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# The interpolar world: a new scenario

Giovanni Grevi



European Union Institute for Security Studies

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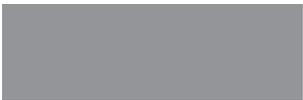
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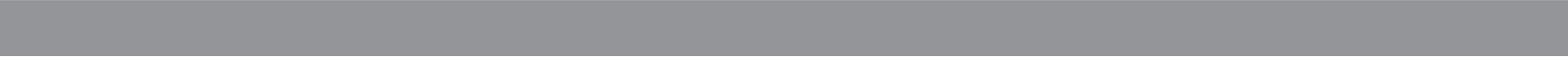


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# Summary

Everyone agrees the world is changing. The question is in which direction? This *Occasional Paper* offers an original contribution to the debate on the future shape of the international system. Based on a diagnosis of current developments, it argues that many factors point to the emergence of an ‘interpolar’ world. Interpolarity can be defined as multipolarity in the age of interdependence. The redistribution of power at the global level, leading to a multipolar international system, and deepening interdependence are the two basic dimensions of the transition away from the post-Cold War world. All too often, however, they are treated as separate issues. The real challenge lies in finding a new synthesis between the shifting balance of power and the governance of interdependence.

In the emerging international system, the asymmetric distribution of power assets puts a systemic brake on the unilateral temptations of all powers. Endowment with and access to natural resources and energy becomes central to international affairs, with all major powers expanding their interests, and influence, in every region of the world. The description of a multipolar system captures many dimensions of the emerging international environment. However, emphasis on the relative power of competing actors offers only a partial insight into this new environment. Deepening interdependence is the second basic trend shaping the international system, and provides the new context of power relations. Economic growth, energy security and environmental sustainability are the three interconnected issues at the core of complex interdependence. All major powers are exposed to the unprecedented conjunction of the economic, energy and environmental crises and none of them can successfully confront these challenges on its own.

Both established and emerging powers have a strategic interest in investing in cooperation to place their prosperity and security on firmer grounds. This provides fertile conditions for the emergence of an interpolar world. Interpolarity is interest-based (as it builds on the convergence between the interests of major international actors), problem-driven (as it focuses on the challenges requiring cooperative solutions) and process-oriented. An interpolar system and a multilateral order are compatible, provided that the latter is reformed. This entails, among other measures, strengthening summit diplomacy. It is suggested here that summits such as the G20 or the G8+5 cannot replace the work of traditional multilateral organisations but can fulfil important tasks of confidence building, top-level agenda setting and connecting bilateralism, ‘minilateralism’ and multilateralism. In an interpolar system, where effective cooperation de-

depends on the commitment of major powers among others, these are key functions.

This analysis begs the question of whether the EU will rise to the challenge of steering change, bringing about an inter-polar world and promoting effective multilateralism. The EU can showcase considerable achievements, for example in fostering the environmental agenda at the global level. However, as interdependence deepens, competition grows and power shifts, its political cohesion is put to serious test. Whether the Union will shape up to become a central pole of power and cooperation will be decisive for its own future and for the shape of the international system to come.

# Introduction

The world has entered the great transition from the short-lived post-Cold war international system to a new, unprecedented configuration of international relations. The ongoing transition consists of the progressive shift from Western cultural, political and economic predominance to a more diverse and heterogeneous international system, where emerging and resurgent players not only assert their individual interests but also promote their distinctive worldviews.

Managing the great transition will require a high degree of international cooperation. Creative and inspirational leadership will be in high demand to foster and shape collective action at the global level. The advent of the new Obama administration in the US has surely marked a turning point in the discourse and perception of the only superpower. The first steps of Barack Obama on the global stage have been met with great expectations all over the world. The sense of a momentous shift in American politics offers a crucial window of opportunity to engage all relevant global actors in addressing pressing common challenges.

American leadership, however, has to be restored and exercised in a very different international context from that which existed only ten years ago. The most important actor in the international system may well change its approach and policies. The system itself, however, has changed in many respects. The main features of such transformation require close scrutiny to map the scope for renewed leadership and global cooperation in the midst of the great transition. The opportunity is at hand to strengthen the bases of an *interpolar* international system, where major global and regional powers cooperate to manage deepening interdependence, and build a viable and effective multilateral order.



# 1. The drivers of change

Two fundamental trends are driving change in the international system, namely the redistribution of power at the global level, leading to a new form of multipolarity, and increasing interdependence, affecting the prosperity and security of large powers and the broader international community alike. Neither dimension of change is new *per se* but, as the financial and economic crisis shows, both the shift in the global power system and mutual dependence are growing in scope and pace at the same time. The interaction of these two basic trends is reshaping the international system and will have long-term implications at all levels.

With a view to making sense of the great transition, it is essential to take a closer look at both aspects of change and above all at their interplay. The changing and very tangible realities of power cannot be neglected in the name of normative persuasions. On the other hand, dismissing the pressing requirements for cooperative action in the name of narrowly defined short-term interests would be irresponsible. The challenge lies, therefore, in finding a new match between power and governance.

In this context, a different scenario from sheer, confrontational multipolarity can be envisaged. Looking at the interaction between the redistribution of power and growing interdependence, the enabling conditions of an inter-polar international system can be detected. Interpolarity is multipolarity in the age of interdependence. Interpolarity is arguably a better illustration of the international system in the making than multipolarity, as it captures the shifting balance of power and the ensuing geopolitical tensions while highlighting the fact that the prosperity and security of all the major powers are interconnected as never before. On the other hand, it suggests a set of guidelines for the reform of global governance structures, based on the respective interests of the main global and regional powers and on the potential for their convergence around concrete policy issues. As such, inter-polarity is interest-based, problem-driven and process-oriented, as it focuses on the frameworks and procedures that could help bring about cooperative solutions to shared challenges.

'Poles' or 'powers' in the international system are conventionally defined as states endowed with the resources, political will and institutional ability to project and protect their interests at the global, multi-regional or regional level, depending on the size of the power in question. From this standpoint, the EU does not entirely qualify as a 'pole' or 'power'. However, taking a broader perspective, it is considered as one in this paper in view of its sheer size and consequent impact on all aspects of international relations, its growing ability and declared aspiration to develop a

more effective foreign and security policy and its distinctive approach to governance and multilateralism.

Defining the international system as interpolar does not mean neglecting the relevance of non-state actors. It is, rather, a question of identifying the main variable, among others, shaping the evolution of the international system. In many respects, the contribution of non-state actors broadens and deepens international cooperation. Conversely, non-state actors can deal serious blows to globalisation and pose critical security threats. However, it is maintained here that state actors, notably large and very large ones, remain pivotal to enable international cooperation at all levels by providing political stability, appropriate incentives and predictable regulatory frameworks. Their initiative is also essential to establish or reform multilateral frameworks. Conversely, serious tensions or even conflicts among states weaken trans-national links and flows, as well as international regimes and institutions. Based on a realistic assessment of the challenges ahead, the case is made here to focus on what brings major powers together, instead of what sets them apart.

