

INTERNATIONAL STABILITY AND SECURITY IN CONDITIONS OF POWER ASYMMETRY: PRESENT STATE OF PLAY AND FUTURE TRENDS

Ionel STOICA

Ministry of National Defense, Bucharest, Romania

Power asymmetry within the international security system can be noticed both at conceptual and practical level. Although it is not a new phenomenon, this asymmetry, which has extended for the past decades, has led to some particular developments that question international security and stability in different ways. States have striven to tackle the consequences of the deepening power asymmetry among them but the success of their endeavors is questionable. This paper analyzes the ways in which power asymmetry propagates within the international security system and its likely consequences for international stability and security in the near future.

Key words: *international security, stability, power asymmetry, globalization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Power asymmetry was perceived as a characteristic of the international system long before the end of World War II. However, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, this concept has been more systematically developed and approached by researchers in international relations theories. The explanation for the increased interest in the dimensions and variables of the aforementioned concept lies in the geopolitical and geo-economic consequences triggered by the end of the Cold War that raised a series of challenges for capitalist economies.

Power asymmetry in the international system can be noticed both at conceptual and practical level. As Martin Wight noticed, the current international system is a Western

one (the international institutions are the creation of Western states), but the overwhelming majority of its members are non-Western states [1]. In the same line of thought, Bull made the observation that “the international law system is not only made up by the West, but also for the West” [2]. As a result, a paradox like this generates asymmetries not only in theory, but also in practice.

Although a certain degree of asymmetry has existed for a long time between states and regions of the world, nowadays, given globalization effects, the configurations and the impact of those asymmetries upon the international relations has gained new features. These developments have tempted us to study the effects of power asymmetry on international security and stability.

2. POWER ASYMMETRY EFFECTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The best method to identify, understand and analyze the effects of power asymmetry on international stability and security is to analyze them by focusing on specific fields where they are most visible. Thus, this article will look at the economic, political, social and environmental fields in order to highlight both the origin of power asymmetry and its impact.

2.1. Power asymmetry in the economic field

Power asymmetry in the economic field has its roots in the differentiated access to food and mineral resources, but also in the aptitudes (or options) of states for a particular type of productive (economic) activity. In this respect, as Wallerstein underlined, economic development discrepancies between the East and the West of Europe have emerged since the XVIIIth century with industrialization and colonialism playing a major role. Nowadays, globalization only deepened the existing gap to the extent that this is perceived as an insurmountable reality [3].

The discrepancies in the economic performance of the states, poverty, and globalization, economic and financial crises like the one from 1997 or the one started in 2008 have contributed to a greater disparity between the rich and the poor states, leading to diminishing standards of life and poverty among large segments of population from the global South [3]. An important consequence of these developments is the economic and

social polarization between the global North characterized by dwindling populations, high living standards, low rates of unemployment and the global South with a large number of people, high birth rates and high mortality rates, large segments of young population and high unemployment rates.

The uneven economic growth panders to political conflict since it undermines the international status-quo [4]. The current political regulation of the international trade creates advantages for the powerful states to the detriment of the other states. Moreover, pressures on behalf of the powerful states aiming at gaining asymmetric benefits not only from such international trade regulations, but also from pollution rights, from energy trade, as well as from other economic and commercial activities paralleled by their ability to harmonize the interests could increase the economic inequality between the rich and the poor states, with negative consequences on international stability. For example, the current protest movements in some of the developing states (e.g. the Arab Spring) target explicitly national leaders, but, in subsidiary, they also have an anti-Western component, the West being perceived as the main beneficiary of the natural resources of the poor states.

The international aids that, in many cases actually represent credits, provided by developed states to the developing ones are far from compensating the loss of the latter caused by their impossibility to match the subsidies granted by the developed states to their own farmers and manufacturers, as well as by the

tariffs applied to the goods made in the developing states. Consequently, the subsidies and tariffs applied by the developed states cost the developing states fifth times, in terms of the lost markets, the value of the aids the latter receive [5].

