

Norbert Elias and the human condition

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Introduction

In *Humana Conditio* (Frankfurt amMain, 1985), his only book chiefly dealing with international relations, Norbert Elias could not yet foresee the end in 1989 of the intense rivalry ('Cold War') between the two competing hegemonic powers, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Nobody could, nobody did (apart from a speculative and rather arrogant discussion on 'how to manage the decline of the Soviet Union?').

In the 1980s Elias and I had, what Stephen Mennell (1989) has called, 'a friendly quarrel' on the consequences of the nuclear revolution for the conduct of the two rivals. It was indeed friendly, because my argument respected – and used – his perspective on the continuity between state and great power formation as well as the elimination contests between them. But we differed on the question of what he called 'the drift towards atomic war' (Elias, 2012).

Elias pointed out that after the end of the Second World War humanity had reached a road's end: the struggle for hegemony between great powers had become global. Before, they had been confined to specific regions such as those formed by the Greek states in which Athens and Sparta were much like the two powers contesting global hegemony after 1945. The great powers in Europe formed a regional balance that was relatively stable and preserved peace for a time. War did erupt in 1914 when alliance formation produced a bipolar structure, dissolving the multipolar balance of power. That event was co-operative, as the idea and practice of the Concert of Europe showed.

But balancing depended on the relative equality of power between the participating powers. When France and later Germany became powerful enough, war was placed on the agenda again. The collapse of the Balance of Power led to the revival of hegemonic contests, the Napoleonic wars and then to the two World Wars. In 1945 the fight for hegemony within Europe had become obsolete. Weakened by war, the former great powers lost their colonies and no longer could restore their position as the political center of the world. As de Tocqueville foresaw, two new great powers emerged in what in political, if not in geographic terms was the rim of Europe. The United States and the Soviet Union were soon forced to give up their wartime alliance and become rivals. Their struggle for hegemony then had to become global. Could the outcome have been the victory of one of the two? It is a moot question. Both new great powers were in the beginning reluctant, careful not to provoke armed conflict for which they were not prepared. During the first twenty years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki the United States possessed nuclear superiority that it did not actively use. Since the late 1960s both rivals possessed mutual destruction capacities, and their policy makers began to realize that victory in a nuclear war had become impossible. Still, by preventing or compensating for any gain in power or power resources (especially armaments) of their rival, the two great powers behaved as if they were engaged in a struggle for hegemony, which did imply the risk of confrontation and (limited) war.

Elias (2007) was convinced that the double bind relation between the two great powers at the global level 2) would remain stronger than the shared nuclear danger leading to the ‘taming of the great powers’, as was my own view (van Benthem van den Bergh, 1992). In *Involvement and Detachment* (2007: 150), Elias perceives double bind processes as occurring whenever

human groups which are interdependent because each of them is without redress – without the chance to appeal for protection to any superior force or to a binding code of self-restraint and civilized conduct – and which are thus exposed to the possible use of violence by another group or groups. Wherever human groups are arranged in the form of such a figuration they are into a power struggle and, if they form the top of a hierarchy of states, drawn in a struggle for hegemony with a strong self-perpetuating tendency.

Participants in hegemonic struggles are tied both to the danger their rivals form and to their own strong emotional reactions to that danger.

He sent me a copy of *Humana Conditio* (Elias, 2010) with an accompanying letter in which he explicitly wrote that what he called ‘Hegemonialrausch’ (hegemonic fever) remained as potent a force for war between the two rivals as it had been all through human history. That regularity made him in *Humana Conditio* even speculate on the aftermath of nuclear war. He hoped that a nuclear war would be a learning process leading to global co-operation for maintaining peace. In the unlikely outcome of the establishment of a global hegemony by the winner he added that this in the long run would not be able to resist centrifugal forces in the form of revolts. These speculations show that he believed that the chance of nuclear war was greater than the end of hegemonic rivalry that had dominated postwar development. *Humana Conditio* was intended as a warning based on Elias’s perspective on the course of all struggles for hegemony in the past. But he also expressed hope that a nuclear war might be prevented by ideological disarmament or mediation by a neutral institution. This contradicted his view of the dynamic of double bind relations. Nevertheless, Elias’s perspective on international relations as a continuation of the dynamic of state formation and civilizing processes, remains the most adequate theoretical perspective to understand how the development of global human society came about and to foresee how it could develop in the future.

