

The EU and the BRICS

The iceberg strategy

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New centers of power have emerged. Existing power poles (West) are challenged economically, politically, culturally and ideologically. We have started to observe a redistribution of power from the “West to the Rest” on the classical state power chessboard. Organski described the situation in the fifties as follow: “Newcomers are constantly challenging the established leaders of the world politics, and if every one of these challengers is successful, it will mean a huge transference of power from one grape of nations to another - and a new international order. Some of the challengers of the past have been beaten back. Whether the current challenge will be successful or not remains to be seen, but one thing can be predicted with safety: the present challenge is by no means the last”¹. Today we are in the same conditions; in a complex world in transition, characterized by both near- and long-term challenges where different interactions at play have still to be apprehended and understood.

The visible part of the iceberg

The West and in particularly the US are challenged by some emerging powers that are also sometimes dissatisfied powers. From the BRICS could come the challenger that will want to form a new world order. The BRICS have arrived on the international scene when the international order was already established and seats already taken. They do not want any more to fulfill a role of subordi-

nate². These regional powers share a common interest to act together to limit the influence of the West, developing or encouraging own regional political spheres or alternative regional orders³. The BRICS, acronym invented in 2001 by Jim O’Neill of Goldman Sachs to characterize some emerging markets, has since, become a “political” reality. That’s in any case the image or perception the BRICS want to show to the West. They represent today 30% of world surface, 42% of world population, 20% of world economy, probably more than 40% of world GDP in 2050. The image projected is one of solidarity, multipolarity, multilateralism, South-South relations, governance and so on. There is clearly a new balance between North and South.

The invisible part of the iceberg

What is behind this policy? Global Governance or National interest?

It appears that the hidden objective is power and strengthening their position on the world scene. As noted by J. Ikenberry: “*The hallmarks of liberal internationalism – openness and rule based relations enshrined in institutions such as the U.N. and norms such as multilateralism – could give way to a more contested and fragmented system of blocs, spheres of influence, mercantilist networks and re-*

² Organski, A.F.K., *World Politics*, N.Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 1958, p. 364 and following.

³ Ikenberry, J., « Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence : Great Power Politics in the Age of Unipolarity », Discussion Paper, 28 July 2003.

¹ Organski, A.F.K., *World Politics*, N.Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 1958, p. 339.

gional rivalries”⁴. To equilibrate the international system the emerging powers as India, China, Brazil,..., are more and more tempted to go up against or contest the US. Their objective is to create a multipolar world that at the same time would weaken the American power. Based on shared frustrations, the emerging powers succeed more and more to co-establish the international agenda.

Although we do not see hard balancing by the BRICS, what we do observe is soft balancing⁵. T.V. Paul defines the concept as follow: “Soft balancing involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms build-up, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening”⁶. For Walt it is the “conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences, outcomes that could not be gained if the balancers did not give each other some degree of mutual support”⁷. It doesn’t stop the superpower but makes sure to make its job harder and the costs higher. If this strategy is regularly presented as defending multipolarity, multilateralism and collective security, reality is more complex. Resorting to international organizations or alternative forums is not innocent: one nation, one vote. It is “entangling diplomacy”, described by Hurrell as follows: “there is no great puzzle as to the advantages that often lead intermediate states to favor multilateralism and institutions (...) The degree to which institutions provide political space (...) to build new coalitions in order to try and effect emerging norms in ways that are congruent with their interests and to counter-balance or

4 Ikenberry, J., « The future of the liberal order », in *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011, vol. 90, issues 3, p.56.

5 See Pape, R.A., « Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy », in *International Security*, Vol.30, n°1, Summer 2005, pp. 7-45; Paul, T.V., « Soft Balancing against the United States », in *International Security*, Vol. 30, n°1, Summer 2005, pp. 46-71; Brooks S.G., Wohlforth C. « Hard Times for Soft Balancing », in *International Security*, Vol 30, n°1, Summer 2005, pp.72-108.

6 Paul, T.V., « The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory », in Paul, T.V., Wirtz, J. et Fortmann, M., (ed.). *Balance of Power. Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

7 Walt, S., « Can the United States Be Balanced? If So, How?», Paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004, p.14.

deflect the preferences of the most powerful”⁸. It allows to reequilibrate the system cheaply and to meet in places, conferring the same formal power. Because as Firedberg observes: “Fast-rising powers tend to be disruptive of existing international order, in large part because they are reluctant to accept the institutional constraints, border divisions, and hierarchies of political prestige established when they were relatively weak. Emerging powers often seek to change, and sometimes to overthrow the status quo, and to establish new arrangements that more accurately reflect their new conception of themselves and of their preferred role in the world”⁹.

Melting away the BRICS: divide ut reges!

