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THE NORWEGIAN ATLANTIC COMMITTEE

Security Policy Library

4-2010

**THE TRAGEDY OF SMALL POWER POLITICS**  
*The European Union under Multipolarity*

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Published by: The Norwegian Atlantic Committee  
Editor: Neving Rudskjær  
Printed by: Hegland Trykk AS, Flekkefjord  
ISSN: 0802-6602

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### *Introduction*

Those who claimed to be able to see into the future from the pinnacle of US power may have been looking in the wrong direction. Unipolarity was not an era, it transpires, but an interlude. We now find ourselves questioning what the new multipolar system might entail, but the answer seems far from clear when we consider that in 1945, and again in 1989, the international system went from multipolarity to bipolarity to unipolarity. Few would argue that subsequent strategic shifts could have been predicted based solely on an analysis of relative power distribution, or indeed on prevailing discourse at the time. The question of who will lead a world with greater distribution of power is a pregnant question, the answer to which has deep implications for the European Union.

In 2010 we are seeing the contours of a new multipolarity. The financial crisis has if anything increased the pace of this transition. The European Union has entered the period of transition in a state of imbalance. The integration process might have fused the twenty-seven states into a common market, but it has not created a political union. Although it is clear that the Common Foreign and Security Policy has made the EU into a force of sorts in international affairs, it is also true that the external policies of the EU have failed to live up to the expectations raised. Europeans have failed to integrate their foreign policy outlooks, aspirations and capabilities.

What do we know about multipolar systems, and what role can the European Union be expected to play under such an international order? This article will examine these issues in detail. Those who

are looking for something essentially new will be disappointed. The arguments presented are an attempt to build and reflect on the material from my new book *The European Union as a Small Power – After the Post Cold War*. It will be argued that the EU will not form a separate pole in a multipolar global order, and will also contend that the EU can be expected to pursue the strategy of a small power. This argument is presented in three parts, beginning with the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity. Section two deals with the most prevalent perspectives on multipolarity, namely, interolarity (multipolarity with multilateralism), nonpolarity (multilateralism without distinct poles), and, finally, a return of history (multipolarity without multilateralism). The concluding section considers the possible implications of multipolarity on the EU as a small power.

#### *What Sort of Power is the EU?*

Students of the European Union have for too long neglected power politics, either because they could not see its relevance to the EU a “global actor” or because they were uneasy with that kind of discourse for normative reasons. In more ways than one, academic work on EU ‘actorness’ is a stand-in for something else. The EU may be as unique as a snowflake, but it operates in a system determined by powers: there is no separate league for those who favour soft power. In most European languages, states that matter are usually referred to as ‘powers’ (in German *macht*, in French *puissance*, in Russian *derzhava*, and in Spanish *poder*).

During the Cold War the term “superpower” was used in relation to the Soviet Union and the United States. With the shift towards multipolarity this category is losing its only remaining member, as the United States steps down and the emerging powers step up into the great power category. The likely candidates for places at the high table are obvious: the United States, China, India, Japan, Russia, and the European Union make up roughly half the world’s people, account for 75 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP) and 80 per cent of global defence spending.<sup>1</sup> Brazil and Germany are potential contenders.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the rise of one or the other is inevitable; one or more of these may prove unable or unwilling to act as a great power. The ageing population of Japan, and the economic

asymmetries of Russia make them likely candidates to be relegated, but the most obvious non-contender is the EU.

Much can be said as to why the EU is not a great power. The simplest explanation is that the Union has failed to channel the sum of its parts. A union of 500 million people could be the greatest power in the world – even much less than that would put it on a par with Russia. But the political integration project is both over-burdened and under-driven. The members have proclaimed a common foreign policy without putting it into practice, and they have promised a common defence without committing the means to provide for it. The distinctive shape of the EU as a power cannot be understood unless account is taken of the context it came into being, namely, unipolarity. The EU is a true-born child of the post-Cold War era, a period characterized by an unusually benign security climate for Western democracies. The assumption was that the globalization of liberal democracy, the rule of law and human rights were unstoppable. This allowed the EU to develop its foreign and security policy as a dispensable and non-decisive increment to the array of political and military resources held by the US. The foreign presence of the EU was constructed with little thought to defining a European ‘national interest’ to guide policy. For this reason EU foreign policy belongs to the altruistic branch of liberal internationalism.

