

A NEW EMERGING WORLD ORDER: WHITHER REALPOLITIK?

By

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World orders are seldom monolithic in structure or linear in their composition. They evolve with the evolution of politics and often shelter nuances of *realpolitik*. World orders during the course of history have given rise to interplay of diplomacy, nationalism, political aspirations and individual ambitions. The world has throughout the advancement of mankind witnessed with both hope and trepidation the gradual rise of “new world orders” eclipsing the antiquated ones in the sands of human history.

During the course of the twentieth century, the list of the world's great powers was predictably short: the United States, the Soviet Union, Japan, and northwestern Europe. The twenty-first century promises to be different. China and India are emerging as economic and political heavyweights: China holds over a trillion dollars in hard currency reserves, India's information technology sector is growing by leaps and bounds, and both countries, already recognised nuclear powers, are developing blue-water navies. Further, the BRIC countries¹ are also on the threshold of a major economic advancement. Such consummate growth is opening the way for a multipolar era in world politics.

However, the course of *realpolitik* must be deliberated upon as the trajectory of world politics gradually swings, quite akin to a pendulum deciphering time, from the vantage point of a unipolar world to that of a multipolar world. On which course is *realpolitik* destined to traverse in this new world order? And which course will the river of power, ambition and nationalist chauvinism take in its journey towards the ocean of inimitable grandeur and success? These questions need to be deliberated upon with great certitude and understanding.

A Probable Composition of the New Emerging World Order

World order being the chimera that it is; there is a need for an in-depth understanding of its vicissitudes. Where is world politics poised today? What are the major changes that have liberated or alternatively assailed the same? What have we witnessed during the past couple of years that should necessitate an investigation into the shades of a changing world order?

The world is changing. The transformation is rather rapid. Continents are trying to carve out transnational economic zones across the globe. Over the past two years, the world's biggest economies have grappled with the threat of a new Great Depression. During the course of 2011, it became clear that the global economic crisis had also soured international politics. Political malaise is linked to economic crisis. Twenty years of excellent times and global economic integration, after the end of the Cold War, had profound political effects. They created a "win-win world" which ensured that all the major powers had reason to be satisfied. The United States was enjoying its "unipolar moment"; the European Union was expanding and prospering; China and India felt themselves becoming wealthier and more powerful.ⁱⁱ

But the global economic crisis has changed the logic of international relations. Both as individuals and as a nation, Americans have begun to question whether the new world order that emerged after the Cold War still favours the United States. The rise of China is increasingly associated with employment crises for ordinary Americans and a challenge to American power. The European Union is also in a defensive mood - with protectionist and anti-immigration sentiment on the rise and tensions between nations that have adopted the European single currency. While the Latin American nations are gradually settling down to happier democratic set ups, the Middle East, newly liberated from dictatorial regimes is still struggling to find its foothold in world politics. BRIC is important for the near future and Germany has woken up in its attempts to increase its influence over the euro-zone economy. The East remains a veritable storehouse for further diplomatic and economic discoveries with India not only emerging as a global player, but also attempting to counter China economically in the long run. Multipolarism has thus become the new game that is being played on the chess board of international politics. In all probability, the new world order would see China poised against a group of nations. It may also witness the rise of newer organisations with affiliations to developing countries pitted against larger economic bodies such as the EU and the ASEAN.

Whither Realpolitik?ⁱⁱⁱ

The course of *realpolitik* is both calamitous as well as unpredictable in nature. It has been so before and it will be so in the near future. As used in the U.S., the term is often similar to power politics, while in Germany, *realpolitik* is used to describe modest (realistic) politics in opposition to overzealous (unrealistic) politics, though it is associated with the nationalism of the 19th century. *Realpolitik* policies were created after the revolutions of 1848^{iv} as a tool to strengthen states and tighten social order. The most famous German advocate of *realpolitik* was Otto von Bismarck,^v the First Chancellor (1862–1890) to Wilhelm I of the Kingdom of Prussia. Bismarck used *realpolitik* to achieve Prussian dominance in Germany, as he manipulated political issues such as the Schleswig-Holstein Question and the Hohenzollern candidature to antagonise other countries, possibly with the intention of war. Another example of *realpolitik* in use is that of Adolf Hitler's attempt to obtain a predominantly German region of Czechoslovakia called Sudetenland in 1938. At first, Hitler demanded that the then President Edvard Beneš hand over that region of the country, but Beneš refused. Subsequently, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain gave Sudetenland to Hitler in the (ultimately vain) hope of preventing a war, as codified in the Munich Agreement. Chamberlain was able to do this because Great Britain wielded power over Czechoslovakia, therefore it was able to overrule Beneš' refusal.^{vi}