Faced with this new reality of emerging powers and a world shifting towards the Asia-Pacific, the danger for the EU is to be excluded and to become irrelevant. The EU parliament has published a document in February 2012 entitled “On the EU foreign policy towards the BRICS and other emerging powers: objectives and strategies”. Although the document is sometimes nuanced, it gives the perception to recognize implicitly the BRICS. Indeed, 120 times the word “BRICS” is mentioned in the document of 20 pages. Furthermore, sometimes the document appears to operate a sort of wishful thinking and appear very naïve. The emerging powers “have **shown regional integration capacity and hence the capacity to engage in multipolar governance systems** ; believes that this demonstrates further the potential interest of the BRICS **in contributing to global governance** ; takes the view, therefore, that the BRICS and other emerging countries are in the process of defining their strategic direction in foreign policy terms and thus becoming partners of emerged powers and **supporters of a global governance system based on universal values, partnership and inclusiveness**”.

The reality is a bit different. There has not been a lot of collaboration on promoting democracy, global governance, strengthening the rule of law, defining a common approach to the resolution of conflicts. There have been no concerted actions con-

8 Hurrell, A., « Some reflections on the role of intermediate powers in international Institutions, Working Paper, n°244, , Washington DC, Latin American Program, Woodrow Wilson Center, 2000., p. 3-4.

9 Firedberg, A.L., « Asian Allies : True Strategic Partners », in Robert Kagan, William Kristol (edited by), *Present Danger: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defence Policy*, San Francisco, Encounter Books, 2000, pp. 200-201.

cerning for example Libya, Syria, Iran or Soudan, climate change,... The interests presented by the BRICS at their summits are not necessarily EU's interests neither : Different cultural, historical values ("Cultural fragmentation") ; Different interpretation of multilateralism and multipolarity;...

Time has come for the EU to become more pragmatic in its foreign policy. Normative power is necessary but not sufficient in this new complex world. Parag Khanna gives an interesting general view of the situation for the next years: *"The Post-Cold War era will be remembered for the rapid emergence of a postmodern Middle Ages – a world without any single power in control. The East will not replace the West, China will not replace America, the Pacific will not displace the Atlantic – all of these power centers and geographies will co-exist in a hyper-complex ecosystem. In the Middle Ages, empires, cities, corporations, churches, tribal hordes, and mercenaries overlapped- all competing to rule territory, control resources, win trade and investment, and seduce heart and minds. The same tableau is unfolding again. By empowering transnational terrorist networks, organized criminals and drug traffickers, globalization has made some weak states even weaker, while multinational firms and NGOs have grown in power and stature (...) Our maps of the world no longer reflect reality on the ground"*¹⁰. The World changes rapidly, the EU not, the danger being to become irrelevant in the future. As Timothy Garton Ash said : *"For its first half-century, the European project was mainly about what we did to ourselves. For the next half-century, it will mainly be about Europe in a non-european world"*.

The EU needs to 1) reinforce its strategic bilateral partnerships and divide the BRICS; 2) assemble a strong, effective EU diplomacy (European External Action Service); 3) limit the role of the member states; 4) implement policies, and not only articulate a declarative policy. This implies to publish a new document defining the grand strategy of the EU in a rising multipolar order, combining balancing and cooperation strategies. The last document defining a grand strategy dates back to 2003!

If the EU wants to be relevant in the 21st century it needs to be an "Agenda setter" and not a "Follower". Consequently, the EU should split the BRICS more and take advantage of their many divisions

¹⁰ Khanna, P., *How to Run the World : Charting a Course to the Next Renaissance*, Random House, New York, 2011, p. 12.

and different national interests. There is less synergy than the image projected during the BRICS summits or bilateral encounters between the members. It is a heterogeneous bloc, characterized by fundamental political, cultural, ideological, strategic and economic differences. The BRICS are more a concept of "nation-branding" than a reality. Their partnership has principally three functions: to benefit of the capacities of a third party, to increase their resources to augment power (for example energy and mineral resources) and finally to deny the superpower the access to certain regions, economically and/or strategically attractive. But this strategy has a fragile point, namely the new power acquired through the partnership, depends on the relationship between the partners.

In addition, not all of these emerging powers really want to take the lead in the balancing of the West. Indeed a policy of counterbalancing via an alliance or partnership supposes common interests and strategies and mutual thrust. Some, as Brazil and India are also "buck-passing" . It is the case when a power does not join the alliance against the superpower assessing that the coalition will be able to dissuade or defeat the latest without her participation and accordingly to come out reinforced compared to the other emerging powers. In fine, most of the time, the BRICS forms a partnership of circumstances with "tactical followership".

In conclusion, the EU shouldn't recognize the BRICS as a homogenous entity or group, because there is more that divide them, than brings them together. To give some legitimacy to a heterogeneous bloc as the BRICS, will make any negotiations on important world questions more difficult. In view of the divergence of interests between the emerging powers of the BRICS, the EU should favor to break it up and reinforce its bilateral strategic partnership, with in particular India, Brazil and South Africa.

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