Power matters in international affairs. Robert Keohane distinguishes between different kinds of powers by examining whether their leaders have a decisive impact on the international system. *System-determining* powers are those that play a critical role in shaping the international system; *system-influencing* powers are those that cannot individually dominate the international system but may be able to influence it; *system-affecting* states are those that cannot affect the international system alone but can have an impact on how the system works through small groups or regional international organizations. Finally, *system-ineffectual* states can do little to influence the system-wide forces that affect them, except in groups so large that each state has minimal influence.<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Kjellén, Keohane’s predecessor by some six decades, previously categorized the four into ‘great powers’, ‘middle powers’, ‘small powers’ and ‘small states’.<sup>4</sup>

If we accept the premise that members of the various power categories 'develop behavioural patterns which decisively separate them from non-group members' then the EU clearly does not belong among the great powers.<sup>5</sup> The unilateralism that characterises a great power is abhorred by the EU. The EU explicitly and demonstratively chooses to impact international affairs through collective engagement. This said, the Union is clearly not system-ineffectual, as is illustrated by its frequent presence when world leaders meet. Kjellén subdivides what he calls the 'middle class' of powers into 'middle powers' and 'small powers', the former being distinguished by greater military strength and a great power past. Unlike the former great powers like France and Britain, the EU has neither. Space constraints prevent an illustration here of the extent to which the behavioural patterns of the EU overlap with those of small powers, I have presented this argument in detail elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> What is worth noting is that in the literature on small powers demonstrates some recurrent themes: the strategic behaviour of small powers is characterized by dependence; they are staunch supporters of international institutions; they prefer to act through multilateral engagement; they are risk averse and they are defensive by nature.<sup>7</sup>

Why has the EU become a small power? The obvious answer to this question lies in the way that EU foreign policy decisions are made. The EU makes foreign policy through strict consensus; that is, in principle, each of the twenty-seven members has an absolute veto over any policy.<sup>8</sup> This encourages lowest-common denominator policymaking. It is perhaps to be expected that a union based on equal membership that is for the most part made up of small states would be influenced by their strategic outlook. Another reason lies with Germany; Europe's largest state is currently the only great power apparently willing to channel its strategic ambitions through the EU. Eager not to repeat past mistakes, Germany embraces the EU's "play small" approach. Finally, there are what Robert Rothstein terms 'the temptations of appearing insignificant.'<sup>9</sup>

### *Power and Polarity*

The concept of polarity has long been a basic staple of strategic thinking. The Peloponnesian war, or the struggle between Rome and Carthage, are both examples of bipolar rivalry, and were perceived as such by contemporaries. Polarity, quite simply, refers to the distribution of power among the actors in the international system. Unipolarity has one dominant power centre; bipolarity has two. Multipolarity in international politics describes a distribution of power in which more than two powers have comparable amounts of military, cultural, and economic influence. A multipolar system is distinguishable from other international systems by the absence of supranational organising principles. Morton Kaplan estimates the number of actors needed to maintain such a system as “at least five, and preferably more”.<sup>10</sup> In the emerging multipolar order, nation states remain the basic units and power is relational. The structure of the system refers to the distribution of capabilities among actors, and this structure helps determine the nature of the system.<sup>11</sup>

Opinions differ regarding the inherent stability of multipolarity. Classical realist theorists, such as Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr, hold that multipolar systems are more stable than those that are bipolar; powers can enhance their position through alliances and limited wars that do not directly challenge others. In bipolar systems, classical realists argue, this is not possible. Neorealists, on the other hand, focus on security and invert the formula: powers in a multipolar system can focus their fears on any number of other powers and, misjudging the intentions of other powers, can unnecessarily compromise their own security. The chance of conflict grows with the number of conflict nodes. From this perspective, multipolarity is expected to be unstable both because of its complexity and because powers cannot be sure of the intentions of others. They are tempted to “pass the buck” if they believe they can get away with it. This may produce opportunities for revisionist powers, allowing them to take on at least some of their opponents, one at a time.

