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World in Transition as an International Environment of the European Union

Abstract: *The aim of this article is to make an attempt at characterising the international environment of the EU. The shape and evolution of this environment is of great significance, as the processes taking place in the contemporary world are important factors influencing the course of European integration. The characteristics of the major features of present international relations is followed by the analysis of transformations in the global distribution of power, divided into sections focusing on economic, military and political power.*

One of the most distinctive features of contemporary international relations is the fact that the world is undergoing rapid, far-reaching, sometimes even revolutionary transformations. It is the result of influence of many various factors, of which we can name only a few: the collapse of the traditional balance of power on a global scale, caused by the fall of the communist system in Europe and leading to unipolarity based on the domination of the USA, rapid acceleration of the general development of civilisation, resulting from, among other things, the technical revolution (especially the growing role of IT and electronics), the evolution of fundamental categories of international security and balance, the existence of two simultaneous, complementary trends: towards integration (homogenisation) and towards disintegration (fragmentation), transformations which are part of the process of globalisation, etc.

All these factors have significant effect on the existing situation and in many cases dramatically alter it. This concerns almost all areas of life: political, economic, social and cultural, of each of the societies on our planet,

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even the most peripheral ones, distant from the centres of civilisation. To describe it more vividly, we could say that the world is currently in a state of upheaval, and its future shape is still forming and remains a mystery – as usually in the times of historical transformations. It means that the world is in a transitional state, which must be followed by a turning point, simply consisting in the emergence of a new international order, based on a relatively cohesive and stable distribution of power.

An analysis of this kind of issues is not exclusively the domain of researchers and theoreticians, but is becoming a permanent problem of practical and political importance. This refers in particular to the European Union, which is one of the most important participants of contemporary international relations.

The important role played by the EU results mainly from the fact that it has a huge, multidimensional potential. This concerns in particular the economy. Suffice it to say that the joint GDP of the EU Member States puts the EU on the first place on a global scale, and the common currency euro is rising in importance. Furthermore, the EU plays several important international roles, the most prominent of which are promoting the rule of law, democracy and human rights, as well as providing development aid for developing states – in other words, roles of an important stabiliser and regulator of international relations.

The broadly understood area of relations of the European Union with the outside world includes a broad range of relations with the third states, groups of states, international organisations, etc. The subjective and substantive scope of this area has been subject to constant changes through years, characterised by gradual extension of the number of problems, a growing level of complexity and ever tightening interrelations between them. The European Union, together with other participants in international relations, is entering an ever more complicated, varied system of interactions covering different areas of life: economy, politics, social and cultural affairs, defence (to mention only the most important of them).

All this means that the integration processes in Europe do not take place in an international vacuum. It is a kind of dialectic feedback: although the European Union is a powerful player who can essentially influence the events on the global scene, it should be stressed that, at the same time, it is subject to very strong influence from the external world. Due to this, the shape of contemporary international relations cannot be unimportant for the political class and the societies of EU states – on the contrary, it is a matter of capital importance to the EU.

The aim of these deliberations, which unfortunately have to be only brief, is an attempt to analyse selected aspects of this international environment of

the EU. Naturally, it is not an easy task, and it would be a cliché to say that there is no such single characteristics – there are probably as many of them as the researchers and politicians dealing with it. Thus, I shall only try to outline the basic features of current international relations by showing the most essential problems concerning them, and present one of their most important aspects, i.e. the distribution of power on a global scale.

1. Unipolarity without vision

It is difficult to explicitly identify the major problems faced by all participants of international relations, including the European Union. However, we can point out a very important global issue. The way it is eventually solved will determine, to a large extent, the form of the approaching turning point in the development of the contemporary world, which has been mentioned above, and its final effects.

The problem consists both in the lack of clear, generally accepted visions and effective, practical recipes for stabilising and then ensuring a peaceful development of international relations, which would be beneficial for everyone.

By saying this I probably lay myself open to the charge that there are actually lots of various concepts on this matter. However, it is not about individual ideas or postulates, of which, indeed, many have been formulated by politicians and researchers, especially in the context of fighting the current financial and economic crisis (the Repair Plans prepared by Barack Obama's government and by the governments of EU Member States could serve as the most prominent examples).

The basic problem is that, metaphorically speaking, the world has lost the compass which would tell it which way it should go. Among many existing paradigms of development, no paradigm is generally accepted any more – even those, which have been most influential so far, like the famous 'Washington Consensus' of the 1990s. If we continue using metaphors, we could compare the present global 'market of ideas' to a huge supermarket, where consumers, i.e. all participants in international relations, choose products which suit them most from different competing offers.

This is a completely different situation than just a few decades ago. With all possible reservations to the directions in its evolution, back then, the world was based on a few elementary, quite clearly specified paradigms, of which the most important were: the Western ideology of the 'free world', promoting the ideas of liberal democracy and free market economy; then communism, prevailing in vast areas of the world, conceiving its own vision of a new society and new international relations, or finally the concept of the 'third

way', manoeuvring between the East and the West in the form of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement.