2.2. Power asymmetry in the political field

Power asymmetry creates the premises for changes in the basis of states' foreign policy. In the current international economy and trade the comparative advantage is no longer the exclusive result of a natural gift or of economic efficiency and, hence, it is frequently created through "political options and governmental and corporatist decisions" [4]. As a result of reassessing priorities (i.e. shifting the accent from the military aspects to economic and technological ones) the nature of the competition between states has changed. Consequently, the means used for this competition have adapted as it was the case, for example, with the increasing role of diplomacy to the detriment of military force. The changing nature of inter-state competition is reflected in the states' behavior, both at domestic and international level [6]. In this respect, the statement of the US Representative for trade in Clinton Administration, Michael Kantor, is illustrative: "*Trade and economy do not represent a distinct sphere from the rest of the American foreign politics anymore*" [7]. Moreover, in conditions of multiple interdependencies, states will be constrained to become partner-competitors [8], such as to cooperate in conflicting situations.

According to Giddens, the processes associated with globalization had in effect "a translation of power from states towards the global depoliticized space" filled up with an impressive number of national and international non-governmental organizations [9]. Worth mentioning from this point of view is that, currently, there are more than 400 international governmental organisations and tens of thousands of non-governmental organisations (depending on the accepted definition) [10]. These organizations compete with states to establish the international agenda and sometimes they contribute to the laws passed at international level. For instance, Amnesty International benefits from its consultative status within the UN that allows it to take part in important summits of this organization, to propose documents and to make statements [11].

The power of international organizations is derived from their competition with the states at the level of international politics which grants them a higher degree of acceptability in front of the public opinion in every country. In some fields, such as sports, art the power of these organizations clearly exceeds that of the states. These organizations can have an important say in the negotiations of international agreements and contracts [6] and can also play important roles in increasing or diminishing the states' prestige.

Two quite recent developments/trends contribute to the increasing power of international organizations. First, there is the loss of citizens' trust in the desire and capability of political authorities to solve community problems because of corruption,

as well as because of the common perception that politicians often forge alliances with those working in the financial field with a direct result in the privatization, to some extent, of the public institution. Second, current problems are mostly transnational ones and international organizations are much better positioned from this perspective, since cooperation between states - which is compulsory in such cases - is much more difficult to realize.

However, the power of these organizations should not be overestimated. They can draw conclusions, can make recommendations but, in the end, the states themselves are those that decide their own policies. As they are not invested with decision power over states, international organizations are, at least nowadays, tribunes or discussion forums in the international political arena. Moreover, given their need of states' support in the promotion of their own agendas, these organizations are sometimes used by states. Theoretically, all states can use international organizations, based on their status within these. However, in practice, it is the powerful states that have clear advantages from such a relationship. In fact, by creating these organizations, the powerful states cede a part of their power to the international organization they created, in exchange for the right to dominate the international stage on democratic bases. In these conditions, cooperation, but also conflicting relations have emerged among states and international organizations [12].

2.3. Power asymmetry in the security field

Asymmetry impacts both directly and indirectly regional and international security and stability. Changes in the nature of security threats trigger changes in the definitions of security. Moreover, an asymmetric military force determines changes in the concepts of security, risk, threat and vulnerability [13] with implications for security policies. In the context of the new asymmetric challenges, the security dilemma, as it was formulated by Herz, remains valid but, still insufficient to incorporate the updated consequences on national and international security [14].

Power asymmetry in the military field corroborated with some developments/ consequences of the Cold War end led to the intensification of some older forms of fight (such as international terrorism), but also to the appearance of a new type of conflicts/threats, such as local/regional insurgencies or transnational organized crime. In some cases, these conflicts are to produce significant changes in the strategic interests of states, as well as in the ways these interests will be pursued (including the politics of making alliances). The case of Pakistan, a state facing sectary divisions and a trans-border insurgency is illustrative in this respect. Currently, from its own perspective on national security and regional strategic equilibrium, the government from Islamabad tends to view as equally important its role in the Taliban's reconciliation and reintegration process in Afghanistan and its defense against prospective threats coming from India - its historical enemy.