The first part of this paper illustrates some of the main dimensions of the great transition with a focus on, respectively, the dynamics of power and influence at the international level and the deepening of interdependence. The second part takes a closer look at the concept of interpolarity itself and points to some of the basic features of multilateral cooperation in an interpolar world.

## 2. The shifting balance of worldviews

Since the 9/11 attacks, the gap between the US's power and its influence on the global stage has been widening. From towering as the largely undisputed hegemon in the aftermath of the Cold War, the reputation of the US in the eyes of global public opinion has plummeted in the last few years. Such a relatively rapid deterioration of America's international standing can be ascribed to two main factors. First, the aggressive form of unilateralism that the US preached and practised during the Bush era.<sup>1</sup> Second, the shifting balance of power in the international system, which entails a shifting balance of worldviews and perceptions and puts Western priorities and norms in perspective. The combination of these two factors signals the fading away of American global hegemony. The first factor is reversible. If a drastic change of political discourse and strategic posture in 2002/2003 has caused much of the damage, an equally drastic shift away from such a discourse will be essential to regain political credit.<sup>2</sup> The second factor, however, compounded by the political and economic implications of the 2008 financial crisis, is much less reversible.

The change of leadership in Washington has opened a huge window of opportunity for the US to regain much of its squandered soft power. Richard Holbrooke put it succinctly when he said that 'restoring respect for American values and leadership is essential not because it is nice to be popular but because respect is a precondition for legitimate leadership and enduring influence.'<sup>3</sup> The US holds many cards up its sleeves to restore its image and leadership, the most important of which has been so far a vibrant economic and social model and a taste for permanent innovation.

However, the hegemonic position that the US enjoyed in the second part of the twentieth century in the non-communist world and, most notably, in the ten years after the end of the Cold War, is unlikely to be restored. Self-inflicted political damage only partially accounts for the dilution of American and, more broadly, Western political influence at the global level. The equally important point is that, while the US and Europe may have their ups and downs, the rest of the world is moving on and a new balance of values and worldviews is taking shape.

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1. Strobe Talbott defined Bush's approach to international affairs as 'arch-unilateralist' and blamed the 'uncompromising and extreme variant of exceptionalism' to which the Bush administration adhered. Strobe Talbott, 'Anatomy of a disaster', *International Herald Tribune*, 22 February 2007.

2. For influential views in this vein see Center for Strategic and International Studies, Commission on Smart Power, Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye (co-chairs), 'A smarter, more secure America', 2007. More recently, Fareed Zakaria has made the case for a new sense of American purpose and a new *modus operandi* in the new international environment. See Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), pp. 215-59.

3. Richard Holbrooke, 'The Next President Mastering a Daunting Agenda', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 5, September/October 2008, pp. 2-24.

The emergence of important global and regional powers carries implications that go far beyond the changing distribution of power and resources. The point here is that the international system is growing more heterogeneous, as henceforth large powers will be very different from one another. The upcoming global concert – or cacophony – includes players that have different historical traditions and original conceptions of international relations and of their place therein.

The complexity of the emerging international scene does not lend itself to easy dichotomies. Certainly, the distinction between democracies and authoritarian regimes is an important one, in particular when it comes to debating and promoting human rights and the rule of law. However, even this apparently neat distinction is in reality not that clearcut.

The differences between liberal and illiberal democracy are often overlooked.<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the socio-economic conditions that have permitted the progressive affirmation of political liberalism and constitutionalism in the Western world are an important prerequisite for establishing liberal democratic regimes. Countless instances, each with its unique features, can be detected on the continuum between democracy and authoritarianism. Furthermore, the divide between democracies and autocracies is not necessarily the most consequential in current international relations.

Given the compelling demand for international cooperation in the face of challenges such as major humanitarian crises, nuclear proliferation, energy security and climate change, equally important factors are the strategic interests and political positions of individual countries, whose alignments vary depending on the issue at hand. Of particular relevance in this context is the divide between those countries accepting a relative notion of sovereignty, whereby the latter is or can be subject to overriding international norms, and those who support an absolute notion of sovereignty and reject external interference in the exclusive domain of internal affairs. While most, if not all, authoritarian states can be found in the latter camp, democracies are split on this issue. Major emerging democratic actors such as India, Indonesia and South Africa are, for example, uncomfortable with the idea of endorsing the concept of the Responsibility to Protect or humanitarian intervention that would infringe on state sovereignty.

Different attitudes to sovereignty distinguish the US from EU Member States as well. The former regards its own sovereignty in rather uncompromising terms and has shown increasing reluctance to be bound by

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4. Fareed Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no 6, November/December 1997, pp. 22-43 and, by the same author, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2003).

international agreements that could impinge on the definition of its foreign, security and defence policies. The new American administration has shown more openness to international negotiations and arrangements, for example displaying new resolve to lead multilateral negotiations on the issue of climate change with a view to the Copenhagen conference in December 2009. New disarmament negotiations have been launched with Russia and new emphasis has been put on forging a comprehensive partnership between the US and major global actors such as China and Russia. In parallel, diplomatic efforts have driven a new approach to addressing critical crisis spots in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, including a focus on their regional dimension and working with partners. These and other initiatives may signal an important shift in the US attitude towards multilateral cooperation and the constraints that it entails.

On the other hand, the Member States of the EU have committed, in the context of the process of European integration, to the most advanced experiment in sharing sovereignty ever undertaken and are therefore, although sometimes reluctantly, rather more inclined to accept the constraints that come with subscribing to international norms and organisations. This distinction carries important implications when it comes to the development of international law and multilateralism.<sup>5</sup>

Turning to classic geo-strategic considerations, geometries change once again and camps are equally difficult to delimit. In the last few years, for example, the US has been at the same time a *status quo* power, preoccupied with maintaining its primacy, and a revisionist power, intent on expanding democracy, including by force. Turning to emerging countries, their natural revisionism takes many different accents. Russia's aggressive assertion of its renewed great power status and of its sphere of influence contrasts with China's quiet, albeit shrewd and determined, pursuit of its strategic interests. India, for its part, eagerly seeks superpower status not in opposition but in cooperation with the West. The point here is that, as the great transition enters into full swing, an uneven mix of conservatism and revisionism will be found in most countries, although some may prove more impatient, and troublesome, than others.

Aside from the politico-security field, tension is manifest when looking at the global trade regime and its battered reform efforts. On trade and development issues, the main (although not only) divide remains that between North and South, which by and large overlaps with the divide between those who have shaped the international trade system till the late 1990s and those who feel that their interests have not been adequately taken into account in previous negotiation rounds. Such cleavage may be

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5. On the distinctive European approach to multilateralism, see Mario Telò, *Europe: A Civilian Power? European Union, Global Governance, World Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2006), pp. 39-82.

deepening under the pressure of demographic, environmental and economic trends, while protectionist sentiments are on the rise in some advanced countries and developing nations alike.

