Power Relations
in the 21st Century

By Karl Kaiser*

Writing in 1907 no one could have approximately predicted the conflicts and bloody disasters of the 20th century, all of which emerged from relations of the big powers of that period. A hundred years later the essential nature of history has not changed, and any look ahead into the 21st century should be undertaken with the proper humility when considering humanity's capacity for surprises.

An assessment of the important global trends at the beginning of our century which are likely to affect relations of big powers for some time to come can, however, be accomplished with reasonable accuracy. Certain conclusions can be drawn as to the nature of their probable relationship from the perspective of today's knowledge.

Let us begin by defining "big powers" as that small group of states with sufficiently large populations and resources to be able to project influence on a global level and include those that are only moving towards that status with reasonable certainty. They include the present permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and those which are being discussed as likely candidates once their number increases: Britain, China, France, Russia and the US as well as Brazil, India, Japan, Germany and South Africa.¹ To be sure, Brazil and South Africa will not yet play a strong role at the

Karl Kaiser is Ralph I. Strauss Visiting Professor, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs/John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.


¹ 71% of the Chinese population and 76% of the Indian population view their countries in 2020 as world powers and ahead of the United States. www.bertelsmann.de
global level, India somewhat more, and at a later stage a second African country may well join the group. Moreover, some of them are tied into alliance relationships or, as in the case of the European Union (EU), into a system of integration which affects their behavior.

The Big Powers’ Environment

Transnational Relations and Globalization
As a result of new technologies in transport and communication, notably the internet, direct communication and interaction among societal actors across national borders dramatically increased and accelerated in the second half of the last century, thus diminishing the relevance of frontiers and facilitating the flow of people, ideas, and goods. As a result states, though still the dominant units of world politics, have lost some of their ability to shape events according to their wishes and to solve problems alone. Vulnerability to outside crises, terrorism, or crime increases. Simultaneously the impact of non-state actors has constantly grown, notably in the economic arena where multinational companies today produce a third of global gross national product (GNP).

These developments lie at the heart of what we now call “globalization”, a process that has de facto become irreversible and is the “megatrend” that shapes all other trends.² It produces a new world wide interconnectedness within which international trade and foreign direct investment grow faster than production but which also produces new inequalities inside and between countries, though it has at the same time dramatically decreased overall global poverty.

Big powers cannot escape these processes since openness, connectivity, and economic interdependence have become the prerequisites of modernity, economic development, and higher living standards. However, its by-product, vulnerability (for example to terrorism), creates new constraints and necessities for cooperation for states.

The Rise of Asia, Notably of China and India
The rise of China and India and other parts of Asia will profoundly change the geopolitical landscape in the 21st century. Though India will lag behind China because of internal shortcomings (notably illiteracy and the caste system), they will both assume a weighty place as the two most populous countries in the world that also

mobilize an enormous economic potential. China is likely to have overtaken all economies except the United States (US) by 2020; India will have overtaken most European countries by then.\(^3\) China will replace Japan as Asia’s central economy. Though the Atlantic economy will remain the most integrated economic region in the world,\(^4\) and the US, Europe and Japan will likely still dominate the international financial institutions, globalization will take on an increasingly Asian face.

To be sure, both China and India face considerable internal problems in the future, in China’s case the growing internal inequality, its demographic structure, and the absence of democratic mechanisms to peacefully channel internal conflict. Unless these problems upset or reverse their ascendancy, their economic weight, indeed, China’s enormous currency reserves alone, will heighten the international impact of their policies. Will then the growing dependence on functioning world markets affect their external behavior?

**Demographic Dislocations and Migration**

Some of the big powers will have to face the consequences of lower birth rates and a shrinking ratio of work force to pensioners that will put enormous strains on their pension and health systems, indeed, on their entire social and political fabric. By 2020 China will have over 400 million pensioners over 65, and a country like Germany will have decreased from 82 to 67 million inhabitants by the middle of the century (even given an annual immigration of 150,000). Russia and Japan face similar problems as do Britain and France though to a lesser degree. The US, India, and Brazil are likely to grow; in South Africa HIV/AIDS is a drastic damper on demographic growth.