Assuming that the great powers continue to act as great powers have done in the past, an active multipolar system is likely to develop. Such a system will be flexible and prone to alliance shifts, making it dif-

ferent from precedent bipolar and unipolar orders, when the structure as a whole was rigid. In the multipolar system of the future, the military balance of power will have a greater number of unknowns, making unlikely the sort of stable deterrence-based structure seen under bipolarity. Whether the balance of power will provide a future multipolar system with instability or flexible stability remains to be seen. It would seem unlikely, though, that ideology will play a key role in shaping the strategic environment, since “authoritarian capitalism” offers little common ground in opposition to liberal democracy. This could change rapidly, however, as new, strident ideologies tend to accompany the rise of revisionist powers.

What most scholars seem to agree on, here, is that the relative power of opposing coalitions depends greatly on how various powers define their national interests. These are difficult to ascertain in advance and are subject to rapid shifts. Failure to react and miscalculation are greater problems in situations of multipolarity than in bipolarity, where the calculation of relative strengths, while never easy, is at least possible. For such reasons, a multipolar world will have to overcome problems of coordination. L. F. Richardson’s classic balance-of-power model illustrates the array of corollaries, among them the relationship between the number of actors and the stability of the system.<sup>12</sup> Discussing this model, Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer (1964) reached the conclusion that “in the long run ... multipolar systems operating under the balance of power policies are shown to be self-destroying”, owing mainly to an “accelerated rise of interaction opportunities” and a resulting “accelerated diminution in the allocation of attention”.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, multipolar systems, with their ever-shifting balance of power, are most often portrayed in the scholarly literature as turbulent. Resource scarcity is likely to be a key factor in driving future instability because inequalities among the members carry such severe penalties. Charles Doran sees the ceaseless movement of powers on the vertical axis of the global power hierarchy as combined in a multipolar environment with incessant manoeuvring for allies on the horizontal axis of balance-of-power politics.<sup>14</sup> As a result, William Thompson argues, crises are expected to be more common than



under situations of unipolarity and bipolarity.<sup>15</sup> Building on this rationale, Robert Powell concludes that conflict resolution can be expected to have a low rate of success, and that war will be more prevalent.<sup>16</sup> Yet there may be other systemic conditions that will fuse with multipolar power distributions and reduce the likelihood of war.<sup>17</sup> This is why the question of whether multipolarity will provide more or less stability in the international system than bipolarity is a flashpoint in contemporary international relations debates.

*Interpolarity, Nonpolarity or a Return of History?*

Many European international relations scholars object to the power calculus of the mainstream international relations theory described above. World orders do not spring up organically: they are created by the ways in which major powers cast their relationships, by the incentives provided by the international system, and by the ways in which these incentives are interpreted. A brief discussion follows of three of the most widely cited attempts to explain the nature of modern multipolarity. Two of the scenarios are competitive, one is hegemonic; two are linear, one is cyclical; two are continuity scenarios, and one predicts rupture.

Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis retains many followers, not least in Europe. Although some of the determinism has been dispensed with over time, along with the actual slogan, many still believe that we are witnessing a universalization and an evolution of liberal democracy, where globalisation redefines the nature of power and of international affairs. A distinctly European vision of a *cooperative* multipolar system is what Giovanni Grevi has dubbed "interpolarity", which he defines as "multipolarity in the age of interdependence".<sup>18</sup> This concept keeps the notion of a new world order in the making, but reintroduces the powers at the centre of the system. Grevi argues that the defining features of the contemporary international landscape are the intensification of economic globalization, thickening institutions, and the shared problems of interdependence. Compared to past orders, the contemporary liberal-centred international order provides a set of constraints and opportunities – pushes and pulls – that reduce the likelihood of severe conflict. Grevi accepts that multipolarity captures many dimensions of the emerging international system; he claims that the relative power