Capitalism itself takes different shapes in different countries. Emerging actors are defining their own distinctive path to the market. Even more so after the dramatic financial crisis of autumn 2008, the sense of progressive convergence towards the Anglo-Saxon capitalist model is replaced by a debate on the co-existence and competition of different models. The role that governments play in the economy, the influence of social partners, the respective levels of public spending, private savings and stock market capitalisation, and the degree of liberalisation of financial markets are among the key indicators that distinguish different economic systems.<sup>6</sup> The bottom line is that, while the market economy is expanding worldwide, economic models tend to adjust and fit particular national contexts, political systems and societal preferences.

It is no surprise that, in the presence of such a variety of historical traditions and political perspectives, the largely Western-inspired normative foundations of international politics are challenged in a number of domains. In a heterogeneous international system, the idea of 'the end of history' has been made history by a combination of factors. The distinctive perspectives of major powers like China and Russia on domestic and international order are an important case in point. Besides, aggressive nationalism and fundamentalist ideologies openly challenge Western liberal values.

More broadly, in much of the developing world, the attractiveness of the Western, and more specifically American, drive to export democracy, free markets and deregulation has considerably waned. While the values of democracy or the market economy are not necessarily questioned as such, the way in which they have been implemented or exported has produced much scepticism and resentment. The US-born financial crisis, whose economic consequences are hitting hard worldwide, has only fuelled these feelings. As the Chinese Deputy Premier Wang Qishan has reportedly noted: 'The teachers now have some problems.'

The controversy on Western values and worldviews has been interpreted as the return of history, which would herald new ideological rifts between the 'axis of democracy' (the West and its allies) and the 'association of autocrats' (notably including Russia and China) as well as between modernity and liberalism on the one hand and radical Islam on the other.<sup>7</sup> It seems

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6. Le cercle des économistes, Jean Hervé Lorenzi (ed.), *La guerre des capitalismes aura lieu* (Paris: Perrin, 2008), pp. 17-33.

7. Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008), pp. 53-85.

more appropriate to observe that, after two or at most three centuries of exceptional Western predominance, history is simply resuming its natural course and large countries, as well as different worldviews, come to play an important role on the international scene.<sup>8</sup> If anything, the main difference from the past lies in the extent to which the prosperity and stability of different global powers and regions are interconnected.

Different worldviews are gaining relevance and visibility because the countries expressing them are acquiring more power. The redistribution of power is, however, anything but linear and clear-cut. On the contrary, it leads to a very asymmetric allocation of different assets, which generates more uncertainty and undermines unilateral action.

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8. Nicole Gnesotto and Giovanni Grevi (eds.), *The New Global Puzzle. What World for the EU in 2025?* (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, 2006), pp. 189-209.



### 3. Power shifts and the rise of negative power

Power is shifting at the global level but it is doing so unevenly across different dimensions. The asymmetric distribution of power affects the ability of each major player to successfully pursue its interests independently of others. Power asymmetries will act as a systemic brake on the unilateral tendencies of all great powers.

When it comes to military might, it is commonplace to stress that US resources far outstrip those of any potential contender, or even coalition of contenders. US military spending in 2008 accounted for around 48 percent of the world total, with the combined spending of the EU ranking second at 20 percent (\$280/290 billion) of global expenditure and China and Russia following with 8 percent (\$120 billion) and 5 percent (\$70 billion) respectively.<sup>9</sup> The US budget has grown from \$333 billion in 2001 up to over \$660 billion in 2009.

While, therefore, the US maintain their primacy in the military field, the power shift is most notable when looking at the relative wealth of major powers. As a share of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms, the Chinese economy has grown almost sixfold between 1980 and 2008, while India's economy has more than doubled.<sup>10</sup> In 2005, in PPP terms, the US and the EU produced around 21 percent each of global wealth, with China's GDP ranking third at 13.7 percent followed by Japan (6.7 percent), India (6.2 percent) and Russia and Brazil at around 2.5 percent.<sup>11</sup> Taking into account the growth rates that were envisaged before the economic impact of the 2008 financial crisis became manifest, the picture would look very different ten to twenty years down the line. By 2020, China may become the largest world economy in PPP terms with almost 20 percent of global GDP, while India would rank fourth at almost 9 percent. The respective shares of the US and of the EU are expected to decrease only slightly, and Russia's to remain roughly the same at a modest 2.5 percent.

9. The amount for the US includes all defence-related spending from the Department of Defense and other agencies, as well as the costs of the operation in Iraq and Afghanistan. See Christopher Hellman, Travis Sharp, 'The FY 2009 pentagon spending request - Global Military Spending', Center for Arms Control and Non-proliferation, 22 February 2008, based on data from the US Department of Defense and *The Military Balance 2008* (International Institute for Strategic Studies: London, Routledge, 2008).

10. Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), *L'enjeu mondial. Les pays émergents* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po-L'Express, 2008), p. 14.

11. For data in this paragraph and the following, see Economist Intelligence Unit, *Foresight 2020*, 2006. It should be noted, however, that the picture looks quite different in terms of market exchange rates. On that basis, the EU, the US and Japan together still account for over 60 percent of world GDP.

The pace of change stands out even more clearly when considering the respective contributions of different countries to the creation of global wealth over the medium to long term. The BRIC countries are expected to generate well over 40 percent of global economic growth between 2005 and 2020, with China alone contributing 26 percent of global growth and India 12 percent. The financial crisis of 2008 will slow down global economic growth for the years to come. However, the relatively harder impact of the crisis on Western economies will mean that the contribution of emerging countries to global growth will be even larger, assuming that countries like China or Russia will not enter a phase of severe social turmoil due to lower growth rates. The broader political point is of course that a world where three of the five largest economies will be Asian (China, Japan and India) will be a very different place.

The relationship between economic prowess and energy endowments is a particularly telling indicator of the tensions built into the new international system. It has been calculated that the twelve most energy-rich countries, while producing only 6.5 percent of global GDP, control over 80 percent of the world's proven oil and gas reserves whereas all OECD countries combined plus China and India, while accounting for over 75 percent of global wealth, control only 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the largest and fastest growing world economies are exposed to severe dependency on resources held by a relatively limited number of countries, whose political influence is thereby multiplied. This is a defining feature of current international relations.

Given the worldwide economic slowdown of 2008-2009, the artificially high price of oil has dramatically fallen over the last seven months, dealing a blow to the government revenues and growth prospects of countries particularly dependent on energy exports like Russia or Venezuela. That said, the fundamentals have only marginally changed, as highlighted by the projections of the most respected international organisations.<sup>13</sup> In future, both the dependency of major economies on energy imports and the concentration of energy production in a handful of countries will grow, together with wealth transfers from the former to the latter. While coal resources are more evenly distributed, oil and gas are concentrated in a few geopolitically critical countries. The largest oil reserves are located, in decreasing order of magnitude, in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Venezuela and Russia. The largest gas reserves, by the same criterion, are in Russia, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, the US and Nigeria.<sup>14</sup>

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12. Vladimir Milov, 'Russia and the West: the Energy factor', Institut français des relations internationales, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2008, p.1.