The nuclear balance has made war between present hegemonic powers most unlikely. Nuclear superiority has become as meaningless as preparation for war. The ancient slogan ‘if you want peace, prepare for war’ had to be changed into ‘if you want peace, prepare for peace’. Though the great powers have armed themselves into an expensive rut, they have also acted on an understanding of their common nuclear danger. They engaged in various forms of security co-operation in order to lessen the chance of nuclear escalation and unintended war. This forced them to no longer give priority to deterring an attack by the opponent but to perceive their own nuclear arsenal as equally dangerous as that of the opponent. The main purpose of security co-operation, one could say, was implicitly to prepare for durable peaceful relations, though until the arrival of Gorbachev, this would or could not be admitted by policy makers on both sides. This was complemented by mutual avoidance of crisis, necessary because crises were the most likely sources of escalation to nuclear war. This co-operative relationship – first developed in the relation between the USSR and the USA, and now being extended to the US and China – could make possible a peaceful transformation and diffusion of power in global relations. Possible, though not certain.

In this paper I will first discuss in more detail Norbert Elias’s perspective on international relations, and second the consequences of the nuclear balance for the hegemonic struggle between the two remaining great powers after 1945. Thirdly, I will attempt to describe global power relations in the aftermath of that struggle, not just between states. I will argue that Elias’s concepts of monopolization processes and elimination

struggles are more useful for understanding global economic interdependencies than those based on the idea of ‘markets’.

I. Elias and international relations

In his Conclusion (part VIII of the Synopsis) of *The Civilising Process* as published in 1939 (now republished as volume 3 of the Collected Works, 2010), Elias presents a picture emerging from his work ‘from a particular point of view, that of our own day’. He was able to take enough distance from the threat of imminent war at the time (in the late 1930s) to observe, if not predict, the first outlines of a worldwide system of tensions composed by alliances and supra-state units of various kinds, itself the prelude of struggles embracing the whole globe.

What brought Elias to center his research on the structure of the long-term development of human societies? I think it was primarily an attempt to improve the reality-congruence of the way people oriented themselves in the world in which they lived. The dominant means of orientation available in that time were based on religion, ideology or philosophy, as they still are. They were characterized by the attribution of good or evil properties to human beings in general or to particular human groups (van Benthem van der Bergh, 1980). For Elias, explanations of human conduct on the basis of moral or philosophical criteria were inadequate, if not misleading (Kilminster, 2007). Instead of attributing blame to particular individuals (such as political leaders), human groups (classes, tribes, states and so on) or abstract categories (capitalism or socialism), the means of orientation might more adequately deal with the inherently coercive dynamics of competition between individuals or groups as a process which only social science could describe and explain – while recognizing the problematic relationship between involved and detached perspectives.

Elias’s perspective on international relations has to be understood against this background (Linklater, 2011; 2012). Briefly, it has two interconnected aspects: the development of survival units and the development of different kinds of interdependencies. Most important is his unraveling of state formation as an aspect of the civilizing process, for which his main example was France, including comparisons with England and Germany. In short, that process shows the interconnection between the formation of states characterized by relatively stable monopolies of violence and taxation over a large territory and the changing habitus of individual members of these entities, who were constrained to behave more peacefully than before. The formation of specific states was mainly the outcome of violent elimination struggles between two or more rivaling units within (an increasingly larger) territory. States are the latest forms of the survival units in which human beings have always lived, providing security and we-identity for their members. In the past such units (which may also be called attack and defense units) had a great variety of forms, from bands, tribes and cities, to states, large and small, claiming to be sovereign on the territory they controlled. The dynastic states in Europe emerged primarily from conquest, strategic marriage or open elimination struggles (war). Out of prior dynastic and imperial forms, states developed into what came to be called nation-states with which their members identified or were made to identify. Here, a distinction must be made between the claim to a nation as the unchanging subject of a nationalist ideology and nation formation as a process in which ‘the functional interdependence between their regions and their social strata as well as their hierarchic levels of authority and subordination becomes sufficiently great and sufficiently reciprocal for none of them to disregard completely what the others think, feel or wish’ (Elias, 2008: 115).

