

The NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

An Online National Security Journal Published by the National Strategy Forum

The Dangers of a Multi-polar World in the 21st Century

By Endy Zemenides

The 21st century world faces more dangers than ever: multiple nuclear flashpoints; global terrorism; infectious diseases; failed states; the potential for resource wars; climate change; etc. Despite these challenges, the world seems ill-equipped in terms of institutions. The U.N., NATO, IMF, and other organizations were all established in a much different global context. The post Cold-War world seems to rely too much on the good intentions of its biggest players: Will the United States be a responsible hegemon? Will China's rise be peaceful? Will Europe continue to integrate eastern European nations, and will Russia allow it?

Our world desperately requires structure, at a time when the United States – because of deficits and debt to other nations, its multiple wars, and its decreased soft power – is ill-equipped to impose it. Instead, we are witnessing the emergence of major powers in every region of the world. In the absence of structure in international relations, is the emergence of multiple powers a positive, or a negative? Are we more likely to see a multi-continent, multi-cultural, 21st century Concert of Europe? Or are international relations about to devolve into a real life version of *RISK*?

A combination of factors – the rise of China, European political integration, the overextension of the United States – has made the post Cold War American uni-polar moment the shortest lived era in modern international relations. Those who wished for multi-polarity now have it. The United States still features the strongest combination of economic, military and soft power. China's ambition, the size of its economy and armed forces put it in second position. The E.U., with NATO to serve as military cover as a single European foreign and defense policy is established, with its pre-crisis economic clout, with two permanent Security Council members, and with the prestige of European diplomacy rounds out the big three. Russia – another permanent Security Council member – will remain a significant global power because of its nuclear arms, its willingness to project power in neighboring regions, and its access to oil and gas. Finally, Japan qualifies as a global power because of its economy and potential to remilitarize.

The world became multi-polar, but there was no 21st century Congress of Vienna at which the great powers laid out a structure to ensure global stability. Such a task would be difficult in and

of itself, but was made impossible by: a United States that realized too late that it could no longer “go it alone”; a Europe still not fully integrated; and a Russia and China that typically oppose the political and economic ground rules of the existing Western order. Is it any wonder that the past decade failed to produce the next round of WTO trade negotiations, or any significant peace agreement, or any successful example of collective defense led/authorized by the U.N. Security Council or NATO?

Into this gap of leadership and achievement have stepped new institutions – developing country blocs like the Group of 77 (G-77); the annual BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) summits – and non-Western regional powers like Brazil, India, Indonesia, South Africa and Turkey. These “powers” have acted with great effect – with the developing bloc group staking cohesive, and decisive, positions in trade and climate change negotiations and with Turkey and Brazil aggressively trying to negotiate their own solution to the Iranian nuclear dilemma with Tehran.

Perhaps no country better illustrates the dilemma of emerging powers in today’s world than Turkey. People encouraged by Turkey’s emergence as a power point to its bullish economy; the fact that it is a modern Islamic democracy; its NATO membership and potential EU membership; its spot on the U.N. Security Council; and its geographic advantages.

But Turkey’s behavior has also raised red flags. Its role in the flotilla incident and its divergence with and ultimate opposition to U.S. policy on Iran left Thomas Friedman wondering whether Turkey is intent on “joining the Hamas-Hezbollah-Iran resistance front against Israel.” Turkey wants to join the EU, but it continues to occupy the territory of an EU member (Cyprus) and refuses to recognize that member. Turkey declares a “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy, but in addition to the aforementioned occupation of Cyprus, Turkey still is at odds with Armenia, Iraqi Kurds, Israel, and violates Greece’s airspace daily in trying to stake its claim to the Aegean. Turkey is a signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights, but it has been found in violation of that convention more than any other signatory (only Russia is close.)

The challenge for U.S. policy with regard to integrating Turkey into the West is a microcosm for the challenges the U.S. faces with all emerging powers. It has been argued that Turkey’s Western fate depends on Turkey being brought to Europe, rather than Europe to Turkey. If emerging powers do not commit to a structure – and as time passes, they may have a significant voice in shaping that structure – but treat their commitment to international relations in an *a la carte* manner, the dangers our world faces are more likely to be exacerbated rather than beaten back. John Mearsheimer predicted in 1990 that we would soon miss the Cold War because of the instability of the emerging multi-polar world. Twenty years later, it is hard to argue with him.

Endy Zemenides is a lawyer at Johnston and Greene, and is a member of the National Strategy Forum Review Editorial Board.