The social realist system has spectacularly gone bankrupt, both in terms of its antihumanitarian, antidemocratic ideological and political objectives, and in terms of the absolutely ineffective economical practice. Also the Non-Aligned Movement has collapsed, no longer supported on both sides by former Cold War adversaries. The only model of development which has remained on stage, as practically a monopolist, is the one propagated by the West, which has even given rise to ideas – such as those Francis Fukuyama once announced – of the 'end of history', which means petrification of this monopolist position. However, the domination did not last for long. As we will see later, some alternative concepts have emerged, which are trying to influence the situation in each region and the shape of global international relations.

What are the most essential features of these international relations? Generally speaking, the contemporary world may be compared to a grand chessboard – as in the title of the well-known work by Zbigniew Brzezinski – on which all larger and smaller global actors play their complicated games, aiming first of all at protecting and realising their own interests.

One of the basic features of this chessboard is unipolarity in international relations, caused by the domination of the United States complemented by the strong position of other Western states. Let us not go into detailed characteristics of this situation, but let us notice that the functioning of the unipolar system brings both positive and negative effects.

The first ones include, above all, the stabilisation of the distribution of power in the world, which, owing to the advantage of the USA (or, more broadly, the West), became more predictable and long-lasting, at least in the 1990s. Leaving aside the controversies around this subject, it is about the effect of strengthening the international order based on liberal-democratic values shared by the whole Western civilisation, the observance of which – although they are not necessarily fully accepted by everyone – makes the world safer. (Any doubts in this respect should be dispelled by a gloomy vision of the world dominated by different kinds of ideological and religious extremists.)

On the other hand, the hegemony of the United States also has negative consequences. First of all, it hinders the free development of international order causing bias in the general principle of balance of power. It leads, among other things, to a much too deep dependence of world policy on the decisions of one centre of power. In case of the errors made by the subsequent Washington administrations (including Barrack Obama's government), it may have dangerous long-term effects.

However, notwithstanding the various implications of the American domination, there is also a problem of its survival. There are many controversies

around this subject. According to some politicians and researchers, despite some signs of weakness, the Americans still have a huge potential to influence the fate of the world, which guarantees that they will keep the key position for a long time. Moreover, according to such authors as George Friedman, the American power is still in its preliminary state of development and the 21st century will be the 'age of America'. (Such theses are described in his well-known book *The Next 100 Years*.)

On the other hand, there are already clearly visible signs of weakening of the America's power, for instance difficulties with achieving definite victory in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the condition of the overly debt-laden US economy, additionally dramatically endangered by the present economic crisis. Many politicians and researchers have already pointed that out, including Emmanuel Todd. In his deliberations on situation 'after the empire', he highlights the excessive egoistic individualism leading to suicidal atrophy of social life as one of the main reasons for the weakening of the United States. (He formulated these theses many years before the present crisis, which fully shows the degeneration of the American economic system). The weakening of the USA's position as a superpower may naturally still last for decades, during which the Americans may keep their political and military advantage, but no longer the economic one.

Although today the deliberations on the definite solution of the question of maintaining American domination still belongs rather to the field of futurology, we can try to outline an objective assessment. Because, leaving aside useless academic attempts to define possible dates of the 'fall of the empire' (which may really happen in one hundred years), it should be stressed that, apart from the empirical data, there are also reliable theoretical premises to consider that *Pax Americana* is not an infinite state. This statement can be justified by the concept of the so-called transition of powers, which is an interesting separate subject for research in itself, but which will serve here only to illustrate the above thesis.

2. The transition of powers – still up to date

It is possible to prove that the history of international relations has seen the emergence and fall of many superpowers, which for some time played the main role on the world or regional scale (mainly European). Within the last three hundred years, over a dozen of such states can be identified – from Turkey to the present superpower, the United States. Each of them developed in subsequent phases: initiation (the initial, more or less rapid growth of power), interim (dynamic strengthening of power) and full growth, when some

symptoms of weakening of the position of superpower are already emerging. The replacement of one superpower by another also takes place in several stages – first a pretender to the leading role appears, then it questions the status of the current hegemonic leader, and finally, as a result of decomposition of the old distribution of power, it takes the dominating position itself.

The method of introducing this transition is the key issue in this case. Most often it takes place through armed conflicts between the main powers, playing central roles in the economy of the capitalist system. Already since the XV century, these wars have been taking place in regular cycles, the course of which coincide with the rules of transition described above. The repeating elements of the cycles are: wars on a large scale, leading to the domination of one global superpower, followed by the delegitimisation of the existing international order and, as a result, the breakdown of the existing global system, and finally the outbreak of a new war, leading to the repetition of the whole cycle all over again. The duration of such cycle depends, of course, on some specific historical and socio-economic conditions.

Some patterns can also be observed as regards the set of features which a country aspiring to world hegemony should possess. From the historical perspective, we can see that countries with a huge general potential but very specific features, such as relatively little innovation in technologies, elements of mercantilism in foreign trade, closed society without access to entirely free media, intensive exploitation of peripheral areas (e.g. colonies), large land forces have a much tougher time becoming superpowers (e.g. the Habsburg Empire, Napoleon's Empire, the Russia of the Tsars, Germany of William I). The pretenders who had the most success had quite different features: intensive development of science and technology, well developed foreign trade, open democratic society and free media, smaller but more effective land forces and a huge navy (e.g. the United Kingdom and the United States).