The new type of conflicts based on asymmetric tactics specific to insurgency, organized crime, etc. leads to a loss in the monopoly of violence by the states, to a “more and more intense privatization of violence” [15] in parallel with the erosion of states’ legitimacy as centralized entities with important implications for their citizens’ loyalty. A result of these conflicts, with major implications for regional and international security, is that they produce a significant number of internally displaced civilians or refugees. According to UNHCR, the number of displaced civilians at global level reached 14.4 million persons (this number including only refugees that cross national boundaries). To that number the Iraqi (more than two millions) and Afghan (more than four millions) refugees should be added. The US Commission for Refugees presented higher figures: 38 million displaced civilians, from which around half are internally displaced persons. One international trend worth noting is to actually provide shelter to these refugees not only in the countries that are neighbor to their country of origin, but in other countries with no common border with the conflict areas from where they flee. The most obvious examples are the conflicts from Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan (even though almost all African conflicts follow this course). It is significant that the majority of the conflicts registered in the last 50 years have occurred in the global South, these conflicts being a consequence of the poverty, and vertical inequalities (i.e. intra-state inequalities and not inter-state ones).

An effect of this new type of conflicts is the increasing number

of “gray areas”, namely those areas where local conflicts and the collapse of state’s authority have substantially increased the risks to life and property [6].

To the new tactics new methods of financing the militants’ actions are recorded: drugs trafficking, weapons trafficking, cars trafficking (that furthermore are transformed into vehicle-borne improvised explosive device), money laundering, kidnappings, etc.

Transnational organized crime - another type of asymmetric threat - has become, considering the dimensions it has reached, a major danger for the political, social and economic stability of many states and a risk to global security. The available financial resources allow organized crime groups to undermine democracy in many areas of the Globe, especially in weak states and societies and where pluralist regimes are not strengthened.

At present, in Western states, an escalating trend of traffickers can be noticed. That could become more prominent as, at international level, there is an increasing social polarization, marginalization and stigmatization of the immigrants, as well as an increasing feeling of frustration, as a result of the (inequitable) redistribution of resources across the Globe. Once tangible by its effects, the phenomenon will lead to the strengthening extremists’ capacity to act counter international stability and security.

Cyber-space attacks have emerged as an expanding asymmetric threat for the past years. Worth mentioning is that, in some cases, organizations

belonging to (allegedly hostile) states were behind such actions.

The negative effects of this new type of conflicts are increased by the insufficient readiness and, hence, inability of state military forces to intervene in such situations given their allegiance to a more traditional role in the security field. Moreover, the new conflicts mainly unfold in urban areas, and that determines changes in the very concept of military operations.

2.4. Power asymmetry in the social field

Poverty, economic and social marginalization, the increasing population in poor countries lead to a growing feeling of insecurity which, in turn, leads to social polarization and to diminishing the space for the integrative values [15]. The young population in these countries frustrated and without a clear perspective of a decent life will become easy to manipulate and exploit by obscure forces.

As a CIA report claimed in 2001 *“the poorest countries and, often, the most unstable politically ... will have the largest young population till 2020. Many of them will lack the economic, institutional or political resources to integrate these teenagers in their societies. The teenagers deprived by their rights, without hope, but quite unpleased, will be the most powerful insurgents against the world order that America strives to provide”* [13].

Presumably, according to researchers, poor countries may have a better chance provided that women gain a higher status in society and that a larger number of people have

access to education. However, such reforms take several decades to produce effects.