Coming back to modern times, the world at present being rocked by immense political, social and economic insecurities, *realpolitik* would definitely play a pivotal role in the aspirations and ambitions of nation states. A multipolar world would not only contain elements of power pockets and groups, but would also reflect transnational economic and strategic relations between nations and regional organisations of importance. While strategic issues may influence *realpolitik*, the core of the matter would be determined by economic influences and energy security concerns. Central Asia at present has become a hunting ground for major world powers interested in energy and geopolitical issues. Further, Africa and Latin America are also promising areas where the great game of power politics may be played in the near future. India should further its *realpolitik* aspirations if it wishes to gain a footing in the politics of Central Asia and Africa. In South Asia, as a result of the turmoil following the war in Afghanistan, individual countries would in the long run attempt to secure their own backyards and prosper in regional politics. However, the course of *realpolitik* would not only be determined by economic powerhouses such as EU, ASEAN and APEC, but also by multinational corporations spreading their tentacles across the globe. Thus, not only political aspirations, but also economic determinants,

pragmatic considerations as well as geopolitical pressures would establish the course of *realpolitik* in the next decade or two.

Conclusion

The 17th century was a time of intense Great Power rivalry and *realpolitik*. The 21st century may be a little different. With Iran^{vii} and North Korea perpetually at loggerheads with the international community, and with the slow and steady rise of China, world politics in the 21st century is destined to negotiate a path it has never travelled before. Perhaps the next battle may be fought on sea, as was recently observed during the course of diplomatic tensions that cropped up in the South China Sea dispute in November 2011.^{viii} Perhaps a newer amalgamation of nations may rise up and challenge the might of the major powers in international politics. Perhaps multinational corporations may in conjunction with states determine the course of the future of the globe. Whatever may be the course of human history, it is quite evident that a multipolar world is here to stay, and the games of power to be played in the near future would be within the range of this new world order.

ⁱ In economics, BRIC is a grouping acronym that refers to the countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China, which are all deemed to be at a similar stage of newly advanced economic development. It is typically rendered as "the BRICs" or "the BRIC countries" or "the BRIC economies" or alternatively as the "Big Four".

ⁱⁱ Rachman, Gideon, "Welcome to a Zero-Sum World," *The Economist*, November 22, 2010, accessed electronically at <http://www.economist.com/node/17493390>, on February 23, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term *realpolitik* was coined by Ludwig von Rochau, a German writer and politician in the 19th century. His 1853 book *Grundsätze der Realpolitik angewendet auf die staatlichen Zustände Deutschlands* describes the meaning of the term:

"The political organism of human society, the state, originates and subsists in virtue of a natural law which man, with or without consciousness or will, carries out... The imperative of Nature on which the existence of states depends is fulfilled in the historically given state through the antagonism of various forces; its condition, extent and achievements varying infinitely according to space and time. The study of the forces that shape, sustain and transform the state is the starting-point of all political knowledge. The first step towards understanding leads to the conclusion that the law of the strong over political life performs a function similar to the law of gravity over the material world."

^{iv} The European Revolutions of 1848, known in some countries as the Spring of Nations, Springtime of the Peoples or the Year of Revolution, were a series of political upheavals throughout Europe in 1848. It was the first (and only)

Europe-wide collapse of traditional authority, but within a year reactionary forces had won out and the revolutions collapsed. This revolutionary wave began in France in February, and immediately spread to most of Europe and parts of Latin America. Over 50 countries were affected, but there was no coordination or cooperation among the revolutionaries in different countries. Five factors were involved: the widespread dissatisfaction with the political leadership; the demand for more participation and democracy; the demands of the working classes; the upsurge of nationalism; and finally, the regrouping of the reactionary forces based in the royalty, the aristocracy, the army, and the peasants. The uprisings were led by shaky ad-hoc coalitions of reformers, the middle classes and workers, but it could not hold together for long. Tens of thousands of people were killed and many more forced into exile. The only significant lasting reforms were the abolition of serfdom in Austria and Hungary and the end of absolute monarchy in Denmark. The revolutions were most important in France, Germany, Italy, and Austria, and did not reach Russia, Great Britain, Spain, Sweden, Portugal, or the Ottoman Empire.

^v Steinberg, Jonathan, *Bismarck: A Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011.

^{vi} "Chamberlain and Hitler 1938," in *The National Archives*, Richmond, Surrey, accessed electronically at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/lesson31.htm>, on February 23, 2012.

^{vii} At present Iran has expressed willingness to resume talks over its nuclear programme, but has blocked access to a military site suspected of hosting covert nuclear weapon research for visiting inspectors from the UN nuclear agency, the IAEA. These gestures follow developments that have deepened the standoff between Tehran and the West: claims of nuclear advances; fresh threats of economic retaliation; and allegations by Israel that recent bombings in New Delhi, Tbilisi, and Bangkok were part of Iran's plot to target Israeli diplomats. Iran denies any involvement in the bombings.

^{viii} "Wen warns US on South China Sea Dispute," *BBC News Asia*, November 18, 2011, accessed electronically at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15790287>, on February 20, 2012.