Changing demography will affect big powers differently and will consequently have a different impact on their power position. Besides diverting energies to internal politics demographic deterioration will reduce resources available for foreign policy, for example in the military sector or for development aid. As the ratio between work force and pensioners deteriorates the demand for immigration is likely to intensify, thus generating additional problems: the integration of Muslims, for example, and relations with the respective exit countries. Among the big powers, the US (and to some extend Brazil as well), seems to be the only country that has succeeded in turning immigration into an asset though Washington is also facing a growing internal opposition to illegal immigration.

Indeed, migration is likely to be one of the dominant issues in the 21st century. “Push factors” like economic misery, the youth

\(^3\) Ibid.

bulge, and huge unemployment create the drive for emigration in developing countries where modern media project images of wealth and abundance to starving people. While the "pull factors" of labor shortages and young people in aging societies create demand for immigration, the two factors can often not be synchronized. As immigrants increasingly choose illegal avenues for access, many countries experience growing xenophobia and resistance to immigration as well as calls for more effective barriers against it. In the case of the European Union such attitudes played a decisive role during the referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005 in the decision to reject the Constitutional Treaty.

The Changing Nature of Violence
At the beginning of the 21st century "classical" war among the big powers appears highly improbable, although it cannot be definitely ruled out, for example should Taiwan declare independence. Violence has shifted from interstate war to internal conflict, civil war, ethnic conflict, asymmetric war (as between Hezbollah and Israel) and the tactics of terrorism. The worst scenario that cannot be excluded would be a combination of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

These new forms of violence make use of the openness and mobility of modern transnational relations, of networking via the internet, of links between crime and terrorism. All big powers are deeply affected by this shift. The use of classical armed force cannot protect against the vulnerabilities of open and modern societies except against host states of terrorists as in the case of Afghanistan (and even there it has not produced complete success). Established rules and international law do not apply in these types of conflict that are mostly fought by non-state actors working in transnational networks. Since terrorism with its jihad and suicide tactics knows no restraint, classical deterrence policies do not work.

An adequate response to such threats requires a broad spectrum of internationally organized instruments that go beyond classical alliances. They include cooperation of intelligence services, police, drug agencies, or finance ministries and extend to means to deal with the roots of terrorism, such as dialogue with moderate Islam to isolate the extremist minority. To establish such a cooperation is easier for those big powers which have established among themselves a tradition of cooperation as it is the case between the NATO members Britain, France Germany and the US, between the EU and the US, or between the US and Japan. Immediately after the attack of 9/11 China and Russia joined the US in an antiterror coalition and promised intensive cooperation in this field. However, America's war in Iraq and other differences reduced that cooperation to a mutually convenient minimum. The two other big powers Brazil and South Africa seem to be outside this loop, though that may change in the future.
Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

The proliferation of nuclear armed powers has proceeded to a point where the international system of treaties and institutions to prevent proliferation is seriously eroded, if not facing collapse. Besides the original five nuclear countries that are also Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, nuclear weapon state status has now been acquired by India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel (though non-declared). Iran is clearly engaged in a program that points in that direction.

Thus, of our list of big powers the original Five and India possess nuclear weapons whereas Germany and Japan are strongly committed against such a step. South Africa once possessed nuclear weapons and destroyed them. Brazil, though committed to a non-nuclear status, is engaged in an enrichment program.

Several developments accentuate the relevance of effective non-proliferation while simultaneously undermining its sustainability. First, the combination of nuclear weapons (and nuclear materials) and terrorism creates what has rightly been called “the ultimate preventable catastrophe” when suicidal and undeterrable terrorists who have no clear address are in a position to create horrendous damage formerly only available to governments. All big powers are threatened by such attacks, though the open Western systems more than the countries with stricter state control. Nevertheless this challenge has engendered some solidarity beyond all rivalries and differences and produced some cooperation among them to fight this common threat.