In relation to the latter, the rule of transition seems to apply. It shows not the mechanical determinism of historical processes but rather certain historical imperatives; after all, it is hard to imagine that the power of the United States will remain dominating forever, unlike any earlier superpower. The time perspective of the next transition is naturally still an open question, as it can happen, as mentioned before, even in many decades.

Of course, there are many variants of further global development of the distribution of power in the world. Apart from the scenario of emergence of a new superpower, it is also possible that the world will return to multipolarity, more in line with the classic principle of balance of powers. It is even more possible because, if we look at the geopolitical map of the world, we can already clearly observe great changes in the construction of international relations.

The changes consist mainly in the emergence of new powers, to some extent competing with the present centres of civilisation (or with the 'cores', as defined by Immanuel Wallerstein). Moreover, the distribution of power within the 'cores' is also changing, as is the nature of mutual relations between all players, who – in line with the logic of the processes of globalisation – form complicated networks of relations, based both on competition (sometimes even confrontation) and on co-operation. If that is the case, who belongs to the most important actors in the international arena today?

3. Who rules the world?

Due to its many advantages, the vast cultural area defined broadly as the West still holds the key position. However, it is not a monolith; it is divided into two main components: the United States, with the status of a superpower, in North America, and the EU on the Old Continent. In addition, there are some regions within the area of direct influence of both these centres of power which can also be included in the definition of the Western world, regardless of their geographical situation. They include such countries as: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and most Latin American countries.

The West has specific bonds with a group of countries which do not belong directly to its cultural circle but have long had common political, economic and military interests with the West, and to some (sometimes very small) extent share its system of values. The members of this pro-western group differ substantially in terms of scale and intensity of their bonds with the USA and Europe. These bonds are stronger in the case of Japan, some 'Asian Tigers' (South Korea, Taiwan) and Israel, and more loose in the case of India and Turkey. (Islamic countries, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, or Egypt form a separate group – they are allies of the West, especially of the United States, but only in the field of politics and the military).¹

The most important factor upsetting the post-Cold War distribution of power on the global scale was not the evolution of the Western system (for instance, in relations between Europe and America), but the emergence of new powers; countries which have achieved the position of regional powers relatively quickly and to a relatively large extent: first of all China and India, and to a lesser extent Brazil and Nigeria – not yet well developed but rich in natural resources.

¹ We should also mention examples of the countries which – usually as a result of internal transformations – either broke their relations with the West in a radical way (like Iran under Ayatollah rule) or restricted these relations, as the Republic of South Africa after the fall of the Apartheid system. Today, a similar process can be observed in Pakistan.

This group also includes the Russian Federation, which, after the period of ‘the Time of Troubles’ of the 1990s, begun intensive attempts to rebuild its status of a superpower. As we can see, some of them remain in the sphere of influence (stronger or weaker) of the western world, but the two leaders of the group – China and Russia – have chosen their own models of development, which can be referred to as the Asian or the anti-Western models. However, regardless of the choice made, one distinctive feature of the policy conducted by the new powers is their evident ambitions to hold ever higher places in world rankings and thus to compete with the present leaders.

In order to observe to what extent this kind of ambitions are realistic and what the real strengths and weakness in the policy of these new powers are, it is necessary to draw up at least an outline of the history of their development to date.

Certainly the most spectacular success was achieved by China, which is most often mentioned as an example of successful system transformation and abrupt improvement of the international position. Indeed, the country’s rapid economic development in the past decade has not only deeply changed the living conditions of its citizens but has also increasingly influenced the world economy, which is proved by various economic indicators. Thus, it seemed that economic power supported by a growing military potential could serve as a stepping stone for the country to take the position of a superpower – not only regionally, but also globally. Despite its unquestionable achievements, we should rather adopt a more careful attitude in the predictions of the future status of China in the international arena.

It is necessary to take into account some very important factors, the influence of which may restrict the position and role of this country in the global arena already today, and even more in the coming years. They include, first of all, an unhealthy, hybrid socio-economic structure, shaped both by the state’s official policy based on orthodox Marxist-Maoist ideology (suppressing any democratisation attempts), and by the development of the quasi-capitalist free market economy which undermines the ideological and political foundations of the PRC. It leads to growing dangerous political, economic and, above all, social tensions (the Tiananmen Square massacre was a tragic symbol of the first).² What adds

² The fact that the Chinese system is a hybrid results in making many non-rational decisions in the field of economy, which in turn causes a waste of energy and resources and ‘overheating’ of the whole economy. The fact that Chinese export is competitive results mostly from the use of very cheap workforce, including numerous prisoners working for free. In the social sphere, there are huge and growing tensions caused by unemployment (which used to be hidden, and now is increasing as a result of the global economic crisis), a dynamic migration from rural regions to cities and a deepening gap between the standards of life among the citizens. In addition, there is huge corruption and constant ethical and political tensions (e.g. in relation to Tibetans and the Uyghur people).

to it, are the effects of the current world economic crisis, which has particularly badly affected the exports-oriented Chinese economy.

Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that any possible future global superpower – in order to really become one – must have the ability to influence its international environment not only by means of economic, diplomatic and military instruments. In the present globalised world, mass culture plays a very important role and China has no chance to become its major exporter due to obvious historical and cultural conditions – it is very difficult to imagine domination of Chinese music, literature or lifestyle on a global scale.

All this justifies a thesis that the future of China, not necessarily as a global superpower, but even as a stable, harmoniously developing regional power, is up in the air. Many researchers assess this issue in a similar way (like Brzezinski and Wallerstein, quoted above). They do not concur with the theses of China's future domination. They believe that while it is a very important player, it has rather regional or continental meaning and the best thing it can do – after the failed attempts to dominate Asia – is to form a coalition with other great powers.

We could assess in the same way the other new powers, starting with India. Their rapid economic development, comparable in many ways to the Chinese case, has also led it to achieve, in a relatively short time, a high position on the economic map of the world.³ Similarities in development, but also geographical proximity and historical and cultural bonds between India and China provoke some analysts to present bold theses on the development of a new informal economic and political entity, with joint potentials of both countries, which could be called Chindia. However, the thesis does not seem realistic, mostly because some differences between them are deeper than similarities. Without going into detailed comparisons, it is enough to point out the fundamental differences in their political systems, generating implications in relation to the selected models of economic and social development: India is the 'largest democracy in the world', while China is still under communist dictatorship.

Economic success cannot overshadow the serious problems faced by India. In the field of internal affairs these include severe tensions and conflicts with different backgrounds: political, ethical, religious, class (more specifically – caste) or social, which often turn into bloody riots. In the field of foreign pol-

³ For India, the standard advantage of the emerging powers (large resources of cheap labour) is additionally supported by the fact that Indian workers can speak English (hence the Indian speciality – IT services). India's additional advantage is the existence of a relatively large and wealthy middle and upper class (the percentage of Hindu people among the richest people in the world is quite a sensation).

icy, the greatest problem are the continuing tense, or even hostile relations with India's main adversary and rival, Pakistan, during the whole period of after-war independence. They are manifested in the form of the unresolved Kashmir dispute, and in the increase of terrorist activity, demonstrated by the brutal and bloody terrorist attack in Mumbai in November 2008. What makes the situation even worse is that the two protagonists – India and Pakistan – have been in possession of nuclear weapons for several years now, in both cases aimed mainly at gaining military advantage of one country over the other. Without any doubts, this arms race constitutes a huge burden for the economy and society of the whole subcontinent, and in the case of the politically unstable Pakistan, it can additionally cause real danger for world peace and security.

All these difficulties strongly affect India's international position, and also in this case force us to reconsider the prospects of its evolution. We should remember that in a situation when a country has serious internal and external problems even a huge economic, demographic, resource or other kind of potential does not necessarily guarantee the achievement of permanent success in terms of strong position in the world.

The above diagnosis can also refer to another new power: Russia. For many years, the country has taken intensive steps towards rebuilding its position of superpower, using its own version of anti-Western model of development. However, as opposed to other emerging powers, it has not achieved much success in the expansion of its industrial and service sectors (except for the armaments and space industry). Instead, Russia concentrated on the development of its potential in the field of output and transport of its main resource, i.e. the energy carriers: natural gas and petroleum. A distinctive feature of Russian policy in this respect is the use of energy resources not only to gain income from commercial exports, but also as a special tool in politics and diplomacy. (The crisis caused by stopping the supply of gas at the end of 2008 and at the beginning of 2009 has shown how this 'energy weapon' can serve as an instrument for exerting pressure on Ukraine and the whole Europe)

With the prices of energy carriers on the world markets remaining on a very high level in the last years, Russia managed to stabilise its internal situation to a large extent and, additionally, to rebuild its military potential, including the nuclear potential. This potential became the main determinant of Russian world power status – which is another unique feature of this country – as the relatively low economic potential was not enough to play that role (please note that Russian GDP is comparable to Dutch GDP and is only two times bigger than Polish GDP). A good example of the Russian practice to use military instruments as the final argument in foreign affairs was the

intervention in Georgia in August 2008, which was supposed to show – with all the controversies regarding the reasons and course of this conflict – that Russia has regained the ability to once more conduct imperialistic policy from a position of force.

However, the attempts to develop a strong international position using military power and energetic monoculture in economy have not been a success. Sudden drops in natural gas and petroleum prices, combined with other negative consequences of the world economic crisis, have resulted in serious economic, financial and budgetary difficulties. This has been made even worse by the continuous internal problems of social⁴ and political nature (such as, for example, atrophy of the civic society and democratic institutions). All this leads to a significant limitation of Russia's ability to continue the superpower-oriented course of its foreign policy.

Other states pretending to the status of emerging world powers, such as Brazil or Nigeria, are in a similar situation as China, India and Russia. Without making an additional detailed analysis in this text, we could try to make a synthetic assessment of their place on the 'global chessboard', perceiving them as yet another (next to the West) important element of the global distribution of power. Such description allows to identify the major strengths and weaknesses influencing the development of their international position.

