



The World in Sixty Lines

The Sixth Superpower

EDITOR'S
NOTE
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So many highly unlikely hypotheses have become reality in recent times that it is not possible to rule out a follow-up to the Soviet suggestion of giving to reunified Germany the place of sixth permanent member at the UN Security Council, thus officially acknowledging it as a great power. The caution with which the Soviet idea has been received by the German government (which was, however, probably well aware it would be proposed) is at the same time both a way to increase its possibilities of success and a signal that it is doomed to arouse suspicion and meet with difficulty. A more interesting question, however, is why Moscow made this proposal and what purpose lies behind it.

Indeed, independently from its probabilities of success, the proposal put forward by Eduard Shevardnadze is highly instructive relative to the Kremlin's attitude towards the future of Europe, an attitude which is certainly far different from the one held in Gromyko's times, but which probably does not mark the complete reversal widely assumed.

Before Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking", the Kremlin used to stick to an intentionally distorted view of the EEC, routinely proclaiming it to be a "capitalist conspiracy", a cover for German "revanchism", and an American invention against the Soviets that actually went against the interests of its European members. Soviet diplomacy refused to deal directly with the Commission, nor even to recognise it, continuing its bilateral relations with each single nation-state, even with regard to matters whose competence had

been all but devolved to Bruxelles. Under Gorbachev, all this had changed—in appearance at least—and today there is a Soviet ambassador accredited to the Community.

The project of a Common European House, however, can also be read as an attempt to set Europe's unity within more watered-down and wider terms than those fixed in the agreements, from the Treaty of Rome to the Single Act, which gave rise to the EEC as it is today. Shevardnadze's proposal concerning the role of Germany goes even further on this line. As Moscow knows very well, such a proposal is inevitably bound to incite resentment in France and even more so in Britain. In fact, the Security Council is the only place where these second-level great powers maintain equality, albeit fictitious, with the superpowers. It is therefore understandable that the more this formal position becomes at odds with reality, the more Paris and London become protective of their traditional prerogatives. One has only to look at the obstinacy with which France especially, whose currency has the least important international role among the great Western countries, stood against the transformation of the group of the Five into the group of the Seven.

In short, the Soviet proposal seems to be intended to irritate France and England and make them jealous, as well as facilitate the work of those who, inside the EEC itself, seek to lessen its cohesion. Moreover, the Soviet proposal has the effect of creating further problems between Tokyo, where the still existing yearnings for a permanent seat at the Security Council may grow stronger, and Washington, which is obviously interested in maintaining the status quo.

The proof that the Soviet manoeuvre is not just a pipe dream is shown by the fact that neither France nor England reacted to Moscow's proposal with the only possible and useful counter-proposal, the installation as a new superpower at the United Nations not reunited Germany, but the European Community itself. Even if it was not explained whether the

entry of the EEC would mean the loss of the permanent seat for France and England, the very fact that such a hypothesis was taken into consideration means that whatever their formally recognised roles are, neither France nor England has the right to sit in the Security Council at the same level as the USSR and the United States. Moreover, in a moment in which the United Nations' machine seems for the first time to have a realistic chance of working—because the conditions which were taken for granted when it was first conceived, that is, the agreement among the great powers, are now forming again—the role of France and England risks becoming similar, in all its differences, to that of Taiwan in the years when, due to American obstinacy not to recognise Peking, it occupied the seat of fifth superpower.

But there is more in this story to be learned about the Kremlin's view of future Europe. If the Soviet proposal can be deeply suspected of being aimed at sowing discord among the EEC countries, the country which runs the greatest risk of being slighted by such an idea's possible implementation is Germany itself.

It is doubtless that reunification makes Germany a great power of a sort, and that world order has to be adapted to this fact. In this adaptation of the international system to the renewed strength of Germany, the EEC could perform a crucial role, providing a framework in which the new German exuberance could freely express itself within an institutional framework created for the very purpose of abolishing national resentments and rivalries. The merging of the two German states also creates a great deal of problems inside United Europe. Through the absorption of the ex-communist Germany, Bonn's democracy has inevitably put down the premises for the fact that in a few years, an imbalance of power so great as to cause inevitable consequences will exist among the most important members of EEC. At the same time, however, the EEC has acquired a new function, as it has become, in Bonn's opinion, the instrument through which to demonstrate the strength of its

anchorage to the Western countries' family. The political usefulness of community integration therefore has for Germany an importance similar to the economic usefulness the same EEC as a stable currency area has for an economy characterised by a structural export surplus.