The ongoing erosion of the non-proliferation system is the second force of change, though the 182 adherents of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), with the exception of Iran, for the time being accept their non-weapon state status. The rejection by the Bush Administration of the commitments which the US made when the NPT was indefinitely extended, now openly attacking central elements of the international regime, undermined the very system which the US once helped to create as one its main protagonists. The failure to induce North Korea to reliably renounce its nuclear armament, partially caused by Washington’s short-sighted policy, as well as America’s acceptance of India’s nuclear status, topped by a treaty of strategic partnership, completes the picture.

Iran’s quest for nuclear weapons represents the third force that undermines the non-proliferation system. Its acquisition of nuclear weapons in itself would create a huge problem for all neighbors and countries within range of its missiles, since some doubt is justified as to whether the rationality of mutual deterrence and destruction that once prevented war between East and West will work in the case of a

---

religiously driven policy. More important, Iran may tip the scales and unleash a profoundly destabilizing nuclear arms race in the region thus giving the coup de grace to the NPT. A US led new alliance system with nuclear guarantees to Iran’s neighbors may conceivably neutralize the negative impact of Iran’s nuclear weapons to some extent, but it remains doubtful whether the US and the states in the region are ready for such a turnaround.

The question then arises whether other big powers are likely to acquire nuclear weapons. It so happens that the Permanent Five of the UN Security Council are also nuclear powers (Britain just decided to stay in the nuclear club). Was it not French President Charles de Gaulle who stressed that nuclear weapons were essential to preserve independence and secure international influence? Germany and Japan proved during the post war period that countries can become big powers without nuclear weapons. Indeed, their permanent membership in a reformed Security Council would therefore be an important signal which reinforces non-proliferation. Whereas there is no plausible scenario under which Germany could be induced to abandon its non-nuclear status, the case of Japan is different. If North Korea proceeds to acquire nuclear weapons – and the recent agreement within the Six Party Talks is no guarantee against it – Japan will be under considerable pressure to go nuclear, and whether the US nuclear guarantee – lately reiterated – or the negative impact on Asia will stop it from doing so, remains open.

**The Spread of Radical Islam**

Though a "clash of civilization" is highly improbable, a partial clash between radical Islamists and the West as well as modern states and allies of the West has already been unleashed and is likely to continue, if not to increase. It is nourished by numerous elements: the Iraq war and its abuses are interpreted as an attack on the Muslim world as a whole, by new recruits bred in the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan, by the desperate economic situation of young people in Muslim countries, by the teaching of a radical and suicidal Islam, and by the daily images of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

By now the jihadist extremists have become a threat to almost all big powers though each is affected differently. The US will probably remain the main target of attacks from outside whereas the internal relatively well integrated Muslim minority did not appear to be a source of conflict until the discovery of a suicidal plot on a military base in May 2007. The problem is potentially graver in the case of Russia, Britain, India and to a lesser degree France and China, though in all these cases outside connections or support play a role. Germany (despite its large Muslim minority of Turks), Japan, Brazil, and South Africa do not have a major internal problem emanating from Muslims despite some incidents in Germany with an outside connection. However, since in this field only a few individuals can cause horrendous damage, the situation can suddenly change and
invalidate these assessments.

Since the potential connection between jihadist extremists and nuclear weapons creates a particularly dangerous threat, this will hopefully create a powerful incentive to revive non-proliferation policy, to deal with the critical cases of Iran and North Korea and to seek a dialogue with moderate Islam in order to isolate extremists. On non-proliferation, as noted before, considerable differences exist among the big powers whereas a dialogue with moderate Islam has not even begun in a meaningful way.

Global Warming and Resource Shortages
As a result of industrialization and development in the Third World, notably in Asia with China and India in the lead, the demands on energy resources and raw materials increase as incessantly as does the burden on the environment, in particular on the world’s climate. Though there are sufficient energy resources and raw materials for the immediate future, price increases, interruptions in the wake of political crises and temporary shortages are likely. Given the considerable differences in resource ownership and import dependence among big powers these issues will increasingly affect their respective power positions and the quest for influence. The competition among big powers for these resources will be a defining element of international politics in the 21st century.