of competing actors is outdated and that “deep” interdependence is the contemporary context. The intertwined nature of economy, energy and environment is seen to place important restraints on power relations.<sup>19</sup> Like the Soviet “socialism in one country” doctrine, Grevi’s analysis accepts that European integration may be limited to Europe – coupled with a notion of power bloc polarity and a linear assumption that the world is getting ever more interdependent.

Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane provide much of the foundation for this argument in *Power and Interdependence* (1977), in which they question the traditional assumption that military power alone ensures strength; they emphasize the importance of the economy and ‘complex interdependence’ as motivators towards, and reasons for, power interaction.<sup>20</sup> This perspective has since been developed further. Keohane developed a theory in which institutions are seen to promote cooperation by managing communication inefficiencies and the risks inherent in the international system. The provision of mechanisms that warn of defection, and the instituting of pre-defined sanctions in response to violations, can help reduce the security dilemma to an acceptable level.<sup>21</sup> In conditions of complex interdependence, partners, societies and economies are closely connected through norms, rules, processes and institutions.<sup>22</sup> The ‘complex interdependence’ perspective concedes the realist dictum that national security and military concerns trump all other foreign policy agendas, but asserts that the vast majority of international relations do not concern the survival goals of powers. Regime theory is often seen as a necessary supplement to this. Regimes are defined as ‘sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms and decision making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations.’<sup>23</sup>

The view of multipolarity that has gained prevalence in the United States is what Richard Haass (2008) calls “nonpolarity”. In short, he argues that the global system has now embarked on a ‘quasi-anarchic journey’ that involves more than state actors and includes NGOs, large corporations, terrorists and energy providers. He concludes that an open challenge by a single emerging power or coalition of powers “is unlikely to arise anytime soon”.<sup>24</sup> Haass believes that classic great

power rivalry is also unlikely to arise in the medium term, although this depends on the behaviour of the United States, which has not so far engendered such a response but could do so if managed recklessly. The point is that the US has not, even under President George W. Bush, acted in a manner that has led other powers to conclude that the US constitutes a threat to their vital national interests. What Grevi places as the main variable, Haas views as an added constraint: most of the other major powers are dependent on the international system for their economic welfare and political stability. In other words, they play the role of system upholders and will act when rules are broken. This is expected to curb the emergence of great power rivalry. Haas concedes that a nonpolar system is likely to increase the vulnerabilities of the United States; he lists rogue states, terrorist groups, energy blackmail, and pressures on the role and strength of the US dollar. In essence, a nonpolar world is seen as a continuation of unipolarity. Haas is joined in this prediction by Fareed Zakaria, who posits that if managed properly, US primacy could last for generations. In *The Post-American World*, Zakaria predicts an international system in which the United States will no longer orchestrate the global economy, dominate geopolitics, or define cultures.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, he sees the “rise of the rest” as the great story of our time. Drawing on examples from history, Zakaria argues that the United States should seek to maintain its dominant position through acquiescence. The Obama administration has clearly internalised this logic – that the best way to preserve US leadership is through agenda-setting and coalition-building as the way to exert influence.<sup>26</sup>

To others, the current turbulence is a harbinger not of history's end, but its resumption. In their view, the future threatens to resemble its problematic past. Robert Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy* was first published as an article in *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1994.<sup>27</sup> It is considered to be one of the fundamental positions on the post-Cold War era, and is often cast as the antithesis to the “end of history” thesis. Kaplan argued that the West would soon come to miss the Cold War since stable bipolarity is the closest the world can get to perpetual peace; without the stability offered by bipolarity the world is open to a new age of conflict tensions, such as scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease, which will tear at the “social fabric” of the

international system – the norms, treaties and institutions. The fact that the world is modernizing does not necessarily mean that it is Westernizing. Here, Kaplan questions both the idealistic assumptions of liberal internationalism and the supranational visions associated with constructivism. In *The Coming Anarchy* (2000), Kaplan outlines a dark future for the West in his prediction that the forces of anarchy will outstrip the Western supply of idealism.<sup>28</sup>

