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Coping with the Copenhagen syndrome

Thomas Renard assesses the implications of the "interpolar" world that was on display at last December's global climate conference in the Danish capital.

From a European perspective, last December's Copenhagen climate change conference was not only disappointing. It was also a wake-up call. Or at least it should have been. While all the member states of the United Nations were gathered around the table, an agreement was secretly negotiated between the US, China, Brazil, India and South Africa. Though the EU 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 spoke, the less they were listened to. And with good reason. The language spoken in Copenhagen was one of realpolitik and geopolitics, and it was to be pronounced with an American, Chinese or Indian accent.

The fundamental interest of the Copenhagen circus was precisely what it revealed about the emerging world order: the rising importance of new global actors such as Brazil, Russia, India and China, balanced by the corresponding decline of the West. The new situation is marked by a growing interdependence between the key players in economic, political and security terms, and even on an existential level when it comes to climate change.

In such an "interpolar" world, as the Italian scholar Giovanni Grevi has elegantly called it, national and regional problems have become transnational and global, and they require a collective and concerted approach. Otherwise, problems are merely displaced and remain unsolved. This is the case with climate change, in which heads of state and government could not reach an agreement in Copenhagen despite the well-documented threat.

To explain this apparent anomaly, we need to examine the world as a doctor would examine a patient. The world is suffering from what could be called the Copenhagen syndrome, characterised by six distinct symptoms.

The first symptom is the lack of global solutions. While problems and challenges have become global, responses (economic, social and political) too often remain national, or even nationalised in that they are exploited by states.

The second is world domination by China and the US. The final agreement in Copenhagen was written by the US and the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China). Although a formal alliance between the American superpower and the Chinese emerging superpower is unlikely due to recent profound tensions over Google,

Taiwan and the Dalai Lama, few problems can be solved without the desire and assent of these two giants.

Third, emerging powers are increasingly looking to have their say on the international stage, partly because they are increasingly able to. On the last day in Copenhagen, cameras and microphones were pointed at representatives of the BASIC countries, not those of the EU members.

The fourth symptom is the EU's sense of urgency compared to other countries. The world after Copenhagen no longer revolves around European or even Western priorities. The setting of the international agenda is the result of power games played between different centres in the interpolar order. Europeans still need to learn the new rules of the game.

The fifth is the fragmentation of the developing world. Copenhagen highlighted the tensions among developing countries, 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 on the last day. Emerging powers of the developing world also find themselves in an uncomfortable position, falling somewhere between the developed world and the diverse leaders of the third world.

The final symptom is the marginalisation of the EU on the international stage. The climate file was a rare case of Brussels being able to offer some elements of global leadership, thanks in part to the EU having agreed a meaningful common position. Yet in Copenhagen, the European voice was hardly heard.

The Copenhagen conference illustrated some of the principal characteristics of the emerging global order. The structuring elements of the international system – multipolarity and interdependence – are not entirely new but are rather the result of a long period of incubation, which started essentially with the fall of the Berlin Wall. This new emerging order has now reached maturity. Europeans had better get used to it.

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