Among the big powers Russia has chosen to use its position as a major supplier of oil and gas to reassert herself on the world stage as a revived power after having lost her position of equality with the US which she held during the Cold War. Five of the big powers, namely Britain, China, France, Germany, and Japan are today dependent on Russian deliveries to different degrees for parts of their energy supply and have to adjust their relationship with Russia accordingly.

However, when it comes to dependence on energy and raw material imports, China heads the list, followed by India in the near future. The required volume is growing steadily towards gigantic proportions, and its entire growth strategy, so essential to preserve social and political stability, depends on the continuous flow of imports. No wonder that China increasingly has subordinated it foreign policy to the requirements of an almost neocolonial approach to securing energy and raw material supply from Africa.

Whereas Brazil is in the happy position of approximate self-sufficiency, the US is a major importer of energy and raw material. But given its own significant resources (notably coal) and its enormous potential for savings – should it ever choose to pursue such a course – the US is in a somewhat more advantageous position than its European and Japanese allies.

As global warming increasingly turns into an issue of internal and international politics it also affects relations among the big
powers who are, after all, the world’s biggest polluters. In the past, differences on environmental policy have pitted the US against Europe’s big powers and Japan when the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs) was to be implemented. Indeed, the refusal of the US, the world’s largest emitter, to make even small changes in its wasteful policies was and is in no small measure a source of anti-Americanism among environmentally concerned people all over the world.

With growing evidence of global warming and increasing pressure to act, the differences among the big powers are likely to be intensified. The issue of who will assume what cost of necessary countermeasures will become ever more central. This dispute will arise not only between the US, which lags behind Europe and Japan, and the others but also between China, soon to replace the US as largest emitter of greenhouse gases (with India catching up later) and the industrialized countries. Pointing to the industrialized world’s responsibility for accumulating GHGs for 150 years, China argues it has the right to catch up first on industrialization without introducing costly environmental measures unless the developed countries assist her in financing countermeasures. India is bent on a similar course, and in both cases a resolution of this conflict of interest in the coming decades will be difficult. Needless to say, these issues will gain in saliency as further dramatic natural catastrophes like Katrina or large scale floods occur.

**Big Powers and World Order**

**Towards Multipolarity?**
After the Cold War the US emerged as the sole superpower. American neoconservatives were quick to describe the consequence as the “unipolar moment” which, they argued, gave America the God sent chance to reshape the world according to its own designs without the need to consider too many international obligations or the views of other states. That vision has foundered on the ongoing violence of Iraq, the discovery that even American power has its limits and that the legitimacy of America’s leadership has been undermined by its disregard for international law and its violation of human rights in connection with Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and the practice of rendition.

The multipolar world which President Vladimir Putin and President Jacques Chirac evoked in 2003⁶ is, in fact, emerging, although not necessarily as the counterweight to US power, as some

---

⁶ See Moscow ITAR-TASS, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 9 February 2003.
French protagonists hoped and some Americans dread. Most of our big powers represent such poles on the world scene. Russia is staging a comeback based on energy power. In about two decades China will surpass all economies except the US and already is a major trading power and holder of foreign currency. Britain and France, like China and Russia, are Permanent Members of the Security Council. Germany has returned as Europe’s biggest economy and the world’s largest exporter, and its military plays an increasing role outside Europe as does its diplomacy, notably as part of the EU Three on the Iranian issue. Japan is not only the second economy in the world and still Asia’s central economy but has developed an active diplomacy both in Asia and on the global level. Brazil, India, and South Africa are still primarily regional powers but are set on a path towards a global posture.

Moreover, the European Union, with three of the big powers playing a leading role in it, has become a significant actor in the field of trade and one of the major actors in the Doha Round. It is the largest donor of development aid, providing about half the world’s ODA. In the field of foreign and security policy it has repeatedly succeeded in translating its common strategy into action, for example, in the “Quartet” on the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Since the Union’s enlargement to 27 members has inevitably increased its internal diversity, the only chance to have more common policies will depend on whether the essential institutional elements of the rejected Constitutional Treaty can be resurrected. Nevertheless it will take many years for the EU to have a genuine and all encompassing common foreign and security policy. In the meantime the solution of the “EU Three” acting in consultation with other members and involving the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, as in the ongoing negotiations with Iran, may be prove to be a viable approach for some time to come on various issues.