13. *World Energy Outlook 2008*, International Energy Agency, Paris, 2008, pp. 77, 91 and 109.

14. Based on data from *Survey Energy Resources 2007*, World Energy Council, London 2007.

Of all sources of power, knowledge and innovation are crucial to the economic prosperity and political attractiveness of any country. To the extent that technological innovation is applied to the defence sector, they are also the ultimate platform of lasting superiority in military affairs. The US, EU Member States and other developed countries maintain a strong position by all measures of R&D investment and innovation, but new trends are unmistakable.<sup>15</sup> In 2006, the combined OECD investment in R&D amounted to \$818 billion (of which the US alone accounted for around \$330 billion), China's to almost \$90 billion, India's \$24 billion and Russia's \$20 billion. By share of global R&D expenditure, the US rank by far first with about a third, the EU follows with 24 percent and Japan comes third with 14 percent. The share of non-OECD economies has grown from 11 percent in 1996 to about 18 percent in 2005. In particular, China's R&D expenditure has been growing at a staggering annual rate of 18 percent between 2000 and 2006, approaching the EU level of R&D intensity (ratio of expenditure to GDP). China's targets for R&D intensity are 2 percent in 2010 and 2.5 percent in 2020. Were these targets to be met, China would become by far the second largest R&D spender in the world after the US. The picture and the pattern look similar when considering the respective shares and growth rates of scientific publications or patent applications.

Having briefly reviewed some key indicators of national power, the fundamental question concerns the political implications of the asymmetric distribution of resources. These implications are multiplied by the fact that not all the sources of power equally convert into political influence. In fact, it has been noted that in the new international system 'power and influence are less and less linked in an era of nonpolarity.'<sup>16</sup>

In assessing the relation between power and influence, three dimensions need to be taken into account: space, time, and the level playing field of international relations. As to the first dimension – space – different assets obviously play out differently in different regions. The assessment here, however, departs from specific regional considerations and takes the global system as the level of analysis. The time dimension is very relevant in so far as different resources produce political outcomes over different timeframes. Investment in R&D, technological innovation and higher education systems is a good case in point. Over the medium term, however, unless major technological breakthroughs occur, the evolution of the level playing field of international relations may prove the most decisive factor. Among the many implications of the rise of new economic powerhouses,

15. Data on R&D expenditure are drawn from the *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Outlook 2008* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008).

16. Richard N. Haass, 'The Age of Nonpolarity. What Will Follow US Dominance?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, May/June 2008, p. 47.

the exploding demand for energy, other commodities and food is by far the most tangible. This major paradigm shift has far-reaching implications for how power assets convert into political influence.

Given the emphasis traditionally put on military might as a source of political power, it seems relevant to dwell a little on the 'productivity' of military resources for political outputs in the changing international system. The actual role of military power as a 'game changer' when a country seeks to alter the *status quo* to its advantage is increasingly questionable. Few of the political priorities of major powers can be durably achieved by giving primacy to military intervention in the broader policy mix. This is also the case when it comes to the political-security dimension proper, whether it is about fighting terrorism, post-conflict stabilisation or upholding human security. Recent painful experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely to affect strategic thinking for a long time to come.

Even when military victory is achieved in terms of conclusively defeating a conventional enemy force, the very purpose of military intervention can be undermined at two levels. At the political-strategic level, mismanaging the politics of the intervention and compromising its perceived legitimacy can spoil military achievements. In his important contribution on the transformation of strategic affairs, Lawrence Freedman argued that the role and use of armed forces is to be defined in the light of changing political circumstances and that culture and worldviews are strategic factors of growing relevance in this context.<sup>17</sup> This argument is amplified by the increasing heterogeneity of the international system. As is the case in other domains of international politics, the 'competition of narratives' is ever more important. The mightiest player does not necessarily master the most effective, namely credible and persuasive, discourse.

At the operational level, conventional military success can be undermined by asymmetric warfare tactics, which can deprive conventional forces of their comparative advantage. Western troops in Iraq and Afghanistan have been dragged into 'war amongst the people',<sup>18</sup> internecine conflicts, and into a vicious spiral of low intensity confrontation that is proving increasingly unacceptable for domestic audiences in Europe but also in the US. As has been the case in Iraq, a reasonable degree of stability in Afghanistan will only be achieved through political dialogue coupled with well-targeted financial and development assistance. The military can create the basic security conditions to enable this process if it uses force in

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17. Lawrence Freedman, 'The transformation of strategic affairs', *Adelphi Paper* no. 379, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006, pp. 11-26 and 73-93. See also Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 371-404. General Rupert Smith makes the key point that 'the objective of all our operations amongst the people is the will of the people', p. 379.

18. Rupert Smith, op. cit. in note 17, pp. 267-305.

ways that are compatible with efforts at political reconciliation and do not alienate the local population. The bottom line is that projecting force *per se* seems to be paying fewer and fewer political dividends at home and abroad.

Conversely, the deterrent function of military power (notably when used asymmetrically) is acquiring increasing political relevance. In short, from a political-strategic standpoint, it can be argued that military power is increasingly a form of negative power, or power of denial. While the US is the only country that can project massive military force all over the world, many large and regional powers, and even militia movements such as Hezbollah, can deter others from attacking them and affecting their core interests. Conventional and unconventional forces seem therefore more 'productive' in terms of denying victory, stabilisation or political influence, than in terms of their positive power of achieving it.

Zooming away from the narrow military dimension, the increasing importance of negative power – the power to deny others the fulfilment of their objectives – is an important feature of the emerging international system. Clearly, the power of denial rests on much more than military resources. As stressed above, it should be set in the broader context of the changing level playing field of international relations. The possession of or access to natural resources and notably energy reserves affect the balance of (positive and negative) power to a much greater extent than in the past because of the growing demand and the associated geopolitical competition for resources.

In addition, the power of denial is closely connected to the accelerating, if as yet uneven, expansion of the interests of major emerging powers all over the world. These interests are embodied in very tangible investment, trade and energy flows, which, in turn, enable comparatively small but resource-rich countries to benefit from a *rentier* position, to diversify their alliances and to dilute the political pressure that any individual actor, state or international organisation, may seek to impose on them. No region is immune from the interpenetration of the influence of multi-regional, if not global, powers.<sup>19</sup>

The global outreach of powers other than the US and the EU is one of the main dimensions of the great transition and one of the key factors constraining the political influence of Western countries. In the security domain, for example, it amounts to a political veto power complicating the resolution of serious crises from Sudan to Afghanistan, not to mention the Iranian nuclear question. Over time, however, simmering tensions

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19. Michael Klare, *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet. How Scarce Energy is Creating a New World Order* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008).

benefit nobody. More broadly, excessive reliance on the power of denial will ultimately result in mutual constraints affecting established and rising powers alike.