The most frequently cited vision of a competitive multipolar system is Robert Kagan's *The Return of History* (2008), which argues that the ability of the US to maintain the international order is declining.<sup>29</sup> He points out that after the Cold War, the US pursued "an expansive, even aggressive global policy", and that "in shaping a world to suit their values, they have compelled others to bend to their will" in ways that were bound to create a backlash. The logic is that all great powers are arrogant – it just so happens that, for a while, the US was the only one around. For this reason, rising powers will tend to create a balance against the US. It is worth noting that Kagan, like Grevi, projects a European experience onto the international system. In Kagan's argument, the twenty-first century international system will resemble mid-nineteenth-century Europe. That would mean a period of bare-knuckle national interest politics with a minimum of postmodern padding. This is the scenario that the US National Intelligence Council has labelled "multipolarity without multilateralism".<sup>30</sup> From this perspective, great power geopolitical rivalries will deepen in the same patterns as ideological rifts between autocracies and democracies. Rising powers will seek to improve their relative positions and establish hegemony along their borders. As the emerging powers grow in strength, the area they define as their national interest will expand, causing friction with other powers. Because their envisioned spheres of influence will overlap, the relationship between the great powers is likely to be competitive. This is a classic balance-of-power argument. It draws on the classical realist view of history and a neorealist focus on structure. Since Kagan spends little time going over the theoretical underpinnings of his argument, and because this scenario is the one most perilous for the EU, the next section will revisit some of the basic assumptions on which his thesis rests.

### *Balancing, Bandwagoning and Hedging*

When tectonic plates move, they do not always glide smoothly; sometimes they slip. The first decade of this century has witnessed just such a moment of tectonic slippage – a brief but powerful acceleration in power away from the West towards emerging powers. A change of polarity reflects a change in the distribution of capabilities among the great powers in a system. During this process the ascending and descending powers may come to perceive each other as hostile, and they may, subsequently, clash. Similarly, a failure to uphold the rules of the system by system-determining power(s) can create instability.<sup>31</sup> The argument most frequently encountered in the literature promotes the idea that a hierarchy of power upholds the international order. Daniel Geller correctly points out that the rules of the system are a reflection of the interests of the dominant power(s).<sup>32</sup> But these power relations among actors are not static. Changes in security, knowledge, production and finance lead to a shifting, and an erosion of, the foundations that underlie the current order. A growing discrepancy between changing power distribution and the hierarchy of prestige will create disequilibria, which, unless redressed, will increase the likelihood of conflict. Shifts in power relations favour challenging rather than incumbent powers and help provide the necessary conditions for war.

E. H. Carr was among the first to observe that polarity transitions tend to be turbulent, in part because revisionist powers often display a volatile mix of victimhood and aggressiveness, but also because the system-determining powers will be tempted to stop enforcing the rules of the system. The former will see the system as having been weighted against them; the latter will be disappointed that the system allows challengers to rise.<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, powers that favour the status quo, most often those who participated in drawing up ‘the rules of the game’, stand to benefit from these rules; revisionist powers tend to be dissatisfied with their place in the system and wish to change the rules by which relations among nations work. Carr describes the breakdown of international order as follows: rules are challenged by those who see the status quo as favouring established powers; the leading powers grow less willing to make sacrifices to maintain a system that is allowing others to rise.<sup>34</sup> In the present

context, this would mean that China and Russia could be expected to make similar claims to the sort of exceptionalism the US has granted itself during the post-Cold War era. From this perspective, it is to be expected that the taxpayers of the leading power will lose enthusiasm for policing the international order, and for the accompanying military expenses. In other words, it is a dual process whereby the emerging powers rise to the level of the leading power(s), and the upholders of the system show a diminished level of commitment.

