Shaping Multipolarity? Critical Remarks on the Asian and European Debate and the Necessity to Strengthen 'Effective Multilateralism'

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Executive Summary

The debate about whether a multipolar world order is realistic and desirable is becoming increasingly lively. Yet the question whether this debate also promises a stable world order is heard nowhere. Viewed as unipolar, hegemonial, and unilateral, the Bush administration's view of the world which, at least in part, caused the transatlantic conflict triggered by the war in Iraq is much criticised in the US. There is talk about the 'imperial fantasies' of the Washington government as well as about a particular variety of republicanism which presents itself as 'radical, utopian and imperialistic' abroad, but as 'reactionary and anti-liberal' at home.

German foreign policy is guided by the idea of multilateralism. Although there is no general agreement on what multipolarity exactly is, it is generally assumed to mean that there are diverse poles that are equal in their political weight and justification.

From conversations with the Chinese, Europeans and Americans sometimes receive the impression that the terms multipolarity and multilateralism are used misleadingly or even mixed up deliberately. Thus, they talk about a 'multipolar partnership-oriented world order' or 'cooperative multipolarity' and demand to change 'all multipolar structures'. Particularly in the late nineties, there was even some rash talk about the end of traditional military alliances.

Debates that revolve around unilateralism focus on certain tendencies within the foreign policy of the Bush administration. Washington is accused of increasingly concentrating on military pre-emption and/or prevention. While this charge is certainly justified, it similarly applies to European foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the public debate on the issues of unipolarity versus unilateralism and multipolarity versus multilateralism shows conceptual defects. Moreover, it creates logical confusion and operates with insufficiently defined terms.

With regard to the latter, the following should be said first: Multipolarity versus unipolarity refers to the general distribution of power within the global system. On the other hand, unilateralism versus multilateralism primarily refers to the choice of political strategies. Here, a look at history might shed some light on the issue: The very greatest powers did not build their foreign policy on multipolar organisation structures but arranged it on a multilateral basis. Since 1945, America's foreign policy, for example, has been less marked by insistent unilateralism than that of France. This kind of policy, which comes out in the ambivalent role played by Paris within the NATO, may be explained by the relative weakness of the country as well as its endeavour to determine itself the essential aspects of its foreign policy. France needs Germany and the EU, for example, to realise its national interests. This is why France likes to speak of 'European interests' when referring to French interests.

The debate is complex indeed, especially where US foreign policy is concerned. American experts distinguish between unipolar unilateralists, multipolar unilateralists, unipolar multilateralism, and multipolar multilateralism. Every single one of these four schools has its strengths and its weaknesses as well as its own interpretation of US foreign policy. Since 1945, the coexistence of unilateralist impulses and multilateral preferences has been characteristic of

the latter. In the early years of the Bush era, American strength still played a central role, a strength not solely based on military but also on soft power and the attractiveness of freedom and democracy. The latter especially mutated until US foreign policy was perceived as becoming more and more militaristic within the global framework.

Moreover, the history of the European power concert in the 19th century, for example, shows that multipolarity was even more unstable than post-war bipolarity and today's unipolarity. To balance interests within a multipolar system turns out to be even more difficult than within a bipolar system, since not all powers will accept the status quo permanently.

After the end of the Cold War, US policy was characterised by disengagement in Europe as well as in Asia. Under Clinton, the reform agenda enjoyed higher priority than foreign and security policy. The Asian states were gripped by fear because they were afraid of China's rise. From then on, they started to approach Europe, not only for political but also for economic reasons. When America's interest in East Asia was on the rise again in the mid-nineties, as shown by the redefinition of the American-Japanese security alliance, this, in turn, triggered fears of encirclement in China.

US unilateralism certainly also results from disappointment with the inefficient response of Europe's and Asia's multilateral security organisations to the new security-policy challenges. According to Washington, the enlargement of the NATO, the EU, and the ASEAN has a negative influence on their effective operational capability.

At the same time, ideas about multilateralism differ widely even within the EU. The German debate is biased in favour of a multilateral regime in a way that tends to be rather uncritical. Greater pragmatism has always been typical of the British debate, and British threat analyses were always similar to those in America and France. While France defends multilateralism because it supports the country's desire for independence, its threat analyses, however, come closer to those of Washington than to those of Berlin. The Chinese conceptions of a multipolar world order are often directed against Washington's role in East Asia – indirectly as well as directly. In the West, people ask themselves whether Beijing's perceptions might be only temporary, and whether China might not return to unipolar strategies once it achieves a hegemonial position in Asia, which would not constitute a positive development for China's neighbours.

Meanwhile, Europe has taken the American criticism of dysfunction seriously and is now struggling for an effective form of multilateralism. In this regard, the fact that the competences of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have recently been strengthened – for example by authorising ad-hoc inspections of suspicious facilities – speaks for itself. However, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) will only be able to unfold its positive effect if China and Asia turn to effective multilateralism. Yet there is still a long way to go.

Inter-regional relations between Europe and Asia have deepened throughout the last few years. In this respect, the growing strategic interest among Europeans and Germans is closely linked with an economic and security-policy interest. Conversely, the East Asians' interest in the OSCE and their experience in crisis and conflict management are growing. Against the background of all this, it is of great importance to enhance inter-regional cooperation. For the EU, there are five global security threats that constitute key issues in European-Asian security cooperation, namely international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, the collapse of states, and organised crime.

Given these great socio-economic and security-policy challenges, the EU and Asia should strive for purposeful discussions. What is also required is cooperation between Europeans, Asians, and Americans. Neither the EU nor China nor the Muslim world will be able to replace the US in its role as restrained benign hegemon: The alternative to the *pax americana* would be a nightmare.

Europeans as well as Americans are worried that China might support multilateral organisations but subject its support for tactical reasons to global order-policy concepts of strategic multipolarity, the result being more political and economic rivalry and less multilateral cooperation.

By way of conclusion, nine tasks remain: Enhancing strategic partnerships within the EU, expanding security-policy dialogue forums, assuming greater responsibility throughout the world, initiating a global debate about strengthening effective multilateralism, jointly supporting security-policy concepts, improving the capability of regional and global organisations and regimes, extending regional and multilateral military cooperation, strengthening joint crisis management and, finally, directing foreign policy towards a pragmatic complementarity. These are the tasks that Europeans and Germans should address in their policy towards China and East Asia.