The problem is as acute as the dwindling population in developed countries. The demographic decline and ageing population in these countries, simultaneously with the demographic boom in poor states will significantly affect the global distribution of power, not only from an economic point of view, but also from a military one [4]. The demographic decline is frequently associated with a reduction in labor productivity rate, and ageing population involves an increase in the costs with medical care and pension systems. As the labor productivity is the indicator determining a nation's wealth and, in the last instance, the power of a society, it a shift in the global distribution of wealth and power in the international system from the current advanced industrialized countries towards the new emergent powers can be foreseen [4]. Such a perspective will quite probably lead to tensions in the international system. Meanwhile, China, Brazil, India, South Africa or Mexico claim a more important role in the leadership of the international financial institutions.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the powerful states, the demographic decline creates problems for the military in terms of a diminishing recruiting pool of volunteers. Consequently, competition among different socio-economic sectors to attract skilled people will intensify even more than nowadays.

The demographic decline will directly impact, at least in some cases, the capabilities of the powerful states to project their military power beyond

national territories. A particular case is that of the Russian Federation where the current demographic processes (i.e. demographic decline, ageing population, increasing rate of Muslims and Chinese, a decreasing number of Russian ethnics, huge discrepancies in the population's density across the regions of the country) can stimulate inter-ethnic tensions and can increase the risk of political instability, as well as the social and cultural cohesion of the country on the long term. The surveys undertaken suggest that the majority of the Russian ethnics see their Muslim and Chinese co-nationals as a threat to their national sovereignty and identity, which explains the increasing xenophobe feelings in the Russian Federation. The neo-Nazi groups are poorly represented in Russia but they are steadily increasing their attacks against non-Russian ethnics, especially in Caucasus. Racial incidents frequently occur in Moscow and in other large Russian cities.

Demographic changes can lead to ethnic conflicts (e.g. the case of Kosovo) with unforeseeable consequences for international stability.

Even if, quantitatively speaking, nowadays the population does not represent a decisive force in the competition among states, the demographic potential creates the premises for changing the strategic equilibrium both at domestic and international level. That can be best explained as a result of demographic trends that are perhaps the most difficult to influence through national policies and strategies as they do not depend only on a particular political or economic context.

2.5. Power asymmetry and the environment

The environment is the field in which the effects of asymmetry are perhaps the most visible, but where combating the negative effects proves to be the most difficult to realize (being less effective). Environmental issues have become a source of international conflict [10] and according to Robert D. Kaplan it represents "*the national security issue at the beginning of the XXI century*". [16]

Environment deterioration, competition for food and water resources, but also for energy resources and other minerals lead to conflicts between an increasing number of states (as well as between groups within the same states). Approximately 80% of greenhouse gas emissions come from highly industrialized countries (25% only from the USA), but the most damaging effects are felt in the developing countries [10]. Natural hazards also have catastrophic effects on poor countries. The former US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, compared the effect produced by a tsunami on the poor states with that of a nuclear weapon. Environmental issues have already generated tensions among ecologists and supporters of free trade on the one hand, and among poor and rich states, on the other hand.

The current international system is managed by two distinct blocs: the capitalist community of security and trade (made up from OECD, NATO, UE, NAFTA member countries and Japan) and the rest of the world. For the latter the "bloc" concept should be understood in correlation with the idea of exclusion from the former category of states since, in

reality, these states are much too heterogeneous to make up a “bloc” per se. There is an asymmetry of resources, capabilities, standards, etc. between these two blocs and that is reflected in an asymmetry of power, in the favor of the Western bloc. However, the other bloc has important power resources, unused yet. If these two blocs will not cooperate more effectively in order to establish the bases of a coordinated and coherent management of the international system things can escape from control.

3. STATES' RESPONSE TO POWER ASYMMETRY IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The negative consequences of power asymmetry have determined the disadvantaged states to (re)act more or less successfully. Usually, their response is more visible in the economic and military fields.

In the political and economic fields regional organizations, politically motivated (in the case of the European Union), economically focused (ASEAN, in the case of countries in South-East Asia; MERCOSUR, in the case of South American countries) or with a mix of interests (in the case of NAFTA) were established with the aim of increasing commercial effectiveness and of strengthening their negotiation capacity at international level. In other cases, states make up cartels as it is the case of the best known one of the oil exporting countries – OPEC, or the latest attempts of the Russian Federation to make up an international cartel for natural gases.

