

When Two's Company

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Fifteen years ago, Boutros-Ghali, then my boss, said that the main challenge for the international system was to work out a counterbalance to US power that could replace the collapsed Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, idealists hoped for the emergence of the UN as the countervailing force and European optimists saw the EU playing this role. For nearly two decades no solution was in sight.

We now know the answer. China has taken on the role of the counterweight to the US behemoth at the other end of the global see-saw. That is what happened at Copenhagen where China made its debut as a superpower.

Measured in terms of carbon emissions there are two 20 per cent players, the US and China, which used their strength knowing that no international agreement can work without their participation. The EU, a 10 per cent player, which suffers from an excess of leaders, could not influence the outcome despite the vigour of its advocacy. Two important 5 per cent players, Japan and Russia, did not play any significant role because neither of the two big players needed their support. One 5 per cent player, India, and a couple of 2 per cent players, Brazil and South Africa, were there at the endgame because one end of the see-saw still needed their weight on its side.

This structure of power, with a rough 40:40:20 split between the two big powers, a dozen or so mid-sized powers and a legion of smaller nearly insignificant players, holds not just for the negotiations on climate change but also in trade and finance. In these areas too the decisive factor is the interplay of US and Chinese interests.

The new global diarchy has taken some time to be recognised because of the delusions of power in Brussels, Moscow, Delhi and Tokyo. We in India see ourselves as China's equal. But Beijing's view of the China-India hyphen is rather similar to our view of the India-Pakistan hyphen: something artificial concocted by a superpower for its own purposes.

China's emergence as a power player in global negotiations was delayed by the erosion of its diplomatic capacity brought about by the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution. One could see that Chinese diplomats and civil servants educated and trained during this period lacked not just the language skills but also the confidence to handle the subtle needs of multilateral diplomacy. They tended to leave the talking to more loquacious countries like India. This is changing. A new generation of well-trained Chinese officials, confident in the reality of their power, is taking charge and leading from the front.

But the China you will see in global forums is not a monolith. There are factions with differing views within the power structure in China and they are all represented in the official delegation so that the

front-end negotiators are always under watch. This appeared to be the case in Copenhagen also where Wen Jiabao had to watch over his shoulder for the hardliners who did not want any constraint on Chinese growth.

The new oligarchy of power does not bode well for the multilateral system. During the Cold War the UN was a marginal influence on most security issues and a peripheral one on economic matters. The Bretton Woods bodies worked to greater effect because one side of the diarchic confrontation was kept out and an oligarchic board of directors ran the show. The past 20 years saw the UN exercising greater influence with expanded peace-keeping operations and a string of global conferences that redefined the development and environment agenda and catalysed the formation of many activist issue advocacy networks.

All this may change. Copenhagen may mark the end of the democratic moment in global diplomacy. Oligarchic formations like the self-appointed G-20 will be the space for securing a consensus among the more powerful countries on environment, trade, technology and finance. Copenhagen also exposed the limitations of universalism and bilateral agreements and small group pacts may become more important than multilateral treaties.

India will have a place at the high tables of global diplomacy. But to exercise influence it will have to engage with the other 5 per cent and 2 per cent powers to foster a 21st century model of non-alignment that will play a role similar to the earlier version.

The stability of the new bipolar system will depend on the US's willingness to live with the reality of Chinese economic clout, the extent to which the two accommodate the claims to power of Europe, Russia, India and some of the other 5 per cent and 2 per cent players and the way this global oligarchy secures democratic legitimacy for its agenda. The emergence of a militant nationalism in China may be the biggest threat to this new bipolar order.

The new power balance is not forever. Sooner or later the game will begin all over again when one of the two dominant powers succumbs to imperial overstretch. Any bets on who that will be?

The writer is a member of the prime minister's council on climate change.