The key distinction to be made, then, is between defensive *status quo* powers that seek system preservation, and revisionist powers more willing to accept the costs of confrontation. Robert Gilpin splits this complex into three components: the distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and privileges that govern (or at least influence) the interaction amongst powers.<sup>35</sup> This leads to three “tests” of *status quo* or revisionist intent. Do the leaders of the power comply with the rules of the system in words and actions; how do these leaders speak and act with regard to power distributions regionally and globally; and how do leaders speak and act with regard to the hierarchy of prestige both regionally and globally? In order to make its mark as a revisionist power an actor must, according to Gilpin, reject all three of these status quos.<sup>36</sup> According to Randall Schweller, ‘Revisionist states value what they covet more than what they currently possess.’ War is more likely when a former dominant power finds its power relative to a challenger slipping as the result of the challenger’s rise. Robert Gilpin presents this as ‘hegemonic stability’; George Modelsky thinks of it in terms of ‘long cycles’; and A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler use the term ‘power transition’. What they have in common is a belief in a mechanism whereby a shift away from primacy and towards parity encourages conflict.<sup>37</sup> The presence of a large number of small and middle-sized powers that are effectively unable to defend themselves adds impetus to a violent transition.<sup>38</sup> The stability of the international order rests on the willingness of the leading power to sustain it, and on smaller powers accepting the order as legitimate. This is facilitated by the fact that smaller powers are granted “voice options” to influence the predominant power’s behaviour, as argued by G. John Ikenberry.<sup>39</sup> To bandwagon or to counterbalance? This is, from a realist perspective,

the pregnant question in transatlantic relations. Since powers can never know other powers' motives with certainty, alliances can be seen as temporary "marriages of convenience"; they are arenas in which powers aim to maximise their power *vis-à-vis* alliance partners.<sup>40</sup> Stephen Walt (2004) distinguishes between 'balancing' and 'bandwagon' powers in the international system.<sup>41</sup> These are absolute strategies, though there are clearly degrees of both stances involved here. Coordinating positions on minor issues means that actors may become more comfortable with each other (and thus better able to collaborate on larger issues), just as failure to lend support when expected can undermine a status quo coalition. Thus, small-scale opportunism today may lay the foundations for more significant shifts tomorrow. If other states are able to coordinate their policies in order as to impose additional costs on the US, or to obtain additional benefits for themselves, then the dominant position of the US could be eroded, and its ability to impose its will on others would decline.<sup>42</sup>

One way to think about these developments is in terms of 'hedging'. Hedging is a term borrowed from the finance sector: it refers to risk reduction by means of spreading investments in contradictory developments.<sup>43</sup> Hedging has become the new buzzword in US strategic discourse, most notably in the 2006 National Security Strategy, which states that US strategy 'seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities'.<sup>44</sup> Hedging is a behaviour in which an actor seeks to offset risk by pursuing multiple policy options that increase the likelihood of a beneficial result from a range of possible outcomes. It has been utilized in international relations to refer to a strategy that can be distinguished from balancing and bandwagoning. Hedging is in many ways related to 'soft balancing', which is meant not to directly shift the balance of power but rather to undermine, frustrate and increase the cost of unilateral action for the stronger power. Hedging behaviour is seen as the pursuing of policies that combine 'engagement and integration mechanisms' with 'realist-style balancing in the form of external security cooperation and national military modernization programs'.<sup>45</sup>

