

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Any analysis of the role of regional integration in the international system must set out from the premise that we are living through a period of transition, in which old certainties have been replaced by confusion. No single paradigm can explain the basic workings of international relations. The latter cannot be seen as the manifestation of any single phenomenon, be it globalization, multilateralism, economic multipolarity, inter-civilizational conflicts or even the triumph of liberal democracy over centralized models.

The three analytical fields for international relations - strategic-military, economic and values - now interact in a different way, the importance or intensity of each depending on the specific circumstances of any given historical moment.

Global Complexities

The end of bipolarity, the great hopes engendered by the democratic revolution in Europe and victory of the US-led coalition in the Gulf War gave rise to dreams of a new era based on the "international order of triumphant liberalism". This world would be shaped by American supremacy, with the United States operating as the centre of a democratic empire, organizing a network of regional security alliances backed by a compliant United Nations Security Council.

This utopian and profoundly optimistic liberal view of the international system, a product of the great hopes raised by the fall of the Berlin Wall, was replaced by the more sombre and pessimistic perspective born out of the subsequent emergence of bloody ethnic wars and violent political or religious nationalism.

Reality shows that today's great challenges, - be they democratization, the control of extreme forms of nationalism and religious or ethnic fundamentalism, the resolution of inter- or intra-state conflicts as well as the problems of a demographic nature and poverty, require political, economic and strategic responses which transcend the capabilities of any single power. This includes the United States which is still debating the role it should play in the post-Cold War era. Joint solutions arrived at through an international dialogue are the only path available to deal with these issues.

The complexity of the international system today does not advise simplistic definitions. There are numerous choices which can be made and which are not mutually exclusive. The tendency towards

globalization and the need to affirm national identities co-exist in this context; the development of new forms of organization and association which transcend the nation-state paradoxically co-exist with the tendency towards the re-affirmation of national sovereignty and prerogatives.

The most prominent feature of the current system is the global strategic decompression stemming from the disappearance of Cold War security constraints which imposed alliances and restricted the room for manoeuvre of states and political actors. In fact, rather than producing peace, the end of the Cold War has led to the eruption of new regional conflicts from which Europe is not excluded.

If factors of fragmentation, disruption, crisis and war are apparent in the 1990s, a parallel trend of renewed vigour in processes of democratization, association and integration is also visible. Strategic decompression at the global level creates opportunities to advance the causes of freedom and human rights, to promote co-operation between states and processes of regional integration.

The disappearance of heterogeneous ties of solidarity – the disappearance of clear antagonistic alignments and the ensuing lack of meaning of the concept and practice of non-alignment – brings with it a quest for solutions to conflicts and responses to economic and social challenges through cooperation between countries in the same region.

This period represents an opportunity to engage in new experiments in the organization of the international system which may lead to a more democratic and stable world with less social disparities. It is possible to defend integration; that is, democratically determined free association between states, as a basis for re-organizing the international system.

The Nature of the Present International System

By gaining some critical detachment and despite the complexities, it is possible to summarize the key characteristics of the present international system:

Transition from defined to undefined polarities. The bipolarity which characterized the Cold War era shaped the international system and its conflicts and restricted the action of states. The East-West conflict dictated stable and seemingly permanent political and economic ties of solidarity.

The post-Cold War world can be divided into two different periods. The first began with the fall of the Berlin Wall and culminated with the Gulf War. The second began with the re-emergence of war on European soil, the setbacks suffered by peace or democratic transition processes as well as with

frustration regarding the role played by the international community in, for example, the former Yugoslavia, Angola and Algeria.

In the former phase the world was optimistic about the possibility of making the values of liberalism, democracy and the free market universal. It hoped in particular to create a new order in the security sphere after allied action in the Iraqi conflict. The second was characterized by a resurgence of nationalist movements in Europe and, above all, by the war in the former Yugoslavia. The violence of the conflict, the treatment of minorities and "ethnic cleansing", the resistance to mediation, together with the European security institutions' and the United Nations' inability to end the conflict, undermined existing confidence, thereby directly jeopardizing the international stability supposedly achieved and the credibility of the institutions involved. This situation was further exacerbated by the onset of economic recession from 1992 onwards.

The international system was increasingly perceived to lack continuity, to be transitory, unstable, fragmented and ambivalent. The defined polarities of the Cold War were replaced by non-defined polarities. It became necessary to define strategies for action to deal with unexpected and uncontrollable conflicts; the international community appeared to choose a reactive rather than a preventive attitude. Thus, although international intervention in conflict areas has increased to levels higher than ever before, the results achieved do not raise great hopes.

The bipolar situation had permitted the creation of a dominant paradigm, covering the ideological, strategic and economic spheres. The new international situation has led to the destruction of the old model and yet it has not produced a new paradigm. This is one of the causes of confusion.

Dichotomy between Centrifugal and Centripetal Forces. The international arena is being shaped by dual forces. On the one hand, there are the forces which promote globalization and are conducive to uniformity. These forces act in the economic sphere: the globalization of information, production, markets and investments, the broader role of multinationals as well as the integration of groups of countries. Values are also part of these forces. From them emerges the struggle for human rights and the environment, involving NGOs, multilateral entities and the scientific community.

On the other hand, there are forces operating according to the logic of disintegration. Hence the ethnically-based nationalisms and the religious fundamentalisms engaged in a struggle to establish new national identities. These forces are equally active under the western democracies, as demonstrated by the difficulties with the ratification processes of the Treaty on European Union, the NAFTA founding treaty, as well as by the positions adopted during the GATT Uruguay Round negotiations.

It is important to remember that centrifugal and centripetal processes should be exempt from value judgements. Globalization is not invariably positive as it can exacerbate differentiation mechanisms; similarly, national affirmation as a means of upholding the national interest cannot be rejected.

Integration and formation of regional areas. A characteristic feature of today's world is the interest shown by states in forming regional integration areas with varying degrees of openness as a way of developing new positions vis-à-vis other partners in the international system.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether these regional initiatives will become closed blocs, liberalizing only intra-bloc trade and practicing inter-bloc protectionism, or whether they will lead to open areas establishing bridges between regions heading towards global liberalization. It is essentially a question of whether the prevailing guiding logic will favour cooperation or confrontation in relations between the different areas. It is, finally, a question of finding out whether these areas will turn into the future blocs of the post-Cold War system. The United States, Japan, the European Union, Russia and even China all feature as potential candidates.