In the multipolar world the US still remains by far the most powerful country; with a defense budget roughly equivalent to that of the rest of the world. It yields enormous influence but can no longer necessarily impose its will, as the second Bush Administration has discovered at great cost. In some areas other powers are conducting what has been called “soft balancing” against the primacy of the US to protect their own position. For example, Britain, France and Germany acted indirectly against the US by opposing its decision to go to war in Iraq while studiously avoiding any support of the Iraqi regime. As has been rightly noted, despite considerable disagreements with the policies of the second Bush Administration, there has been no real counterbalancing comparable to the traditions of the 19th and 20th century.

---

8 Ibid.
Big powers cooperate in numerous areas: bilaterally, in groups as well as with the US, particularly now that the Bush Administration has adopted a more cooperative and multilateral style in its second term. While the US has rediscovered that most, if not all of its strategic problems require the contribution of partners, the world in turn is aware of the fact that the solution to every major problem of world order requires US support without, however, necessarily endorsing at this stage of US policy the concept of the US as “the world’s best source of global governance”.9

The Future of Multilateralism

In the 21st century the big powers are unlikely to be divided or set against each other by the kind of powerful ideologies and chauvinisms that resulted in the great wars and disasters of the 20th century. Though there will be conflicts of interest, it does not appear probable that war will break out among them, and it appears entirely impossible among Britain, France and Germany which are part of an integrating Europe, nor between Europe and the US and Japan, all of them linked together in functioning alliances built on economic integration and political cooperation. Today the great democracies have come to constitute a peace system, a somewhat unexpected outcome of a very violent 20th century.

Nevertheless violence and wars will continue to be unleashed in and between other countries as well as by non-state actors. Indeed, although the multilateral system of rules and institutions has frequently failed to prevent wars, ethnic cleansing and other forms of violence, it is more needed than ever as globalization accelerates and vulnerability to transnational threats increases, be they in the form of terrorism, international crime or pandemics. Individual Western powers no longer have the clout to uphold a minimum of world order, not even the US which used to back world order and be the power of last resort.

Reform of the UN system is urgently needed. Much progress has been made at the conceptual level in recent years. “Responsibility to protect” and “human security” are important concepts that define international responsibilities for dealing with human suffering where formerly classical notions of state sovereignty prevented action by the international community. The recommendations of the UN Secretary General’s High Level Panel and the Secretary General’s ensuing proposals delineate the avenues for reform. It will not only take a lot of time and effort to implement these proposals but, even if they get adopted, no progress will be made until the member states of the UN are willing to cooperate and cede some competence to the world body. In this context the behavior of the big powers will be decisive.

But short of successful UN reform, multilateral approaches are possible, called for and even likely. The very openness, connectivity and vulnerability which are the products of contemporary transnational links and globalization make it necessary for governments to join others to solve problems they can no longer solve alone. This applies to many of the problems which plague the modern world: terrorism, international crime or non-proliferation, let alone the management of the economic and social interaction between countries which has become the prerequisite for prosperity.

Effective multilateralism, a term which the European Union uses in its 2003 security strategy as one of its central goals, cannot confine itself to lofty but ineffective declarations as the UN did with regard to Iraq’s disarmament prior to December 2002, but must achieve concrete results.

Mutual dependence among big powers in the economic area is another factor which favors, if not effective multilateralism, then at least cooperative behavior. The relationship between China and the US or between China and Japan is characterized by far reaching dependence on market access, on investment, on the outsourcing of production elements, on financing of deficits, or on the management of dollar reserves. In the Chinese-US relationship mutual economic dependence is a powerful incentive not to let tensions on political issues rise to a dangerous level. The same should be true for the Chinese-Japanese relationship, although their inability to adequately deal with shared history as well as the way they handle nationalism make their deepening economic relationship brittle.10

As Europeans know all too well from their own history, nationalism can turn into chauvinism with military conflict as its final outcome, for example, should China attempt to overcome an internal crisis through appeals to nationalism. Moreover, Taiwan always looms as a potential source of war. Peace may depend on whether China continues to internalize the norms and posture of a stakeholder in the stability of the international system as behooves such a great power.