In all stages of development, whether as hunters and gatherers, agrarian or industrial societies, survival units were with great regularity forced to compete and engage in elimination contests in which some units were defeated and subordinated and others were able to increase their power and wealth. Up to the beginning of

the first millennium the uneven balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces usually prevented the development of relatively stable central governments (states), empires possessing vastly superior military strength and exploitative power being the exception. Such empires usually disintegrated quickly, but some lasted for centuries such as the Roman empire. That empire too eventually declined and collapsed by overextension. The Chinese empire was an exception. Though it knew long periods of instability and disintegration, it did develop into a nation-state.

In the early phase of European state formation the balance between centrifugal and centripetal forces began to shift in favor of the latter, influencing at first which unit would win an elimination struggle and in a later phase leading to the development of central monopolies of violence and taxation in dynastic states.

To make a sharp distinction between state formation and the development of international relations is impossible. In Charles Tilly's formulation 'war made states, and states made war'. One can also say: elimination struggles between feudal units and city-states led to the formation of dynastic states. The Hundred Years War was decisive in this respect.

It is usually argued that modern international relations began with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. In terms of mutual recognition of state sovereignty that is correct. But in terms of hegemonic struggles it was more important that after the elimination as great powers of Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Holland and the Ottoman Empire, in the seventeenth century a figuration of five great powers (France, England, Prussia, Russia and Austria) emerged. These were then still dynastic states or empires, the distinction between these becoming only clear when the idea of 'nations' came up, as the end of the Habsburg 'empire' shows. These five great powers together formed a relatively stable power balance, primarily because England pursued a conscious policy of balancing, aligning itself with the second powerful state on the continent in order to frustrate possible hegemonic ambitions of the strongest continental power. This Balance of Power, at the time written with capitals and widely regarded as a doctrine to preserve peace, as remarked before, in fact proved not to be a panacea for avoiding war. In the French revolution ideological fervor went hand in hand with hegemonic fever, first in the service of the ideals of the French revolution and then of the claim to superiority of the French nation. Napoleon tried to turn the scales on the Balance of Power with his Continental System – though that did not bring England to its knees – and established the hegemony of France on the continent. But this was short lived, because Napoleon overstretched France's military power in Russia. After his second defeat the Congress of Vienna restored the great Balance of Power and in the end admitted France again as a necessary part of it.

The nineteenth century saw the development of a Concert of Europe, intended to be a permanent institution for preserving peace and mediating conflicts of interest between the member states, which it did successfully at the Conference of Berlin. However, Prussia profited from the rise of nationalism in Germany to become more powerful. After it defeated Denmark it waged a successful war against Austria, eliminating it from the leadership of the German Bund. And in 1871 Prussia defeated France in a short war. Its victory enabled Prussia to unify Germany under its leadership. The power balance in Europe then shifted towards the new Germany. Bismarck as its first Chancellor tried to preserve power balancing (the Treaty with Russia to protect the German back as an example) as the means to keep peace between the great powers. But he was removed from power in 1890 by Emperor William II, whom Elias describes as an upstart beguiled by the desire for hegemony, as demonstrated by his aim to make the German navy as powerful as that of England. The Balance of Power then became replaced by two rigid alliances. England still pursued its traditional policy by allying itself with France – and later Russia. Germany assured Austria-Hungary of its support. One of the most murderous wars in European history ensued.

At the time there was a widespread belief that increasing economic and financial interdependencies would prevent war. Norman Angell's (1913) *The Great Illusion* (that war could be profitable) influenced public opinion in this direction before the shock of 1914. Angell believed that war had become increasingly costly and irrational rather than impossible because of 'the delicate interdependence of our credit-built finance'. But the drift to war became so strong that the July crisis of 1914 and the subsequent mobilizations of the great powers made the First World War inevitable. All the states involved at first believed that they would win and that the war would be short, like the Franco-German war of 1871. Enthusiasm for the war among the population was great. The German social democrats, at first opposing the war, voted in Parliament for the war credits requested by the government. The expectation of winning the war intensified the disappointment and humiliation in Germany when it suffered unexpected defeat. It was widely believed that this outcome could only be explained by treason, by a stab in the back. The Treaty of Versailles holding Germany responsible for the outbreak of war, and providing the justification for making it pay large reparation payments, led to popular support for the enemies of the Weimar republic and the National Socialist movement. The rise of Hitler and his renewed hegemonial fever had hardly been possible without that 'Schuldfrage', the humiliation and attribution of blame for the war experienced by many if not most Germans who did not feel guilty. This brief account of Elias's perspective on the dynamics of great power rivalry in Europe, as described in *Humana Conditio*, should suffice.