All this adds up to the conclusion that by proposing to upgrade to superpower status the role of Germany at the UN, Moscow is actually trying to deal a mortal blow to the only "supranational" organisation that can enable Germany to express all its vitality without the risk of resuscitating the traditional jealousies and fears. At the same time, Moscow is also trying to "frame" Bonn (or Berlin) into the merely "international" UN framework. Officially acknowledged superpower status in the UN would surely be satisfactory for Germany's prestige and self esteem. But it could enjoy this privilege only in a very special forum, the Security Council, where all decisions are subject to the unanimous agreement of the great powers, including the Soviet Union. New Germany could therefore pride itself upon being a great power only if the Soviets did not block its initiatives by exercising their veto.

Bonn (or Berlin) would, of course, also acquire the right of vetoing Soviet proposals, but this would hardly reduce Moscow's maneuvering capabilities, given that at the UN there already are three other Western countries endowed with veto power. For Germany, on the contrary, being able to express its newly found "greatness" only when the Soviets agree, would be a serious limitation, especially since the prize obtained at the UN will have to be paid for somewhere else in the complex balance-of-power system commonly called the "international order". The price to be paid would probably be an outburst of anti-German fears, prejudices and commonplaces in France and Britain, that is, a weakening of the EEC. But the EEC framework offers to the Germans an environment in which they can move and grow with a much higher degree of freedom, and with much smaller risk of arousing the hostility of other nations.

The Scramble for the Middle East

EDITOR'S
NOTE
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If the winter of 1989 has been marked by the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the ensuing radical transformation of world order, the coming season—the winter of 1990—could be characterised by an equally drastic transformation of North-South relations, of which the Gulf crisis is probably going to mark the opening. It is in fact inevitable that the upheaval of 1989 will undermine the role that the Third World, by taking advantage of the East-West rivalry, had managed to acquire in the post-war international order.

After World War II, the US, the leading power in the West, had shown an openly anti-colonialist attitude. In spite of the fact that Britain and France—the two major colonial powers of the time—were America's natural allies against Stalinism, exactly as they had been against Nazism, Washington never kept secret its intention to disband their overseas empires. Several reasons explain this attitude: first of all, the very tense political climate in the non-self-governing territories. The dissatisfaction of the local elite had been clearly visible during World War II, namely in the form of the widespread sympathies that the Axis, as an enemy of the colonial powers, had won in the Arab-Islamic world. In Iraq, there was even a pro-Nazi coup d'état and the Shah of Iran leaned so openly in favour of Germany that the Russians and the British had to occupy the country, and replace him on the throne with his more tamable son, Reza Pahlavi.

In many Asian colonial territories, the Japanese had been welcomed by the native population if not as liberators from the colonial yoke, at least with the feeling that they were taking the revenge of all the Asians against the arrogance of white people. It was an attitude which, as the Americans themselves were to say later, had psychologically and politically "cut the ties between European colonial powers

and their overseas dependencies". Even in India, which had remained under British control, a strong pro-Japanese movement had developed, notwithstanding the fact that, from nearby Burma, word was spreading of the extreme brutality of Japanese occupation forces.

At the end of the war, it was clear that out of hatred for their colonial masters, the populations of what was to be later called the Third World were ready to welcome whomever challenged the powers which, in the 19th century, had established that peculiar form of North-South relations otherwise known as colonialism. It thus became obvious that these territories were offering extremely favourable ground to the spread of Communism, which not only identified itself with Stalin and the Soviet Union—the new enemies of the usual oppressors—but also promised social justice and economic progress to societies extremely backward with regard to both these aspects. And indeed, as soon as it was blocked in Europe, that is after the failures of the civil war in Greece and of the Berlin blockade, communist expansionism turned its aggressiveness towards the colonial and ex-colonial territories, seeking an alliance with the "national progressive" and "anti-colonialist" forces.

