truly global superpower, but it is also likely to be the very last.”²⁶

²⁴ Art. 12 of the *Joint Statement of the BRIC Countries’ Leaders*. Yekaterinburg, June 16, 2009, published on the web site: *President of Russia, Official Web Portal*, at eng.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2009/06/217963.shtml, last visited on 3 October 2009.

²⁵ See also their stated “strong commitment to multilateral diplomacy with the United Nations playing the central role in dealing with global challenges and threats” and their reaffirmation of “the need for a comprehensive reform of the UN” in Art. 14 of the Declaration, *loc. cit.*

²⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), p. 209.

If the current trend towards multipolarity proves sustainable – and all indicators point in that direction –, Brzezinski's prediction may come true much earlier than he originally anticipated.