In *Humana Conditio* and the Fishermen in the maelstrom (in *Involvement and Detachment*) Elias (2007; 2010) applies his perspective on the compulsive, 'double bind' character of elimination contests to interstate relations. He also demonstrated how 'hegemonic fever' between great powers might accompany them.

Elias was not concerned with the debate about 'realism' and 'idealism' (as schools of thought) about the foreign policy of states and interstate relations. He does share with realism the crucial importance of the absence of a regional (European), and after 1945 global, monopoly of violence as a cause of war. Though Elias's analysis on the face of it appears to be similar to realism, it is in no way based on normative assumptions or on advocacy.

Elias advocates 'a detour via detachment', making it possible not to cloud one's perspective by prejudice and involvement with one's own normative perspective. Detachment is required for a reality-congruent theoretical perspective, without regard for moral or ideological assumptions. Only on the basis of such a perspective could more realistic intervention in an undesirable process become possible. Realist philosophy has often departed from human sinfulness, from using a moral assumption as an explanatory category. Kenneth Waltz's (Sagan and Waltz, 1995) 'structural' realist 'third image' is still static and, as Campbell Craig (2003) points out, is in the end driven by moral considerations. Even though Waltz attempted to develop Realism into a real (social) science he fell into the same trap as the other two in not being able to reconcile his theoretical with his moral perspective on the need to avoid nuclear war. The flaw in Waltz's approach was that he thought in terms of 'structure', that is, seeing the unchanging anarchical structure of interstate relations as a permanent cause of war. Waltz saw 'bipolar stability' as the least dangerous structure in the nuclear age. Realist assumptions have often been used to justify the policy (or 'strategy') of a particular great power, for example, by tending to dismiss negotiations as 'appeasement' or by arguing for the need for the buildup of armaments. Most realists attached to great powers would look askance at the tentative remedies suggested in *Humana Conditio* – ideological disarmament and mediation – for breaking the 'frozen clinch' of the two hegemonic powers.

The civilizing process as occurring within states has increased the contradiction between peaceful conduct within nations and violence (war) seen, though not always justifiably, as an inevitable and therefore frequent temporary condition. Different norms for conduct between states and within states continue to prevail. But Elias (2012) noted that the further developed the division of functions, the greater the mutual dependence

between rivals, and the related orientation towards the resolution of inter-state conflicts by less dangerous means.

The Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907, the creation of the League of Nations after the First and the United Nations after the Second World War, as well as the growth of non-governmental pressure groups promoting peace – building on the growing repugnance for violence accompanying the civilizing process within states – show this clearly enough. But these efforts remained weak against the drift to war contained not only in great power competition but also in relations between and within smaller states, which either disintegrated ('failed states') or did not yet develop relatively stable monopolies of violence.

In *Humana Conditio* Elias pointed out the compulsory character of the struggle for hegemony between great powers (they might not want to win, but they do want to prevent their rival from winning). He saw the Cold War as the last of the long sequence of elimination contests at different levels of development. He was convinced of the lasting possibility of a 'Hegemonialrausch' and therefore of nuclear war. His pessimism was clear. In fact he did not see any reliable way out. On the contrary, he told me that he was convinced that there remained a fifty per cent chance of nuclear war. But global hegemonic rivalry unexpectedly came to an end in 1989-1991. Why?

II. The Unintended Rise of a Nuclear Leviathan

The unexpected end of hegemonic rivalry is usually perceived and formulated as being 'the end of the Cold War'. This led to the ideologically inspired claim that the 'Cold War' was won by the United States and lost by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was supposed to be incapable of responding to the superiority of American power, especially in innovative technology and economic strength, as expressed in particular by President Reagan's SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative). The Soviet Union, it was argued, decided to throw the towel into the ring. This is a biased explanation. SDI was still in an infant stage and there was a common conviction among scientists that its aim of missile defense was utopian. The Soviet Union knew, and made it known that even if it would be successful, it only had to increase the number of its offensive missiles. The nuclear balance between the two rivals remained as it was. Competition could have continued. The argument that the costs of competing were so high that both 'lost' is also difficult to refute (Lebow and Stein, 1994).

