



Society for International Development

SID-NL Lecture Series 2011-2012

**“The State in a Globalizing World.
Problematic, yet indispensable”**



Lecture: **Multipolarity of states or regions?**

On Monday 16 January 2012, **Alcides Costa Vaz**, professor and former Director of the Institute of International Relations of the University of Brasilia, held his lecture “Multipolarity of states or regions?” in the 2011-2012 SID-NL Lecture Series, ‘The State in a Globalizing World’.

Summary

Professor Vaz began his lecture by stating that multipolarity must not be regarded from the perspective of international politics in traditional terms, that is, from the perspective of inter-state dynamics. Instead, a more global perspective should be adopted as states are no longer the exclusive actors of power in international relations. He argued that multipolarity in a highly interdependent world entails important changes in the nature of power and power relations. For example, soft power has increasingly gained in importance. However, although regional alliances are important for emerging powers, international and multilateral coalitions have become more relevant as immediate options.

What is multipolarity?

The debate on the meaning of multipolarity conveys the idea that there are important changes in the distribution of power. Power has become more diffused, but a diffusion of power does not necessarily mean that there are no concentrations of power that decisively shape and influence events and outcomes on varying issues. We can indeed recognise centres of powers. It is however important to note that these are not solely composed of states, but of a complex exchange between states and non-state actors. Interdependence and the rise of multipolarity has brought forward the possibility of a greater diversity of actors to influence international relations.

Costa Vaz then discussed the controversial relationship between multipolarity and stability. Multipolarity is generally associated with a more stable and equitable order where a balanced relationship between soft and hard power should provide stability. However, historical evidence suggests that multipolarity entails conflict and instability. The current emergence of multipolarity coincides with a significant decrease of inter-state conflict. At present, the pattern of conflict is associated with diffused violence perpetrated by non-state actors at the domestic level. But it is still important to discuss factors that might trigger inter-state conflict, as multipolarity emerges. There are growing forces that might trigger inter-state conflict such as the control of, and access to, natural resources. It is as if we are revisiting pre-modern times in which basic resources, such as food, have become potential elements for conflict at the international level. These potentially conflicting elements represent a key challenge for multilateralism in a multipolar world.

Who are the major protagonists: states or regions?

Although states remain central actors in the international arena, there will be an increasing reliance on the interaction with non-state actors in the pursuit of national objectives and to



successfully pursuit regional and global policies. Costa Vaz sees initiatives led by nation states as the basic requirement for the construction of political and economic regionalism.

However, most regions did not succeed in developing a political identity and policy instruments that enable them to perform actively as regions in the world economy and in global affairs. Regions are, according to Costa Vaz, important reference points for policy making but they are not relevant actors themselves. Instead,

their actual importance as constitutive elements of multipolarity is relatively smaller than was expected some years ago.

The nature and importance of regional alliances

Regionalism has indeed become a component of the economic order, but its role is less important than was foreseen. Multilateralism emerges as a corollary of multipolarity. However, this does not exclude regions from finding functionality in many important areas. Global governance will rely on initiatives, policies and mechanisms depicted by states at the regional level in key areas such as environmental management, economic infrastructure, foreign direct investment and security. Regions are also experiencing an increasing relevance in geopolitical importance and this importance is bound to increase in the near future. However, the main challenge for regions will be the inadequacy of the regional institutional frameworks, which are vital for the coordination of policy in dealing with global challenges.

Then, is it in the interest of emerging powers to seek political alliances with their neighbours? In normative terms, yes, but the reality displays a different and more complex scene. The needs and incentives for greater reliance on regionalism differ per region, and the relevance of regionalism in their international strategies should be assessed per region. For example, emerging powers like Brazil, South Africa and India are all three recognised as regional leaders. But it is important to note that they face different conditions and difficulties in leading and forging their own regional political identity. Therefore, it is important to look more specifically at the different regions and their leaders. Brazil for example is concerned with forging a regional South American identity that can function as a political asset for South American countries to engage in international politics and in the global economy. However, the exercise of political leadership has been difficult. This has resulted in a greater reliance on coalitions at the international or multilateral level - such as the BRICS, the WTO and the G20 - rather than on its regional prominence.

The implications for power relations

Costa Vaz sees the enhancement of stability as a primarily political task. The balancing of hard and soft power will not be stabilised if distributive issues are not effectively addressed. The political relevance of regions will thus depend upon the demands of governance for different issues. Finally, the importance of regional powers should not be assessed primarily by their ability to lead or to stabilise their own regions. Instead they should be assessed by their ability to set patterns of international relationships that contribute to global stability and help forge governance mechanisms at regional and global levels.

Discussion

Anton Hemerijck, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the VU University, opened up the discussion by asking Costa Vaz to reflect upon the current position of Europe as a region. Hemerijck points out that Europe used to be a vanguard in regional integration, but that the current economic crisis has shifted its focus towards national perspectives and identity. Then, a regional leader such as Germany is in the end undermined, in tackling issues on a regional level, by national politics. Costa Vaz began his response by pointing out that Europe is facing the challenge of managing deep integration forced by greater levels of interdependence. This is a different challenge than the challenge that Brazil is facing. Brazil is trying to forge integration from very low levels of interdependence. However, the fate of Europe will dictate the fate of regionalism elsewhere. For example, the current crisis may also come to demonstrate that national policies may not any longer successfully respond to global challenges. At stake is also the role of regionalism in addressing global challenges. But the answer will not solely be dependent upon German leadership; nor on Brazilian leadership in Latin America. Leadership is required but governance is not forged by states alone. Centres of powers are forged where states and non-state actors work together. Costa Vaz hopes that the EU will overcome the current crises in order to reassert regionalism as a component of multipolarity in the future.

In the discussion with the audience that followed, Costa Vaz elaborated on the implications of multipolarity for the possibility of hegemony and the development of a world order. Costa Vaz stated that the current normative structures that stem from the post-Cold War era are dealing with the refinements of trade and financial rules and international law. Also, new challenges have come up such as climate change and the increasing demand for energy. Quests for hegemony, either by a great or emerging power, must face these realities. Current global issues that demand new forms and mechanisms of governance may not evolve from the perception or initiatives from any single country. The possibilities for, and forms of, hegemony are hereby restrained. The current emergence of multipolarity touches upon the very nature of power relations. And hegemony is a form of power relation; hegemony is therefore bound to change.