Group multilateralism involving big powers plays an increasing role in dealing with specific problems: the Six Party Talks on North Korea’s nuclear program; the Quartet of UN, Russia, US and EU trying to promote the peace process among Israelis and Palestinians; the EU Three (Britain, France and Germany), backed by the US and consulting with Russia attempting to induce Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program. In all three cases countries other than the big powers take part as well, and in each case the US plays a decisive role (and could even more so in the Iran case, if it were to give up its refusal to deal directly with Teheran). The cases of the

Quartet and the EU Three are still pending, the Six Party Talks have at least achieved a first breakthrough, though not yet the definite and controlled abandonment of North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

Alliances are particular manifestations of group multilateralism tying together big powers and other countries with commitments of mutual assistance. NATO’s 26 members include four big powers; the EU incorporating the former WEU assistance clause involves Britain, France and Germany; Russia has concluded a defense alliance with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (though its real effectiveness is somewhat in doubt); the US has bilateral security treaties with Japan and South Korea and a trilateral agreement (The Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty, ANZUS) with Australia and New Zealand (though the US suspended its obligations vis-à-vis New Zealand in 1996).

Among contemporary alliances the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is not only the largest and most active but particularly interesting from the point of view of relations among big powers. NATO has evolved from a defense alliance deterring or defending against aggression into an institution projecting security beyond its borders by stabilizing areas from which a threat to its members could emanate but also wherever the local situation creates unacceptable suffering. NATO notably plays this role in the Balkans and Afghanistan. Combining civilian and military measures, it simultaneously prevents conflicts from re-emerging and rebuilds institutions, the rule of law, civil society, economy and democracy quasi under a military roof, thus addressing the roots of conflict and of terrorism.

Acting under a UN mandate, with the big powers playing a major role, NATO can implement a highly innovative and hopefully successful approach to tackling one of the contemporary world’s most urgent problems: failed states as the locus of enormous human suffering and potential source of terrorism and crime. Interestingly over 30 states have associated themselves with the efforts in Afghanistan, among them a big power and non NATO member Japan.

The case of NATO is sometimes raised in the context of the more fundamental question of how multilateralism can be adapted in a world of humanitarian disasters desperately in need of intervention by the international community and a UN failing to do so. In 1999 NATO intervened militarily in Kosovo to stop ongoing ethnic cleansing without a UN mandate. At that time, though Russia and China cooperated in the Security Council by demanding an end to ethnic cleansing of the Yugoslav regime, they refused to endorse the use of force when Yugoslavia did not comply. NATO’s action, though not technically legal, was considered legitimate by most countries and also followed norms contained in other international conventions.

Since the Kosovo case there has been a discussion on whether democracies should intervene in obvious cases of humani-
tarian disasters when action in the Security Council is blocked by a veto (usually by China and Russia which object to intervention in principle). A proposal has been made to expand the role of NATO to a “Global NATO” that could perform this function by cooperating with and including other democracies. A broader version of this concept has called for a “concert of democracies” that would combine all democracies in a new global institution which attempts to contribute to a better world order.

The creation of a new global institution including all democracies is unlikely to get sufficient support and might even have a fatal effect on the efforts to undertake the necessary reform of the UN. However, a pragmatic approach in which democracies assume responsibility to act in obvious and unequivocal cases of humanitarian disasters or terrorist threats if the UN is incapable of action may well be an alternative and more frequently used in the future. In such cases acting within an alliance and cooperating with other countries may give greater legitimacy and increase effectiveness.

11 Stanley Hoffmann first proposed this idea in his *Gulliver Unbound. America’s Imperial Temptation and the War in Iraq*, with Frédéric Bozo, Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 2004, p. 121