### *What will multipolarity hold for Europe?*

So what can be expected from the EU under a 'multipolarity without multilateralism' scenario? In order to answer this question we need to look at how small powers of the past have behaved under such circumstances. There is a widely held assumption that small powers are of particular relevance in times of systematic shifts since they are prone to opportunistic behaviour, nimbly changing allegiances, and thereby tipping the balance of power. However, Robert Rothstein arrives at a different conclusion.<sup>46</sup> Studying alliances, small powers and the international system in the period 1815 to 1939, he finds on the contrary that "small powers made every effort to loosen their commitments not tighten them".<sup>47</sup> In dealing with two greater powers – the established power and the rising power – small powers can be expected to take a passive and proactive positive stance towards both. Small powers, in other words, are prone to hedging.<sup>48</sup> Why? In *Nations in Alliance*, George Liska explains this seeming paradox by noting that small powers seek a 'special relationship' to an allied great power out of a preference for the "status of the unequal but distinct partner". The alternative, "being absorbed in an apparently equalizing multilateral mass", is unattractive.<sup>49</sup> In this latter scenario, the demands are greater and the benefits of alliance diminish, so small powers tend to seek to establish themselves as separate poles. What follows might be dubbed 'the tragedy of small power politics'.

Small powers tend to welcome systemic redistribution of power because they assume that more power centres will increase their relative bargaining position with old partners and offer new possibilities for gainful interaction with emerging powers. Rothstein notes that a multipolar system will increase the tendency of small powers to concentrate on local issues to the detriment of global perspectives. What small powers fail to recognise is that as the system changes, so do the rules of the game. In periods of systemic change, alliances move from being defensive ad hoc arrangements and become essential instruments of war. In this context neither "advice nor military support [a]re considered significant enough to warrant any concessions ... on behalf of the great powers".<sup>50</sup> As a result, small powers are soon "shocked out of their reverie by the increasing tensions and hostilities of a new political world."<sup>51</sup>



In most cases, small powers are not able to opt out of great power politics and play for advantage on the margins. In some cases, however, small powers seek to band together, attempting to pool their resources in an attempt to form a balance against threat or to form a bloc big enough to opt out.<sup>52</sup> The fate of the Balkan League of 1912 might be seen as one example of this. But such efforts have seldom delivered on their initial promise. The acute security dilemma that arises with the “multipolarity without multilateralism” scenario tends to draw small powers into one or the other of the competing blocs. Historically, the small powers that have been able to successfully opt out of great power politics were those that had both a strong army *and* a favourable geographical position.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, with the worth of their allegiance diminished, and the risks associated with standing alone increased, the most appealing option for militarily weak small powers will be to enter into an asymmetric alliance with a greater power. The asymmetry generally operates in such way that the greater the dependence of the weaker party on the protection of its great power patron, the more the latter will be obligated to prevent regional conflicts that could jeopardize the territorial integrity of the former.<sup>54</sup> Although such an arrangement would satisfy security concerns, it often eats into the small power’s sovereignty, as the great powers may exploit the weakened bargaining position of the small power to extract relative gains. Great powers are also prone to ignoring the effects of their actions upon the interests of smaller powers. Either way, the small power is expected to provide wholehearted economic, diplomatic and (in many cases) military support. In such a scenario, it is to be expected that the great power would to some extent penetrate the domestic political system and military apparatus of the small power. In summary, then, in turbulent times, small powers tend to trade political autonomy for military security.

The EU, of course, has neither a strong army nor a favourable geographical position to rely on. In the plainest terms, the strategic options faced by the EU states – individually and collectively vis-à-vis its bloc leader, the United States – fall into three broad categories: balancing, bandwagoning and hedging. The two absolute strategies

are either to defect (with weak to no commitment to alliance ventures) or to cooperate (with strong commitment and support for alliance ventures). Each option comes with potentially positive and negative consequences. For the EU vis-à-vis the US, the principal “cons” are abandonment and entrapment, and the principal “pros” are a reduction in the risk of being abandoned or entrapped by the US. Neither of the absolute strategies is open to the EU. The EU will not defect from the US camp – as voices on both sides of the Atlantic have suggested – and pursue a strategy of self-reliance or new alliances.<sup>55</sup> To balance or to bandwagon is exactly the sort of strategic decision the absence of a workable decision-making mechanism precludes the EU from making. The course of action that has been chosen in response to the end of unipolarity is a classic small power response: the EU is hedging its bets.