On one hand, it is obvious that during the last two decades all these states have achieved remarkable economic successes which, in some cases, e.g. China or India, are no less than spectacular. These are complemented by achievements in the social sphere (especially in improving the standards of living of their citizens), as well as in rebuilding or expanding their military potential, considered a symbol of world power status and an instrument of conducting foreign policy. All this resulted in the fact that the new powers have quickly improved their global ranking, especially in the fields of economy and commerce. However, on the other hand, we should take into consideration all the previously mentioned serious problems in these states – with different origin, course and nature (mainly social or political), connected both with the internal situation and with the relations with other countries. In consequence of the current global crisis, all these problems were intensified and

⁴ Russia is one of only few states where the average lifespan, especially of men, is constantly dropping – an average Russian citizen lives only just under 60 years. The tensions are also caused by such factors as common and omnipresent corruption and organised crime, as well as excessive statism leading to proliferation and omnipotence of bureaucracy. As it is the case with other emerging powers, in Russia there are large disproportions in income. This is symbolically manifested by the existence of the class of the so called new Russians, whose affluence (and sometimes almost immeasurable wealth) is in stark contrast to modest standards of living of average citizens.

led to a significant weakening of the economic achievements and a noticeable drop in global rankings (especially in the case of Russia).

Without going into exact and detailed calculations of proportions between the abovementioned strengths and weaknesses, we could probably propose a thesis that – with all due respect to all their achievements – it is rather hard to consider the emerging powers the primary motive force of the contemporary world. This assessment seems especially true in the context of the previous deliberations on the development of the new global distribution of power, in particular in relation to the problems of transition of powers. In simple words – realistically, the chances that one of the new powers will in future assume the global dominating role are rather low.

Such a diagnosis is at odds with the still numerous and commonly accepted claims that the currently developing architecture of international relations will be based primarily on these new powers. Let us point out that China is one of the most enthusiastically evaluated favourites, often believed to become the global leader in the course of the next few decades, even before 2030. However, such forecasts have been formulated in the period preceding the present crisis. Therefore, in order to have a clear picture, it is necessary to make an attempt to briefly describe this emerging global distribution of power.

4. Global distribution of power

While evaluating this system, we should take into consideration the fact that the current distribution of global powers has a multidimensional nature and is different depending on whether it refers to the economic sphere, to the military potential or to the strictly political sphere.

4.1. Distribution of economic power

The economic map of the world clearly shows the emergence of a new centre of power. We could call it the American-Asian Centre. It is gradually replacing the former USA–Europe tandem and covering regions on both sides of the Pacific – on its eastern shores, these are the United States (together with the remaining economic potential of both Americas), which focus more and more on relations with Asia, and on its western shores is a large group of economic powers led by Japan, China, the “Asian Tigers” and India. This shift of the economic centre of gravity from the Atlantic to the Pacific justifies the predictions that the 21st century will be the ‘century of Asia’. China, and to a certain extent the other emerging economies as well, indeed has a prominent position, especially in terms of intensive stimulation of interna-

tional commerce and the stimulation of general economic development of both their regions and the whole world.

However, without denigrating the role of the new powers, realistic proportions should be taken into consideration – the joint potential of the Chinese and Indian economies is still no match for the economic power of the United States. Furthermore, the attempts to treat all members of this new economic centre in the same way and placing them exclusively on the level of common economic interests, seem disputable.

Admittedly, the processes of globalisation indeed force the formation of close co-operation, which is best shown by the formation of unique relations between the Chinese and American economies which could even be described as complementary – China exports a huge amount of goods into the United States and additionally acquires large numbers of their debt securities, while the Americans buy these goods for money borrowed from the Chinese. Before the American financial market collapsed in 2008, this system worked very efficiently (leaving aside the fact that this increased the enormous deficit in foreign trade and the federal budget, very dangerous for the USA). Even now, during a global crisis, both partners are still – perhaps to an even greater extent – dependent on each other, as a total economic collapse in one of them would be a catastrophe for the other one as well.

However, taking into account such requirements of globalised co-operation, we may not disregard other factors, such as the rather obvious fact that, as in other parts of the world, mutual relations within the American–Asian Centre are not only subject to rules of co-operation, but also competition, which often evolves into fierce rivalry. Even without considering here the strictly political and military factors which will be discussed later, we have to stress that the members of this centre do not belong to the same culture, which makes it significantly more difficult for them – or perhaps even completely impossible – to speak with one voice in the international arena. In relation to the United States, it is worth emphasising that its strategic economic interests are not only limited to the Pacific area.⁵

Europe, represented by the EU, still remains a major partner of the USA – and the most important one in terms of economic exchange. Despite all the tensions and incidents of rivalry, the American–European alliance is the foundation of the whole Western world and it is rather hard to overrate its significance for world economy. Admittedly, as it has already been suggested, the centre of world economy located on the European and North American

⁵ Apart from all the reasons described here, it should be taken into consideration that the United States are forced to look after the supply of energy carriers (primarily petroleum) from many different regions, of which most are located outside the Pacific region.

sides of the Atlantic (which could be called the Atlantic Centre) is indeed gradually loosing the dominating position in global economy, but still remains a significant power. We should not forget that the joint economic potential of EU Member States produces the highest share of world GDP, amounting to over 30 per cent, which is slightly more than the United States. This means that combining the leading position of the united Europe with the USA's first place in the ranking of states gives us almost two thirds of the world economic potential.