American anti-colonialism as an instrument with which to fight communist expansionism became an inescapable necessity after the communist conquest of China in 1949, as Stalin and Mao immediately unleashed guerrilla insurrectionists in British-controlled Malaysia and in French Indo-China.

It was thus clear that the colonial system was so politically fragile that Communist conquest of a colonial territory foreshadowed the beginning of an insurrection in the neighbouring one. Communists were cutting into the hatred of the native populations against their colonial master as easily as into butter, and the more the independence of a colonial territory was delayed, the more the nationalist elite would become inclined towards extremist positions and well-

disposed towards the Soviet Union. In other words, the more difficult and prolonged the struggle for independence was, the more likely it became that the communists would conquer the leadership of the nationalist forces.

To counter this trend, and entrust these territories to pro-Western local elite, independence had to be granted to them as soon as possible. Actually, it had to be offered as a lunch at eight in the morning, that would block digestion and extinguish the longing for food for the rest of the day. Thus, the 50s saw the coming of independence for about one hundred States, on many occasions geographically and historically improbable, and sometimes ridiculously artificial. The pace was such that between 1948 and 1961, the "winds of change" entirely wiped out the empires built up by the European powers during several centuries.

But this was not the end of the story. On the contrary, these recently liberated countries discovered that they could play the USA and the USSR against each other, and thus obtain aid, arms and political influence in world affairs. And it was because of this that all through the 60s and 70s the international scene was taken over by the noisy crowd of Afro-Asian countries, the so-called "South".

The North-South component of the post-World War II international order that is coming to an end today was thus structurally founded on the East-West rivalry, a rivalry that—in the impossibility of a direct military clash between their nuclear war-ready armies—made war by proxy the only possible form of confrontation. And so from Korea to Angola, from Vietnam to Nicaragua the proxy, to a great extent in some cases, was able to gain a certain amount of control over the sponsor, and in several "local conflicts" it became difficult to say if it was the dog that was wagging the tail, or the tail wagging the dog.

Today, as a consequence of the internal collapse of the Soviet system, this is no longer possible. The East-West

relationship has changed so radically that the countries of the South have lost all the leverage they ever had; the proxies can no longer transform their sponsors into captives. Actually, there is now no real interest for the North in the political independence of the South, as the real reason for being kind to the peoples of the South—the fear that they would turn communist—has faded away. North-South relations are inevitably bound to total upheaval. The bankruptcy of communism inevitably sponges up the very pre-conditions of the North-South order. And the fact of having underestimated how radically these preconditions have changed may have been Saddam Hussein's major blunder in unleashing an invasion that has triggered an unheard of reaction by the entire world. And as if the concept were not clear enough, the Bush-Gorbachev meeting in Helsinki indeed signaled that the time has past when the South could exploit the rivalries of the North. The entire world has got the message: there is no more reason for the North to be kind to the South, now that the ideological split among the white industrial countries is disappearing.

As to what the new "order" will be like that replaces the old one gone with the communist menace, it is too early to say. There is no knowledge of the future. Still, it is not without meaning that all sorts of countries, even Argentina and Poland, have rushed to participate in the Gulf expedition, as if in the assumption that it will be a military parade where participants will gain entry to a privileged, future North-South order. Indeed, is not the creation of a "new regional order" the declared objective of the US presence in the area? And is it not this area, with its gigantic oil reserves, the region of the so-called South, that is most important in the eyes of the energy-thirsty North? In other words, the Gulf crisis triggered by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait might be an event of major importance for the shaping of future North-South relations on a world scale. And the international reaction to this aggression is, in turn, of major importance in transferring to the North-South order the consequences of the changes in East-West relations.