The use of negative power leads to deadlocks across different policy areas instead of using issues linkages as vectors of cooperation. For example, the struggle for resources leads to a competition for political influence that often hinders political and economic reforms in resource-rich countries, thereby undermining sustainable development and paving the way for instability, which may in turn endanger both human security and economic investments. The point is that negative power may deliver short-term gains for individual countries but it does so at the cost of long-term collective risks. These are risks that the international community can hardly afford at a time of flux when multipolarity is taking shape and interdependence is deepening. The implications of multipolarity and interdependence are explored more closely in what follows.

## 4. Twin tracks: multipolarity and interdependence

Having illustrated the evolution of the level-playing field of international relations, the question is what the emerging international system will look like. The international system is arguably moving from what has been defined as uni-multipolarity, with the US holding material supremacy and maintaining enough influence to mobilise and lead collective action, to multipolarity proper.<sup>20</sup> The ongoing financial and economic crisis is accelerating this transition although features of the two systems will still coexist for some time.

Let us consider more closely the three main features of a classic multipolar system. The issues of primacy (of the largest power), balancing (by other powers) and scope for collective action are important to this assessment. As regards the question of primacy, power is distributed among three or more great powers in such a way that none is in a position to prevail over the others and acquire undisputed primacy in the system. This does not exclude, however, that one or more large powers are considerably stronger than others.

Concerning the scope for balancing, in a multipolar system great powers co-exist and often compete at the global and regional level, including by forming balancing coalitions and alliances. They may also enter into war with each other to gain more power or to defend their interests. No individual great power exerts overarching influence on the international system.

With regard to collective action, the cooperation of all major powers is required to address systemic challenges at the global or inter-regional level. Certainly, some powers may be more pivotal than others to global cooperative efforts on specific issues. However, the involvement of all the most important countries is, in most cases, a precondition for collective problem-solving.

This description of a multipolar system reflects many dimensions of the new international environment. However, it is not sufficiently accurate because it focuses too much on the relative power of major countries and not enough on the evolution of the actual context of their relations. In short, the problem with the multipolarity argument is not that it is wrong but that it is partial.

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20. Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Lonely Superpower', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no 2, March/April 1999, pp. 35-49.

The multipolarity debate emphasises changes affecting the relative power and the scope for balancing and competition among poles of power.<sup>21</sup> The point, however, is that power cannot only be measured relative to that of others, but should also be assessed relative to the changing level playing field of international relations and to the prevailing perceptions and expectations therein. Today, the international system is marked by deepening, existential interdependence. Interdependence is existential when its mismanagement can threaten not only the prosperity but the political stability and ultimately, in extreme cases, the very survival of the actors that belong to the system. Under this unprecedented condition, the ability to shape multilateral cooperation or lead collective action in addressing international challenges becomes a central feature of power.

Three issues lie at the core of global interdependence, namely the economy, energy and the environment. Economic growth, energy security and environmental sustainability are intimately interconnected. The momentous conjunction of economic, energy and environmental trends will test the ability of the international community to reconcile economic prosperity and political stability. Arguably, together with the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, this will be the biggest challenge of the decades to come.

The global economic impact of the financial crisis triggered by the crash of the US subprime market spectacularly illustrates the nature of global economic interdependence. The globalisation and deregulation of finance has enabled large transfers of wealth to support productive investment and innovation all over the world but has also entailed the exposure of all liberalised financial markets to the collapse of a system ultimately based on a pile of debt. The economic consequences of the financial markets' meltdown and of the quasi-extinction of credit will weaken global economic growth for years. As noted above, the impact will be relatively harder on the US, the EU and Japan than on, for example, China and India. These countries, however, are suffering too as their exports to rich countries contract and foreign investments shrink.

The net geopolitical effect of this crisis will likely be to accelerate the shift of economic power and political influence from the West to the East, most notably to China.<sup>22</sup> The risk is that both developed and emerging countries turn

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21. With a view to the debate on whether the international system is unipolar or multipolar, see among others William C. Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 1, summer 1999, pp.5-41; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'American Primacy in Perspective', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 4, July/August 2002, pp. 20-34; Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment Revisited', *The National Interest*, no. 70, Winter 2002/2003, pp. 5-17; Christopher Lane, 'The Unipolar Illusion Revisited', *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 7-41.

22. Roger C. Altman, 'The Great Crash, 2008 – A Geopolitical Setback for the West', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 1, January/February 2009, pp. 2-14.

more inward-looking as a result of serious economic and social turbulence, neglect the imperative of the international coordination of their economic policies and yield instead to protectionist tendencies and beggar-thy-neighbour policies, leading to political tensions. There is also a danger that the economic crisis detracts political capital and resources from crucial investment in, for example, the energy sector, clean technologies, and development aid at large.

While a concerted global effort to re-launch the economy is a priority, however, focussing on the far-reaching implications of future economic growth is at least equally important. Jeffrey Sachs points out that the world has entered the ‘age of convergence’ where sustained demographic expansion will be paralleled by increasing per capita incomes.<sup>23</sup> The latter will rise relatively faster in the developing and emerging countries that are catching up with richer nations. The resulting huge expansion of global economic output will have to be managed in such a way as to avoid even greater inequalities within and among countries, contribute to ending extreme poverty and be environmentally sustainable. Markets alone will not provide for that: multilateral cooperation will be of the essence.

The interplay of economic growth, energy-related greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and climate change is unleashing what Nicholas Stern has defined the ‘planetary’ crisis.<sup>24</sup> Under the International Energy Agency (IEA) reference scenario, both global energy demand and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will jump by 45 percent between 2006 and 2030. By then, it is envisaged that fossil fuels will still cover 80 percent of the world primary energy mix. As a result, the global competition for these resources will only intensify. China and India will account for over half of the increase in demand and, together with the Middle East, for 75 percent of the growth of emissions. The non-OECD countries’ share of growth of energy demand and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions stands at, respectively, 87 percent and a staggering 97 percent.<sup>25</sup> There is widespread consensus that these growth rates are unsustainable and will trigger catastrophic climate change. The latter will accelerate the depletion of natural resources, engender the propagation of old and new health scourges, and disproportionately affect already poor regions whose population is expected to expand exponentially. In this context, climate change would act as a ‘threat multiplier’ and further undermine the stability and security of fragile states.<sup>26</sup>

23. Jeffrey Sachs, *Common Wealth. Economics for a Crowded Planet* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), pp. 17-53.

24. ‘La crise, une chance de sauver la planète’, Interview with Nicholas Stern, *Le Monde*, 14 and 15 December 2008.

25. *World Energy Outlook 2008*, op. cit. in note 13, pp. 37-49.

