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“Power Shifts from the Perspective of Europe”

The international order has become complex in recent years, no longer like the simplified world of the 19th century in which a number of major powers decided on the course of global developments. The fact that the G8 has faded in importance and attention focused instead on the G20 is an indication that the move toward multipolarization has gained momentum. Although the world has thus been altered considerably, this change in no way represents a break with history. This has been one continuous change arising from cumulative day-to-day changes. It is important to distinguish between single key developments and full-blown trends when trying to trace the world's course. For example, the Cold War world of East-West conflict came to an end with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but the collapse of the wall does not tell us everything about the systemic changes that had already occurred. While it was indeed a symbolic event, there were significant systemic changes preceding it.

The current world order is seeing a shift from a bipolar world to a multipolar one, and the US, while it can no longer be called a unipolar power, still wields tremendous influence. The US accounts for nearly half of worldwide military expenditures, and the balance that characterized the Cold War no longer exists. The US also remains at the top in terms of GDP, far ahead of second place. The US excels in technological capability, and exercises remarkable cultural influence as well. It can hardly be said that China, Brazil, Russia, India or other emerging countries are the US' equals. Despite the disappearance of the Soviet Union, neither Japan nor the EU has become a strategic actor. All countries keep a close eye on US elections and stress their bilateral relations with the US. Has any single country ever possessed such exceptional influence?

There is thus no power equivalent to the US, which maintains great sway as an important world actor. Nevertheless, the US cannot decide global rules on its own and impose these on other countries. The US has become more deeply involved in issues regarding the renminbi and the Middle East, but none of these issues has been resolved. Were ours truly a US-centric unipolar world, then all of the US' demands would likely have been accepted. Still, the world's problems cannot be resolved without the US, and international agreements and treaties absent the US will not function effectively. That said, however, the US cannot act alone. The media, NGOs and a variety of other actors have gained in influence, and it is now impossible for any one state to set the world's course. In that sense, our world is not a unipolar one.

Western society long dominated the world in the past, but its power has waned since World War II. Europe should acknowledge and deal with this. However, Europe is by no means on the decline. Countries outside Europe will break out of poverty, grow and acquire power, but there is no need to fear this. If improved living standards come about in other countries, this will be because these countries have become able to contribute to the international order. Europe was previously fragmented but now it is merging, becoming more multipolarized through soft power and transitioning into a peaceful society without aggressive war. The world currently faces an array of problems such as nuclear weapons and terrorism that cannot be properly addressed by any single country, and the only way to resolve these is for the world to come together via the United Nations and other such organizations. The key to resolving the world's problems will not be hard power exercised by powerful countries but multipolarized soft power.