How long hedging will remain a viable option is a different matter. European integration in the EU has simply not moved fast enough for Europe to hope to form a separate pole under multipolarity or to ‘opt out’ through armed neutrality. Multipolarity is likely to transform the nature of all major relationships – including those within NATO – as an intricate global system of alliances and counter-alliances are forged to reflect the changed circumstances. The EU is no longer in a position where security cooperation involves a low-stake addition to NATO, the supplier of territorial security. Rather, the EU is an annex to a slipping hegemony, which not all its members are committed to propping up. For the US, the period since 2003 has seen a shift from multilateralism to a “spaghetti bowl” of bilateral security and trade arrangements.<sup>56</sup> In this context, perhaps the newfound US enthusiasm for the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is better understood as an attempt to shift some of the security burden that was taken on in a different context.

Some hope that greater responsibility will infuse the EU with a stronger sense of power. But that is unlikely. Being a small power, the EU is defensive; it does not have revisionist intent. Instead, the EU is displaying classical small power behaviour: under the assumption that it will offer greater rewards for opportunist behaviour, it is distancing itself from all poles. The EU states are clearly individually

and collectively guilty of hedging. Collectively, the EU seeks to play as small a role as possible in the global US support system, but does not seek to offer its services to emerging powers. The EU seeks to contribute as little as possible to US geopolitics while clinging the security guarantees of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. If power corrupts, so, apparently, does the lack of it.

This strategy has left the EU's political superstructure intact but the expectation of support that underlies it is being progressively weakened. Regardless of whether it is seen as a small power or as an alliance of small powers, it will be of little military utility against great powers; it is unlikely that the EU could agree upon a *casus foederis* that would commit its members to fight against a great power. And since the use of force against other small powers and small states will raise the spectre of great power intervention, the sort of arrangement the EU represents will find it increasingly difficult to manage hard power as the power gaps lessen in the new multipolar system. If the small power perspective holds true, the more likely prospect is that the EU will bandwagon en masse and return to US strategic primacy. The worst-case scenario is that the EU turns into a microcosm of the whole system's instability, with its member states being drawn towards different poles. Without the US as an offshore balancer, the EU could disintegrate into a twenty-seven-state free-for-all for the great powers.

The shrinking gap between the US and the rest may not be such a great concern for the US, which will still be the most powerful state for many years to come. The US remains militarily stronger, although it will no longer be able to prevail with ease. However, this fact will raise the bar for conflict-seeking behaviour. The decline of US power will first be felt among security-consuming dependants. This shrinking advantage will link with European under-financing of armies and their weak commitment to alliance ventures. If the lesson from the Kosovo war was that the US should never again fight "war by committee", the lesson from the Afghan campaign is, according to a US colonel, that Europeans "are not good at war fighting, not good at peace keeping, but boy do they have opinions."<sup>57</sup> In failing to provide the diplomatic and military backing that the US sees as a fair

price for underwriting their individual and collective security, the EU has managed to carve out a limited but nevertheless real degree of autonomy within the broad confines of US security guarantees. The impetus for change in the transatlantic relationship, if this analysis holds true, is unlikely to come from the EU but from the US.

It is in this current state of flux that the EU has embarked on its own path to multipolarity. It has the interests of a great power but the dependency and capacity of a small power. Europe's security obligations have grown increasingly disproportional to its ability to live up to them. This is a worrisome gap, to be sure. The EU already feels the tug of the centrifugal forces beyond its control - identity, history, capability, geopolitics and values. These are the tides of passion and interests that reside just beneath the current veneer of civilization. History is not driven by academic tracts, however, and international relations are ruled by a bleaker, more limited reality than that of domestic affairs. The current international situation displays three critical factors that point towards 'a return of history': the existence of powerful and resentful states situated on the margins of the international order; an intense and sustained disruption to the workings of the global economy; and, finally, signs of diminished willingness or ability by the United States to underwrite the current international order.

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