The aim of this analysis is not an asymmetric comparison of the power of the American–Asian Centre and the Atlantic Centre. This would be rather wrong from the methodological point of view, as the United States are the key member of both these centres. We should rather look at the global distribution of economic power from a different, more overall point of view and reach the simple yet crucial conclusion that in economic terms the world is still dominated by highly developed states of the West. This domination is all the more visible when we additionally include the economy of the pro-Western Japan and other states following the Western development model – their aggregated potential together with the American and European potential amounts to around 75 per cent of world GDP!

This observation does not undermine the significance of new powers or other important actors in the world economic arena, such as, for example, transnational corporations, which are not analysed in this text. It only suggests taking a sober look and temperance in making judgements – both to those too hastily heralding a radical change in the global distribution of power and to those overly critical in relation to the new pretenders. For the general assessment of the global distribution of economic power is the following: While new Asian powers have a very important place in this system, the dominating position – although no longer a hegemonistic one – is still held by highly developed Western countries.

This situation could be influenced by the global economic crisis which begun at the end of 2008. It has a multidimensional character and affects particular states and regions in different spheres and to a different extent. Leaving aside the reasons for the current crisis-related phenomena – caused, generally speaking, by the fiasco of the ultraliberal model of capitalism based on the 'Washington Consensus' – it is very hard to predict their duration and global consequences. The opinions in this regard are divided, but, without touching on the essence of such debates, we could try to identify the possible results of the crisis in relation to changes in the global distribution of economic power.

Looking at its course so far we can see that despite all their problems and weaknesses, the economies of the most powerful members of the Western

world, namely the USA and the EU, have a good chance to overcome the crisis and perhaps keep most of their current advantages. Such an optimistic assessment is justified, for instance, by the fact that the position and significance of both the dollar and the euro have not been considerably weakened. As far as the state of the economy of the biggest representatives of the new powers is concerned, we can clearly see that the Russian economy is in a major depression, suffering from low prices of energy carriers. China is contending with serious problems as well. It has managed to take Japan's place as the world second national economy, but a collapse of exports could lead this country to a true catastrophe – not only economically, but also socially (what to do with a great army of workless citizens, potentially several tens of millions of people?). Of course, it is still too early to formulate any decisive judgements, but we should take into account that the following years could bring about significant changes in the world economic arena.

4.2. Distribution of military power

As already mentioned, the general distribution of global power has a multidimensional nature and is different depending on whether it refers to the economic, political or military sphere. In relation to the latter ones, we could say that the political and military map of the world is possibly even more complex than the economic one. In fact, it is a 'huge chessboard' with a much larger number of players of various prominence (each taking care of its own interests, just as in the case of economic issues), all of which form different bonds with the others based on various relations: alliance, co-operation, competition, rivalry or hostility.

This chessboard appears to be relatively the simplest in terms of the distribution of military potential alone. In this regard, the West, mainly the United States, still holds a dominating or even hegemonistic position. It is enough to stress the fact that the USA has the most powerful armed forces in the history of mankind and spend as much money on them as all the other states put together. Other NATO allies also have a large military potential, especially the EU Member States.

However, this does not mean that the broadly understood West does not have any competition in this regard. The competitors belong mostly to the group of emerging powers, among which Russia is the most significant. As it has been mentioned before, its participation in the generation of the world GDP is marginal and its position in the global economy actually depends only on significant energy reserves. In order to compensate for its economic deficiencies, Russia tries to expand the huge military potential inherited from the USSR, in particular the nuclear potential. By doing this it directly refers to tsarist and Soviet imperialist traditions, in particular in the context of the

so called close foreign countries and areas in Europe and Asia which it considers its exclusive sphere of influence. The Russian military power, which despite all the efforts still suffers from many deficiencies, is not able to pose a real threat to the USA and the whole West, but nevertheless can be used as a powerful instrument of pressure in foreign policy (which has been shown, for example, by the intervention in Georgia). Furthermore, Russia strives to create a system of political and military alliances of a clearly anti-Western nature, which is proven, apart from establishing its own organisation for security in the post-Soviet area, for example by establishing co-operation with China and the Central Asian Republics of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Indeed, China is the next pretender to the position of a military power. Elaborating on previously mentioned issues, it is necessary to point out that also in the case of China, development of the military potential is a major priority, realised at the expense of considerable financial outlays. This is proven by the development of all types of arms, from conventional to nuclear. A spectacular symbol of this are China's achievements in space exploration (e.g. sending the first Chinese astronaut into space). The Chinese armed forces are quickly modernising and increasing their effectiveness. To achieve this, they are e.g. decreasing their numbers – but nevertheless, with ca. 2.8 million troops under arms they still remain the biggest armed forces in the world (in comparison – the excellently trained and equipped armed forces of the USA have at their disposal ca. 1.5 million regular, active personnel; Russian armed forces, based on conscription, have similar numbers).