The precise course of the set of events that constituted the end of bipolar rivalry is not easily established. Their timing was dependent on both international and domestic conditions. But the question to be posed is not what produced the specific events, but what course hegemonic rivalry took and what the conditions were for its unexpected end. In other words: the aim should be to explain the underlying direction of the process making the events possible. I can find no better explanation than the shared perception of the consequences of the nuclear balance. It could be said that the absolute character of nuclear weapons – the impossibility of one power becoming really relatively superior – has restored the properties of a balance of power in preventing war. Rather than tracing the whole path of that process, as I have done before (van Benthem van der Bergh, 2009), I will only discuss its beginning: the consequences of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

Before 1962 crises had already arisen between the two great powers (over Berlin and over the shooting down of an American spy plane in Soviet airspace). But these petered out quickly: one of the two rivals backed down before the stakes became too large. From about 1957 onwards, American nuclear superiority was disappearing. This meant that both rivals had to take into account that the other possessed an invulnerable second-strike capacity. That situation of the possibility of mutual destruction might already have led to restraint of the political-military establishments. In this respect the distinction between actual conduct and thinking and preparing about winning a nuclear war becomes crucial.

The Cuban missile crisis, however, was different from previous crises in that both rivals from the beginning perceived vital interests to be at stake. It started with Secretary Khrushchev's attempt to confront the United States with a change of the nuclear and political relationship between the great powers to the advantage of the Soviet Union. He placed middle range nuclear weapons (or at least missiles to carry these) within short distance of American territory (its 'backyard'). This move, done covertly, was unacceptable to President Kennedy and his advisers, not so much because the nuclear balance could indeed shift (though some of its advisers did think so), but because it was a political challenge, a provocation. Kennedy, however, took his time to find a suitable reply. After a week of deliberating with his closest advisers he rejected outright military confrontation (invading Cuba or bombing the missile sites), but he clearly refused to accept Khrushchev's move by a blockade of all Soviet ships destined for Cuba. That relatively restrained move left a way out for Khrushchev who did back down and ordered all Soviet ships on their way to Cuba to return. Careful negotiations about a compromise solution then proved possible. It consisted of the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba and (in secret) of American missiles to Turkey, as well as an American promise never to invade Cuba.

Both political leaders became able to see the crisis as a common danger contained in the figuration constituted by both rivals. In a letter to Kennedy the Soviet leader wrote:

you and I ought not now to pull the ends of the rope ... the more the two of us pull, the tighter the knot will be tied. And a moment will come when that knot will be tied so tight that not even he who tied it will have the strength to untie it and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain that to you ... Consequently, if there is no intention to tighten that knot and thereby to doom the world into the catastrophe of thermonuclear war, let us take measures to untie that knot. (in Kennedy, 1963: 89-90)

It would be a mistake, however, to see the crisis only as a sequence of reasoned moves and countermoves. The two establishments involved were uncertain about what the rival would do and they should do. In that respect they walked on a tightrope in a fog. But the combination of the recognition of the fear of the scale of destruction of a nuclear war and the certainty of uncertainty about the consequences of further escalation of the crisis did force both into a restrained course of action. They realized only afterwards how near unintended escalation had been – by misperceptions, raising alert stages and other military entanglements. To speak of 'lucky escapes' was not exaggerated (Ball, Bundy, Gilpatric, McNamara and Sorensen, 1982). McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser, concluded: 'The teaching of these great events ... was not to 'manage' a grave crisis but how important it is *not to have one*' (Bundy, 1988: 462).

After the crisis was resolved the first imperative for the rivals indeed became to avoid or prevent any crisis that might escalate. And any crisis could: the rivals were faced with the certainty of uncertainty. That demanded great care from both. It forced them to respect what the other rival considered a vital interest. One example will suffice: in Vietnam, bombing of the North remained limited, while the Soviet Union supported North Vietnam but did not provide it with the troops stationed in the North. The war in Vietnam was contained because the fear of escalation. Indeed, no crisis which had such vital stakes and serious escalation potential for both came about afterwards.

Hostile and 'strategic' rhetoric did remain. In their actual conduct with each other, however, the great powers were tamed, one may say. In fact, the Cold War no longer had the intensity of the period before 1962, though the rivalry continued, especially in arms competition. But given the impossibility of being certain that escalation to nuclear war could be circumvented, that did not matter much for the actual conduct of the great powers.