26. On the security implications of climate change, see EU Council Document 7249/08, ‘Climate change and international security’, Paper from the High Representative and the European Commission to the European Council, 3 March 2008 and EU Council Document 16994/1/08, ‘Climate Change and Security: Recommendations of the High Representative on the follow-up to the High Representative and Commission report on Climate Change and International Security’, 12 December 2008. See also, from a US perspective, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, National Intelligence Council, 2008, pp. 40-57.

Interdependence no longer mainly concerns trade and investment but involves issues that are central to the basic well-being and even survival of large parts of the world population. In conjunction with other security and development challenges, economic interdependence is evolving into existential interdependence. Looking at the ongoing financial crisis and at the envisaged planetary crisis, Stern makes the crucial point that both stem from a system that neglects the long-term risks produced by its own intrinsic functioning, focusing instead on immediate gains. While the impact of the financial crisis is very serious, however, the impact of the planetary crisis would be disastrous and irreversible. Meeting the challenges of existential interdependence through multilateral cooperation is therefore the overriding priority of the years ahead.

## 5. A new scenario: the interpolar world

The combination of emerging multipolarity and deepening interdependence will change the course of international relations. Whether today it is fully established or not, multipolarity will be an important feature of the international system for decades to come. The big question is whether the emerging multipolar system will be a confrontational, competitive or cooperative one. It is safe to assume that these three dimensions will coexist, but it is critical that cooperation prevails over confrontation and that competition is not unrestrained, or else global security and prosperity may be compromised. The fundamental challenge, then, is how to promote a cooperative form of multipolarity in the age of interdependence. In other words, how to reconcile an effective multilateral order with a multipolar international system.<sup>27</sup>

As the world is changing fundamentally, a fundamental rethink of international relations and of the place of individual states therein is required. The daunting combination of many dimensions of change, however, challenges attempts to make sense of the great transition. Complexity is, quite rightly, the name of the game, which suggests that the transition is not amenable to quick fixes, mono-causal explanations and ideological readings. Recent important contributions to the debate on the evolution of the international system put complexity at the centre of the analysis. Both the emphasis put on ‘relative power’ and multiple ideological and political cleavages by Pierre Hassner<sup>28</sup> and the concept of ‘non-polarity’ in a world shaped by the seamless interaction of state and non-state actors put forward by Richard Haass signal the sense of uncertainty that surrounds the great transition.<sup>29</sup> Both these contributions wisely refrain from offering grand designs to reduce and domesticate complexity with unilateral initiatives or ambitious institutional constructions.

And yet, while complexity is impeccable in theory, it is problematic in practice when it comes to policy-making and even more so when it comes to multilateral cooperation. In a complex international environment, there is a need to identify the key actors and factors shaping developments. It is suggested here that major global and regional powers remain the decisive actors that will shape the future for better or for worse. Successfully

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27. *The New Global Puzzle*, op. cit. in note 8, pp. 206-9.

28. Pierre Hassner, ‘Le siècle de la puissance relative’, *Le Monde*, 2 October 2007.

29. Richard N. Haass, op. cit. in note 16.

addressing the conundrum of emerging multipolarity and deepening interdependence rests primarily on their active, albeit not exclusive, engagement. In fact, this is more the case today than it was only a few years ago. For one, the sheer proliferation of significant global and regional powers implies that their mutual relationships need to be redefined, which will affect the scope for more or less cooperation. For another, some of these powers articulate powerful worldviews and, in some cases, express strong nationalist sentiments, which may prejudice attempts at cooperation if respective perceptions remain far apart.

Furthermore, while power is indeed diffuse, states have acquired relatively more influence in critical domains beyond the traditional high politics of internal and external security and foreign affairs. National energy companies, sovereign wealth funds and protectionist tendencies attest to this trend. Following the financial crisis, strong public intervention in bailing out financial institutions, supporting credit, rescuing entire branches of industry and reshaping the global financial system points to a larger role of the state in the economy than commonly expected until recently.

The greater role of the state in international politics, economics and security is a factor of growing importance in shaping the international system. Based on this insight and on the co-existence of power politics and cooperation, a different scenario can be envisaged from sheer, confrontational multipolarity. The emerging international system could be best defined as inter-polar. Inter-polarity epitomises the basic connection between the two fundamental dimensions of the great transition described here – multipolarity and interdependence. Under the scenario of inter-polarity, power is progressively redistributed at the global level, with resulting controversy and tensions, but is ultimately used to enable international cooperation in addressing major common challenges. Inter-polarity differs from multipolarity given its focus on the challenges of interdependence and it differs from non-polarity because it puts the accent on the relations between large state actors, while not neglecting the importance of trans-national relations. The notion of inter-polarity includes both an assessment of the state of play and a perspective, or aspiration, on the shape of things to come. It is a realistic bet on improving the future based on the diagnosis of current developments.

Inter-polarity is interest-based and problem-driven. It also puts the emphasis on cooperative solutions and collective security and focuses on the process and institutions by which the convergence of the main powers around common priorities can be fostered. A reading of the international system based on inter-polarity paves the way towards the reform and strengthening of the multilateral order. The point is that no future multilateral order will be viable if disconnected from the transformation of the

underlying international system and from the distinctive interests of the main powers therein.

The world is a more competitive place than it was only ten years ago and, in the absence of political will to avert that, it will be even more so ten years down the line. Given the decisive role of global and regional powers in promoting regulation or unleashing competition, their interests should be considered as the basic pointers to identify scope for convergence, divergence, or clashes. To be sure, national interests are clearly not the only variable affecting international relations, but their importance as enablers or spoilers of cooperation remains unparalleled. Furthermore, focusing on interests does not mean emphasising ruthless self interest, quite the contrary.

Interests are not fixed: they evolve like any other man-made idea. Their evolution depends of course on variables that are both internal and external to each country, as well as on both ideological and material factors. If, however, ideology, politics and practical needs shape interests over time, then the future course of international relations is open and not bound to lead to instability and confrontation.

At a more fundamental level, interdependence enters the strategic calculus of all countries, including the most powerful ones. The growing emphasis on the need for international cooperation expressed by, among others, the new American administration, the EU, China and Brazil, while their accents and specific prescriptions may differ, proves this point. The difference between self-interest and shared interests may be less clear-cut than it appears at first sight. Arguably, few core national interests will be durably fulfilled without taking into account the interests of other major players and, where possible, building on the scope for convergence between them. Enlightened self-interest provides a reasonable and workable basis for inter polarity.

Interest-based inter polarity is problem-driven in so far as it builds on the expanding range of serious challenges that require cooperative solutions for the simple reason that they affect many countries in a context where no country, no matter how powerful, can unilaterally provide for its prosperity, stability and security. In particular, no issue has potentially more far-reaching consequences for global prosperity and stability than climate change. The complex links of this challenge to many others, such as energy security, development, food security, migration flows and even the political stability of the most affected areas, mean that it will be the defining issue of international relations over the next few decades. It is by now obvious that all countries have a stake in addressing together this set of challenges as none is sheltered from the direct or indirect consequences of failure. When focussing on present and upcoming common challenges

as opposed to political posturing and ideological drifts, the scope for and advantages of cooperation in an interpolar world become apparent.

