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Time to end the ‘Copenhagen Syndrome’

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From a European perspective, the [Copenhagen conference](#) on climate change last December was not only disappointing – it was really a wake-up call. Or at least it should be. While all the United Nations were gathered around the table, an agreement was secretly negotiated between the United States, China, Brazil, India and South Africa. While the European Union was for once showing some signs of leadership, it was not even invited to negotiate the final agreement.

What happened? The answer is simple: Copenhagen was a preview of the new world order. The more Europeans were speaking, the less they were listened to. And for good reason. The language spoken in Copenhagen was one of realpolitik and geopolitics – to be pronounced with an American, Chinese or Indian accent.

The fundamental interest of the Copenhagen circus was precisely what it revealed from the new emerging world order: rising importance of new global actors such as Brazil, Russia, India and China ([BRIC](#)); balanced by the corresponding decline of the West, according to the laws of power relativity; and marked by a growing interdependence between global actors at the economic and political levels as well as at the security level, even existential level when it comes to climate change.

Yet despite the well-documented threat posed by climate change, heads of state could not reach an agreement in Copenhagen. To explain this apparent anomaly, one needs to examine the world as a doctor would examine a patient. *Is it serious doctor?*

The world is suffering from what could be called the ‘Copenhagen Syndrome’, characterised by six distinct symptoms:

First symptom: While problems and challenges have globalised, responses (economic, social and political) often remain too national, or even nationalised, i.e. exploited by states.

Second symptom: The world is dominated by the United States and China. The final agreement in Copenhagen was written by the United States and the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), but even within this select club it seems that the game was really played between Barack Obama and Wen Jiabao.

If China and America (some say Chimerica) dominate the world, they certainly do not rule it together. In fact, a formal alliance between the American superpower and China is unlikely, due to profound tensions between the two as illustrated again recently with Google, Taiwan or the Dalai-Lama. However, it is also clear that few problems can be solved today without the assent of those two giants that form a G2 de facto, without wanting or desiring it.

Third symptom: Emerging powers are increasingly looking to have their say on the international stage and – or because – they are increasingly able to. At the last day in Copenhagen, projectors and microphones were turned towards the representatives of BASIC countries, not towards those of the European Union.

Fourth symptom: *Our* urgency is not always *their* urgency. The world after Copenhagen does not revolve around European or even Western priorities anymore. The setting of the international agenda is the result of power games between different poles of the multipolar order. Europeans still need to learn the rules of the game.

Fifth symptom: The developing world is fragmented. Copenhagen highlighted as rarely before the tensions that rip developing countries apart, when for instance the representative of Tuvalu fiercely opposed those of China and India, or when South Africa dissociated itself from the common African position in the last day.

It is more and more difficult to classify emerging powers given that they seem to fall somewhere between the developed world and the third world. And they find this position increasingly uncomfortable. It is ever more complicated for them to pretend being leaders of the developing world whereas they are every day less members of that developing world and that consequently their interests diverge more and more.

Sixth symptom: The European Union is marginalised on the international stage. The climate file was a rare case where Brussels could offer some elements of global leadership and could reach a common position, despite some detrimental interferences resulting from gesticulations of Member State leaders in search of media and political recognition. And yet, in Copenhagen, the European voice was hardly heard.

So if these are the symptoms, what is the diagnosis? In short, the Copenhagen conference illustrated some of the principal characteristics of the emerging global order. The structuring elements of the international system, i.e. multipolarity and interdependence, are not entirely new but are rather the result of a longer process.

The reshaping of the global order started essentially with the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, this new emerging order had been in incubation for years. Today, it has

reached maturity: this is the Copenhagen Syndrome. And Europeans better get used to it – and redefine their policies accordingly, in recognition of the European interest.