And because history never repeats itself (or at least never repeats itself in the same forms), it is improbable that the new conditions of world economy will lead to renewed age of colonial imperialism, or to a new "scramble for Africa" similar to what the world already has experienced in the past. All which can be said is that in the future it will be accepted more frankly that relations between developed and underdeveloped countries are marked by a strong conflict of interests, and that efforts through economic and military aid to establish unnatural alliances among countries belonging to the two different groups are sooner or later inevitably doomed to failure. The great wealth of diplomatic efforts that the Bush Administration has devoted to the construction of a US-Arab alliance to counter Saddam Hussein's expansionist ambitions could therefore be considered as an attempt at pooling the forces of societies that in future North-South relations are bound to be at odds, a course of action dictated more by the old logic of the Cold War era, than by the logic of the post-Cold War age we are entering.

It is unlikely, however, that at the end of the twentieth century the international community—as the European powers did in the previous century—will sit around a conference table and split up the world among the most powerful countries. On the stage of international politics, not only the very nature of the Northern actors has changed a great deal—namely because of their new political orientations and demographic potentials—but also and especially because the South and its resources do not have, in the perception the North, the importance they had in the past.

The theories of imperialism which, in a conscious or unconscious way, were at the basis of European expansionism in previous centuries have nowadays become largely obsolete. Namely, the Third World and its resources have become practically irrelevant for the global world economy, and in particular for the welfare and the economic development of the countries of the North. Several ideas that were at the basis of the North-South relations have lost all

credibility: not only the idea—wrong from the beginning—that colonial markets could solve the permanent over-production problems of the industrial economies, but also the relatively new commonplace that the countries of the South have become—in Marxist terms—the proletariat of the world. This view held that the same Marxist and pseudo-Marxist forecasts that failed with regard to the relations among classes in industrialised societies, might be proven true on an international scale, in relations between peoples of the North and peoples of the South.

Here there is a basic misconception of world reality: in Marx's view of class relations, the proletariat, although extremely poor, had a crucial economic role in the capitalist system, as its exploitation alone permitted the accumulation of a surplus. Conversely, this crucial economic role allowed the working class to acquire enormous political force, since they could make the system collapse simply by striking. But this is not the case for the so-called "proletarian nations". With a few exceptions, none of the raw materials controlled by the South is really essential to the industrial economies, so that no less developed country or group of countries can play a crucial role in relations between the North and South just by menacing the security of supply. The tragedy of the South today is exactly this point: its total irrelevance to the continuing prosperity of the North. And this irrelevance is so serious that any attempt at creating OPEC-style cartels in order to blackmail buyers would backfire in the economic isolation of the producing country from the world economic system—an isolation which would prove deeply regretful for the population of the country in question, but would pass practically unnoticed outside its frontiers.

An exception to this rule is represented by the international market for oil, and to a lesser extent for tin, in which the main world reserves are to be found in the South. It is easily observed that the most important oil producers—those in the Arabic peninsula—are semi-depopulated countries, so that its inhabitants live in luxury even if they manage to keep for

themselves only a tiny fraction of the huge profits made with the exploitation of oil fields. This situation and the world oil price would probably be very different if the major oil fields were to be controlled by overpopulated nations such as Egypt or Iran. Thus it is not surprising that the North perceived the attack on Kuwait as a threat it had to respond to, nor that the first conflict between the North and South in the post-Cold War era has burst out just in that area.

But putting aside the exception represented by the oil countries, in the contemporary world economy the presently industrialised countries can maintain their day after day growth in wealth as well as in technological sophistication without paying any attention to the South, except for some control over phenomena that do not respect borders and have to be fought at the source, such as epidemics, piracy, and illegal immigration, at least in the short-term future, for in the long term the demographic boom and the Islamic revival make the story completely different, with the present opposition of interests likely to degenerate into a head-on collision of civilisations and societies.

But in the foreseeable future, contrary to what happened in the previous phase of European overseas expansion, the fact that North-South relations are going to be marked from now on by hard-nosed protection of the short-term interests of each side does not mean that—given the disproportion of forces—it is a prelude to a renewed colonial system of direct military control or “protection” by the rich countries of their former colonies of the Third World. Today, Europe and Japan—and up to a point the US, as well—have other more natural, less irrelevant and potentially more rewarding geographical areas in which to turn out their capital and entrepreneurial surplus. As Bismarck said in order to explain Germany’s lack of interest in the partition of overseas territories among Europe’s colonial empires, “our map of Africa” is in the East, in the immense steppes of Russia.