This does not mean that the existence of different sets of values should be neglected. Value-based assumptions, interpretations and behaviour are and will of course remain important to international life. As noted above, the proliferation of global and regional powers with distinctive traditions and worldviews makes the international system more diverse and potentially complicates international cooperation. Rather, the question is whether different values and ideologies should be considered as *the* primary factor structuring relations between great powers. Confronted with the pressing challenges of interdependence, the answer is that ideological differences should not override the critical need for common action or else the ability to manage interdependence, deal with serious international crises and achieve overall stability will be compromised. That would in turn undermine or considerably complicate efforts at progressive political transformation.

Moreover, in an interpolar and diverse world, the coherence between the Western discourse and practice will be much more closely scrutinised. The application of double standards in relations with different countries, and to different matters, undermines the Western normative strategy. The US and European countries will be less and less able to escape pointed reminders of their own behaviour when seeking to enjoin others to respect basic norms and principles of good political and economic governance. The point is therefore not to abandon a 'transformative' agenda aiming at expanding the rule of law, human rights and democracy, but to pursue it with less rhetoric and more consistency, in a way that corresponds to the features of an interpolar world.

Besides focusing on the convergence of interests and on the solution of shared problems, an interpolar system is also, and distinctively so, process-oriented. Procedural norms such as inclusiveness and reciprocity are and will be crucial to the success of international cooperation. Getting the process right is the basis for promoting convergence between all countries and major powers in particular. The common definition of the problems at hand is a necessary (although *per se* insufficient) condition for the common definition of legitimate solutions. In an interpolar world, leadership will have to be creative, inspirational, inclusive and, to some extent, embedded in institutionalised interaction between the major powers. New avenues have therefore to be explored for the reform and adaptation of multilateral frameworks and instruments.

## 6. Multilateralism in an interpolar world

For all the challenges and threats ahead, an interpolar system and a multilateral order are compatible. It may even be said that the demand for multilateral cooperation is inherent to interolarity. Interdependence demands regulation and a strong case can be made that, in a system with multiple centres of power, unbound competition and conflict ultimately hamper all major stakeholders, not to speak of more fragile states. The question is therefore how to adequately respond to the demand for multilateral cooperation. More specifically, it is a matter of making the multilateral order fit for the new scenario of interolarity.

If it is to succeed, the reform of multilateralism will have to reflect and accompany the two fundamental trends identified above. First, the shift of power and influence, which poses the problem of the representativeness and legitimacy of multilateral fora. Second, the deepening of interdependence, which raises the issue of the effectiveness, coordination and resources of international organisations and regimes.

In envisaging the reform of the multilateral order, the same reasoning should apply as in assessing the features of the international system. In both cases, it is not a question of neglecting complexity and pluralism but of introducing a sense of priorities as a basis for action. This is the reason why, in what follows, particular attention is paid to summit diplomacy. In a system where the role and responsibility of major state actors are growing, summit diplomacy has new potential to become the lynchpin and the trigger of broader multilateral cooperation. The prominence of the G20 as a forum to address the economic crisis and the increasing visibility of bilateral or minilateral summits involving in variable geometries the US, the EU, Russia and major emerging powers attest to this.

In order to make multilateralism fit for an interpolar world, a dose of pragmatism is needed. It is necessary to go beyond the debate on the respective merits of more or less institutionalised and binding forms of multilateral cooperation. The key will be to harness what works best in different formats and make them compatible and mutually reinforcing. However, there should be no illusion that intermittent coordination at summit level will suffice to confront the challenges of existential interdependence. Fixing targets, adopting clear and enforceable rules and monitoring their

implementation will be of the essence, whether in dealing with climate change, fulfilling development goals, proceeding towards disarmament or fighting against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. This should be the perspective guiding the upgrading of summit diplomacy.

Five positive features of global summitry are worth pointing out. Summit diplomacy reflects the decisive role of major powers in enabling or stifling multilateral cooperation. It is a more flexible format than that offered by international institutions with broader membership, fixed competences and sometimes stiff procedures. It can cut across different policy domains and promote positive issue-linkages among connected dossiers. It can be established and developed at variable geometries, bringing together the most decisive countries on specific issue areas. Last, and perhaps most relevant, it provides an unparalleled platform for building confidence and trust among major powers by allowing for informal exchanges among their leaders. This is an opportunity to develop personal links and promote a better appreciation of respective priorities and concerns.

At the same time, three major shortcomings have so far hampered the effectiveness and legitimacy of summit diplomacy. First, landmark commitments often do not translate into action, weakening the credibility of the very forum expressing them. This is the case, for example, with the repeated G8 pledges to boost development aid for Africa, which are yet to be fulfilled. Second, the question of what countries get to attend or not attend the summits has become increasingly controversial, affecting their political legitimacy and practical viability. It is understood that the timid inclusion of the G5 (Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa) in the so-called Heiligendamm process of selective cooperation with the G8 is only a first step towards a more far-reaching change of format. Third, summit diplomacy may weaken the authority of established multilateral frameworks, notably the UN family, if anything by way of unintended consequence.

Summit diplomacy can do more and can do better, but one should not ask or expect from summits what they cannot deliver. Instead, one should be clear on what is the added value of summits in addressing the challenges of interdependence and security. Based on that assessment, the focus should lie on the conjunction between summits and 'thicker' forms of multilateral cooperation at the global or regional level. Summits are best suited for confidence building, top-level agenda setting and connecting bilateralism, 'minilateralism' and multilateralism. The last point often goes unnoticed but is of particular relevance.

As noted above, major powers have already established or are upgrading a loose web of bilateral or minilateral dialogues and partnerships. The pressure of interdependence motivates large powers to consult and cooperate

and also join forces in addressing shared problems. Top-level economic and trade dialogues between the US and China and the EU and China have been set up in the last couple of years; the US and India are forging a strategic partnership based on the American support to the development of India's nuclear sector; India, Brazil and South Africa have launched a trilateral forum for consultation and collective action, called IBSA; China and Russia hold regular summits while trilateral summits with India have also taken place. These are only a few, diverse examples of the variety of bilateral or minilateral formats quite casually popping up to manage inter polarity. Summit diplomacy can enhance the effectiveness and coherence of these formats and also prevent competition among them. The most creative solutions emerging from bilateral or minilateral cooperation could, as appropriate, be mainstreamed at the multilateral level.