One cannot claim that these strategies are the most efficient. It is likely that, by such actions, states transfer the current risks for the future. Regionalization has become an important strategy to maximize the economic and political power of the states, but it can have profound negative consequences on international politics, economics and security due to the subsequent effects it generates [4].

In the military field power asymmetry determined some of states which cannot be termed as great powers (but which possess high-skilled human resources) to invest in the military scientific research in a desire to compensate, at least partially, the power deficit. They have tried to overcome this deficit by producing nuclear weapons. As Stillman and Plaff, cited by Kenneth Waltz put it: “*The final result of the nuclear weapons is to make from the powerless states equals to those powerful*”.

In other situations, states have made up regional blocs that include a military dimension. An example of this kind is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which the Russian Federation (a prominent member of this organization) would like to act as a military counterpart of NATO.

Nowadays, asymmetrical reactions are easier to embrace and, at the same time, more difficult to counteract [18]. The asymmetric response is facilitated by the relative low cost of the means of generating violence, large access to information, as well as the speed and innovation intrinsic to new technologies. On the other hand, the early detection of asymmetric threats is currently more difficult to accomplish because

of constraints of different types (people's rights, individual freedom, immigration, as well as an inadequate organization of the responsible structures) and because of the interdependence between states [13].

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper the author has tried to present an objective opinion regarding the consequences of power asymmetry on international stability and security. Such an effort is not easy to fulfill, considering the variety of opinions expressed by researchers in the field. Moreover, any analysis, being a result of an individual process, involves a certain degree of subjectivism. The importance of the subject has made us to ignore these limits.

This effort has led to the following conclusions.

First, power asymmetry has important effects (consequences) on international relations. It can stabilize the international system, if the aggregated result of the interaction between different forces within the international system leads to cooperation, but it can also propagate profound destabilizing effects if the states try to exploit on their own the possibilities of maximizing power to the detriment of other actors within the international system. The current course of affairs suggests that there are premises to estimate that in the near future the disequilibrium among states will deepen and tensions able to generate unforeseeable developments could appear within the international system.

Second, even if the asymmetry will lead to the concentration of power

in the hands of a small number of states (the most powerful) within the international system, the powerless states will also be important. There are premises for a "world with multiple centers of decision ... that suppose more consultation and more consent than any time before" [12].

Third, in the near future, credibility and legitimacy will become key resources of power and that creates the premises for changes in states' behavior and, most likely, for an increasing role of international organizations. A more important role of these organizations should be in favor of the developing states, but this will not occur unless these states prove able to harmonize their common interests in order to become a coherent force in world politics. From a historical perspective, we can appreciate that there are both pros and cons to such a perspective. Some of the developing states (China, India, and Brazil) have already gained important benefits (particularly in the economic field). However, the fact that international organizations like the UN lose from their relevance/effectiveness (although UN's legitimacy is still preserved and benefits from the largest international consent), and that regional and international organizations operating in various fields have become more and more prominent and powerful is not very encouraging for international stability. In this asymmetric world, the states will continue to adapt their working methods either to survive, or to maximize their power.

Fourth, one should not overestimate the radical character of current asymmetries. As we said at the beginning of this paper,

the existence of asymmetry is not something new for human history; the trend that associates asymmetry with the unclear perspective has its roots in the fact that forces that generate and intensify asymmetry at present are new and, therefore, insufficiently known. But, if we admit Waltz' hypothesis according to which "the perennial forces of international politics are more important than new technologies"[8], we may consider that things will not exceed too much the current mainstream. Moreover, since we cannot completely eliminate risks, nor ignore them we should learn how to live with them. Finally, the asymmetry of power represents a factor, but not the only one, in explaining international conflict and instability.

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