As there are no real threats against China originating in its close international neighbourhood, there is the risk that its military potential could be used to engage in armed interventions abroad. These would be performed, for example, in order to secure Chinese economic interests, or in order to provide an outlet for social discontent – a strategy sometimes used by desperate dictatorships. Should this take the form of an attempt to annex Taiwan (which the PRC has never officially renounced) by force, it would inevitably lead to an open conflict with the United States, with all its possible catastrophic consequences for world peace and security.

It seems that another emerging power, namely India, also has awakened military ambitions. However, the efforts made by this state in this respect do not aim at projecting military power outwards, but much rather at gaining military advantage over its traditional enemy, Pakistan. The fact that both opponents have nuclear weapons makes their dispute even more dangerous for the international community – all the more, as there are additional implications involved, connected with the lack of political and military stabilisation in the whole region and resulting from such factors as, among others, Iran's

aspirations to become a nuclear power (and at the same time a superpower) or the intensifying armed conflict in Afghanistan, in which NATO members participate.

As a result, while the global distribution of military power remains quite clearly defined from the material point of view (technical dominance of the USA and its allies), it can be susceptible to diverse changes, or even turbulences, resulting from the consistent pursuing of their armaments policies by new world powers (at this point, it should be stressed that in the contemporary world, military power, while still a very important instrument of pressure, is no longer the final argument in foreign relations).

4.3. Distribution of political power

The global distribution of strictly political power also seems to be unstable. Indeed, it is connected with the distributions of economic and military power described above, but in this case, generally speaking, there is a much greater dispersion of significant centres of world politics. Of course, despite all their weaknesses, the United States remain the key decision maker with the greatest influence on the international situation, also in the political and diplomatic sphere. Therefore, there is no overstatement in claiming that the President of the USA is the most powerful man on our planet, even though his word no longer has the ability to end discussions on any issue in the global arena (a reference to the ancient maxim describing the power of Rome: *Roma locuta, causa finita*). This is a consequence of not only the relative weakening of the economic and political position of the USA, but also of gradual emergence of other significant centres with not necessarily global influence, but certainly at least continental or regional influence.

One of these centres is undoubtedly the European Union. It is enough to say that regardless of clear and often very severe deficiencies in its external policy, the EU gradually gains a more and more important position on the 'global chessboard', both in economic and political terms. For many reasons (including the lack of a proper political will), this position surely does not reflect actual significance of the EU in the world. On the other hand, the position is significant enough for the EU not to be underrated in global politics and as far as the problems of Europe and, to a much lesser extent, the neighbouring regions (including such important areas as the Middle East) are concerned, the voice of EU diplomacy is treated very seriously.

As in the case of the distribution of economic and military power, when referring to political power we can speak of the existence of a general community of strategic interests of the whole West, including mainly the two major centres analysed above: the USA and the uniting Europe. Although their mutual relations contain both elements of alliance and co-operation, the solid

common foundation is the unity of the system of political, ideological, social and economic values. It should also be noted that the Western development model is more or less accepted and implemented by a large number of states in different parts of the world (including such economic powers as Japan).

All this results in the fact that even though the West is not a monolith on the political map of the world, in many key issues it is able to represent a close, if not a unanimous position. In reference to this, the question arises, whether this kind of influence is essentially of rather less significance than in relation to economic and military issues. It would seem that it is so indeed, for reasons similar to the causes of the relative weakening of the position of the United States – the leading state of the West.

As it has been suggested above, the contemporary world is becoming more and more multipolar in terms of politics. Apart from the Western centre, there are also other centres showing huge ambitions in deciding on the shape of international relations. Once again, this refers in particular to the new, emerging powers, mainly Russia and China, but in this case the list of claimants is even longer.

As far as Russia is concerned, we only need to add a few things to the previously mentioned characteristics of its economic and military potential. Basing on military power backed by the 'energy weapon', this state is consistently trying to rebuild itself and possibly also strengthen its position as a world power, which it used to hold for centuries (in the times of the Soviet Union it even held the position of a global superpower). One of the main manifestations of these imperialistic tendencies is the almost fierce striving to reclaim its traditional sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in near and far Asia. A solid ideological and political foundation for this has been the idea of a strong state with autocratic rule, deeply ingrained in Russian historical tradition, complemented with the conviction that one of the best ways to increase the state's power is constant acquisition of new territories and subduing more and more nations by means of conquest.

Russia is rebuilding its power by, among other means, creating a system of political, economic, political and military alliances, formed not only with states in the post-Soviet area (e.g. the Commonwealth of Independent States), but also alliances of a much broader range, such as the previously mentioned Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. By doing this, Russia tries to perform the role of a centre of influence and power of a greater international range than simply a regional power; it attempts to be (in accordance with another of its historical ideas) that 'third Rome', a counterbalance for the domination of the West and the growing influence of the East. What is more, when diplomatic methods are not sufficient to reach these goals, Russia does not hesitate to use military power, which is proven by the long-lasting war in Chech-

nya and the recent intervention in Georgia. While repeating the assessment that despite everything the Russian potential cannot pose a serious threat to the current international order, in particular to the states of the West, we should also note that this potential, in its political aspect, may not be ignored.