As the inter polar system is interest-driven and problem-oriented, so form should follow function in reforming the multilateral order.<sup>30</sup> Recent innovations provide interesting pointers. In addressing the reform of global finance and seeking to deal with the economic crisis following the credit crunch, the G20, including the countries representing almost 90 percent of global GDP, constitutes a major development. The G20 has acted as an important focal point to encourage the convergence of major economic powers around a common set of priorities and to force them to discuss and attenuate their differences. The very presence of the G20 has played an important role in reassuring financial and economic actors although the summit in London in April 2009 has only laid the first steps in a process of economic recovery that remains fragile. However, the G20 does not necessarily include all the countries whose participation is most relevant to address other common challenges, from climate change to proliferation issues. Different formats can be envisaged depending on the task at hand.

For example, bringing together the largest emitters of greenhouse gases to discuss viable recipes for a global deal on climate change can help pave the way towards compromise in larger fora. Options for future formats may include regular summits between major producers and major consumers of energy where the related concerns on the security of demand, the security of supply and excessive price volatility could be addressed. A platform where all major donors and selected representatives of development aid recipients meet to give new impetus (and resources) to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda could be considered as well.

The G8 needs to reform in order to remain relevant, as it does not fully include the actors that are core to many of the problems of complex inter-

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30. Jeffrey Sachs makes this point when addressing the organisational changes required at the national and international level to support effective international cooperation. See 'Common Wealth', op. cit. in note 23, p. 332.

dependence, and that are pivotal to their solution. The G8 could be progressively enlarged to a fully-fledged G13 or G16,<sup>31</sup> effectively becoming the hub of different summit formats. Most of the countries meeting in, say, the G16 will be part of most of the other fora. This will boost the top-level coordinating and agenda-setting function of this summit without burdening its agenda with too many issues or excessive detail. Besides, the G13/16 could be well-positioned to cut across different sets of issues and identify positive trade-offs. Links between the energy, environmental and development agenda immediately come to mind but many others can be imagined. For all the potential of summit diplomacy, however, it cannot be stressed enough that summitry will only deliver if well anchored to existing multilateral global and regional institutions and rooted in a dense web of trans-governmental and trans-national cooperation.<sup>32</sup>

Relevant international organisations should be involved in the preparation of the summits and fully associated to the summit meetings, as has been the case, to some extent, with the G20 summit in London. Once a framework political agreement has been achieved, further negotiations with a broader range of stakeholders, the adoption of legal acts and the implementation of agreed measures should be delegated to the competent organisation or to a set of bodies mandated to work together with clear criteria and objectives. These institutions should of course be endowed with the necessary human and financial resources to carry out their tasks. Furthermore, viable summit diplomacy requires regular meetings at the ministerial level to underpin the top-level political process, as well as permanent cooperation at the expert-technical level. In this context, it will be essential to further involve in multilateral policy-making the non-state actors whose expertise, resources and outreach are key to enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of multilateral cooperation.<sup>33</sup>

Last but not least, the possibility of setting up small secretariats to enhance the effectiveness of summit meetings, supporting for example the proceedings of the G20 or the enlarged G8, should be explored further. The decision of whether and, if so, how to create new bodies should be based on considerations of efficiency and should aim to improve overall coordination and continuity. So as to prevent excessive institutional proliferation, ways of establishing such secretariats within existing international organisations could be considered. This could entail either creating

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31. The G16 format has recently been proposed in 'A Plan for Action. A New Era of International Cooperation for a Changed World: 2009, 2010 and Beyond', a report by the Managing Global Insecurity project involving the Brookings Institution, New York University and Stanford University, September 2008.

32. On the importance and growing role of government networks of regulators, legislators and judges and on their connections with international organisations, see Anne Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

33. Jeffrey Sachs highlights the contribution of academic experts, business, philanthropists and non-governmental organisations to international cooperation in 'Common Wealth', op. cit. in note 23, pp. 291-339.

new departments therein or attributing new responsibilities to existing ones. More thought should be dedicated to these options, which may also entail institutional joint ventures between existing organisations, for example across the domains of energy and the environment.



# Conclusion

The redistribution of power at the global level and the deepening of interdependence are the two basic trends that are re-shaping the international system. Based on this diagnosis, this contribution argues that the defining challenge of the years ahead will be to manage interdependence through peaceful means and multilateral arrangements. That will require engaging all the major powers whose involvement is critical to address the shared challenges of the economy, energy, climate change and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, among others.<sup>34</sup> This effort may or may not succeed, but should drive the foreign policy of the EU.

The emergence of an unstable multipolar world, which many fear is upcoming, can be averted. A new, alternative scenario can be convincingly fleshed out using the concept of interolarity. In an interolar system, the main powers regard cooperation to address the challenges of interdependence as a strategic priority. Interolarity provides both a realistic assessment of the state of international affairs, where the prosperity and security of major powers and of the international community at large are increasingly interconnected, and a prescription for future action.

To be sure, daunting obstacles may divert the evolution of the international system away from the interolar scenario presented here. But letting the ongoing transition drift towards a world of confrontation among different poles of power would be a political and strategic failure. Instead, the choice is at hand to build on the scope of shared interests and expand it, fostering mutual trust and international cooperation. Under conditions of existential interdependence, when impending collective risks far outweigh short-term individual gains, that is a political imperative.

The EU stands at the crossroads between a multipolar and an interolar global system. In principle, the EU is equipped with the right baggage of values and policy tools to make a real difference in bringing about an interolar world and strengthening the corresponding multilateral structures. This is at the core of the very mission of the EU to build sustainable peace well beyond its borders. In practice, however, the ability of the EU to deliver in a world of great powers, at a time when its economic growth as well as its political and social cohesion are wavering, is under question.

The EU can showcase considerable achievements. It has successfully promoted the agenda of sustainable development and climate change at the

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34. As to the partnerships established by the EU with emerging global actors, see Giovanni Grevi and Álvaro de Vasconcelos (eds.), 'Partnerships for effective multilateralism: EU relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia', *Chaillot Paper* no. 109 (Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, June 2008).

global level. It has focussed on the root causes of conflicts and crises and put in place a wide range of instruments for conflict prevention and post-conflict stabilisation. It provides, together with its Member States, critical funding to a range of global and regional organisations, from the UN to the African Union. It has by and large pursued an intermediate course between extreme versions of the free market and public regulation.

On many issues, however, the EU does not come across as a single international actor to its major global partners, but as a loose grouping of erratic states. The way in which the EU and its Member States are represented in international organisations and informal summits is ineffective and ultimately unsustainable. Furthermore, the external policies of the Union will be put to ever more serious test in the years to come, as interdependence deepens, competition grows and power shifts towards emerging countries and Asia in particular.

Whether and how the EU will shape up to become a central pole of power and cooperation, thereby effectively engaging major global actors and supporting the emergence of an inter-polar system, will be of decisive importance for its future. This should be the subject of serious political debate and innovative research.

# ANNEX

## Abbreviations

BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India and China
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHG	Greenhouse gas
IBSA	India-Brazil-South Africa
IEA	International Energy Agency
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
R&D	Research and Development
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations



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