As far as another new power – China – is concerned, its military potential, characterised earlier in this text, is supplemented by remarkable economic power. This creates additional opportunities and increases the temptation to conduct foreign policy not only on regional but also on a global scale. It is clear that the striving after a leading role or even domination in Eastern Asia is no longer enough to satisfy China's ambitions. This is the case even though this position is not yet fully established, among others because of the need to compete with Japan (which is an economic giant, but has only little political or military power). Another reason is the still unsolved problem of Taiwan, with which the PRC has business relations, very successful in terms of economy, but which – not willing to make a suicidal 'return to the motherland' and being a close ally of the USA – is a tinderbox in relations between the PRC and the USA.

China's ambitions to have a more significant role in the global arena are manifested for instance by increased activity in these regions of the world which were earlier not considered areas of greater interest for the Chinese diplomacy. This refers mainly to Africa, where China has been conducting a broad, extensive economic and diplomatic expansion for some years now. It is conducted in many diverse forms, including both direct investments (in particular mining of natural resources and agricultural production) and technical and financial support for the poorest African states, helping for instance with social issues and the development of economic infrastructure.

Such comprehensive activities prove the magnitude of China's goals – apart from the realisation of economic tasks (especially in relation to ensuring supplies of strategic resources), a very important goal is the strengthening of China's political and diplomatic position. Playing a very subtle game on the global chessboard, the PRC tries to be perceived as the spokesman of impecunious states of the 'Third World', who defends their interests against the threats created by the 'callous globalisation' promoted by the West (for Africa, which indeed has a marginal position in the global system of power distribution, such activities could in fact produce the anticipated results). Consequently, the Chinese policy could be called 'soft neo-colonialism' (in contrast to, for instance, the Russian 'hard neo-imperialism'). Generally speaking, China's position in the international political arena seems to be gradually stabilising and strengthening, although it should be also stressed that in future, this position will depend on the development of the Chinese economy and to a certain extent also its military potential.

The deliberations above show that the world political arena is dominated by a small group of key actors – of course, from amongst the representatives of the broadly understood West these are mainly the United States (the EU has a significantly lower position in this respect), and among the emerging powers these are China and Russia. This grand triangle is characterised by a complex system of mutual cooperation and interrelationships, as well as rivalry and even confrontation. On one hand, this is manifested, for example, by the previously mentioned symbiosis of the US and Chinese economies, but on the other hand, by fierce military competition between the USA, Russia and China. Each of these actors, while looking after its own interests, turns its assets to its own advantage and at the same time tries to exploit the weaknesses of others. At the same time, the system of interrelations between these actors is changeable and unsteady, depending on the current situation in international relations – e.g. in their striving to oppose the power of the United States, Russia and China can get closer in political and military terms, while at the same time fiercely competing against each other in various parts of Asia and, despite everything, trying to maintain good relations with the USA.

If we apply long-term thinking and take into consideration the economic and military conditions, it seems that the United States remain the most powerful actor in this system, regardless of their various deficiencies. Their most important partner is still China, which – provided that it will be able to keep its superpower potential and aspirations – could become the second ‘quarterback’ in the international arena. (Russia, weak in economic terms, will not be able to take this role.)

However, it should be remembered that the distribution of global political power is not limited, as it has been stated before, to the abovementioned triangle. This system is not tripolar but multipolar and other significant actors should be taken into consideration as well – even despite all their limitations and the weaknesses of their foreign policies – such as the European Union, Japan and all the other emerging powers.

An additional characteristic typical of the political map of the world – in contrast to the distribution of economic and military power – is the fact that actors with very low actual potential can have a relatively significant role. Such a situation can result from a coincidental set of various circumstances, including their ability to play negative roles in international relations.

North Korea and Iran are examples of such actors. Both these states, ruled by autocratic regimes founded on extremist ideologies, have been striving for many years to obtain nuclear weapons and consequently have become a threat to world peace and safety. The same could be said about certain states or regions with more or less chronic political and military tensions or conflicts, such as, for instance, the Balkans, Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. In a glob-

alised world, all these crisis situations have lost their initial local character and have become the focus of intensive political and diplomatic efforts undertaken by the whole international community (in consequence of the direct or indirect involvement of major powers and many other significant political, economic or military implications). This means that many smaller actors *de facto* have very significant roles in the international arena, which actually do not reflect their real geopolitical potential.

This way a pyramid of political significance in the modern world is created – at the top there is a small group of key actors in the global arena who represent particular civilisation centres, below there are their allies and members of these centres (e.g. EU Member States), and at the bottom there are the remaining participants in international relations, some of which have specific, relatively significant roles most often connected with their involvement in conflicts.

However, it is difficult to create a full picture because the pyramid overlaps with the previously described systems of economic and military power, as well as by general transformation in international relations, characterised by both a modification of their construction (e.g. because of the emergence of new powers) and the evolution of the paradigms ruling them, manifesting itself e.g. in the form of competition between various development models. All this results in the fact that no description and no analysis of contemporary world can be simple and unambiguous.

This does not change the fact that attempts to produce such an analysis are necessary in order to outline a more complete international framework in which the UE is functioning. This, in turn, is necessary in order to better understand the major factors influencing the present and future shape and course of the processes of European integration.