As important for the gradual transformation of the hegemonic struggle was the beginning of security cooperation between the rivals, such as the (limited) Test Ban Treaty, the Hot Line, SALT and START, the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the ABM treaty. During Gorbachev's rule the CFE and INF treaties were added. In 1988 even the setting up of crisis reduction centers, manned by representatives of both rivals, was discussed. The combination of crisis avoidance and security co-operation made it possible for the unlikely pair of Gorbachev and Reagan to end bipolar hegemonic rivalry.

This constellation ended the drift to nuclear war, which Elias analysed as the consequence of the long process of violent hegemonic struggles, i.e. war. My analysis did start from that process. But the more I studied the role of nuclear weapons (more adequately called 'nuclear devices' as they are not weapons anymore) the more I became convinced of their function of mutual restraint instead of deterrence. Weapons may deter prospective attackers but attack that means one's own destruction is madness.

What then if a madman pulls the trigger, I have often been asked? This evident objection to my analysis is surely shared by all nuclear establishments – and acted upon by various means of protection, also by nuclear states like Pakistan, India or Israel. I do not pretend that nuclear devices are not at all dangerous nor that there is a (very small) chance that something may go wrong.

I remain indebted to Elias for his analysis of the long processes of elimination and hegemonic struggles. But I do believe that my analysis of the turnabout of 1989 and the unintended role of nuclear devices throws new light on the 'drift to atomic war'.

III. The Aftermath

Though hegemonic rivalry ended, nuclear arsenals did not disappear. In fact, the nuclear relation with Russia did not change that much, though security co-operation increased, as well as mutual trust. President Obama went far by making a plea in Prague for abolishing nuclear weapons altogether, starting with reducing the largest, 'overkill' arsenals of the United States and Russia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the political establishments and the general public of the great nuclear powers (to which China should be added) at first seemed to believe that the nuclear danger had disappeared and nuclear weapons had become irrelevant. Of primary concern then became the spread of nuclear weapons to small states believed to be dangerous, immediately or in the longer run. Iran has become the main example of the consequences of that concern.

Has the struggle between great powers indeed lost its inherent dynamic? Has the danger of nuclear war in the longer run disappeared? Though Obama's plea did not take the possibility into account that abolishing nuclear weapons might result in the revival of pre-nuclear struggles for hegemony, the first steps of his program might reinforce restraint and a further lessening of the danger of a global nuclear war. Reduction of the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia – and limiting China's nuclear arsenal – to the level of assured potential destruction (the ability to provide 'unacceptable damage' to the opponent, though the precise minimum –100 or 1,000 warheads – is admittedly difficult to define) would lessen the effects of a nuclear war without doing away with the expectations and practice of restraint. Reduction or abolition of American and Russian 'tactical' or sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe is also desirable. Such agreements would increase trust between the great nuclear powers. Their security interdependence – and their co-operation – could durably get precedence over sources of rivalry that could lead to confrontations. Crisis avoidance can be complicated by the conduct of allies. But the nearly forgotten conflict over Georgia, however, once more showed the resilience of mutual restraint though less so of mutual trust.

This does not mean that great power rivalry will completely disappear. One current example is the development of missile defense. The original Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) of President Reagan proved not only too costly but also technologically impossible. And its effectiveness could not be tested. The idea of missile defense in the United States became more limited, and directed only at imagined attacks by nuclear proliferators such as Iran, Russia and China, however, regard missile defense by the United States as an attempt to undermine the nuclear balance. Both assumptions are dubious. Proliferators risk their own destruction by a missile attack, while having little to gain. The kind of missile defense which the United States wants to develop leaves the nuclear power balance upon which restraint is based intact. But missile defense became a prestige quarrel, a sign of continuing political rivalry caused by the humiliation of Russia (especially by the enlargement of NATO). A convincing reason for continuing the American missile defense effort is difficult to find. As long as it continues, however, the balance of co-operation and rivalry between the great powers remains uneven.

Russia and the United States are perhaps less clearly interdependent than China and the United States. President Bush and the neo-conservative wing of the American political-military establishment were convinced that America possessed a 'unipolar moment' for the United States to establish a democratic world order on its own conditions. The military intervention in Iraq to achieve 'regime change' and show who was the world's master can be seen as an example of what Elias called 'hegemonic fever'. It quickly turned sour, however. Together with the war in Afghanistan dragging on, the lack of success of the fight against terrorism and the domestic political and economic conundrums has led to a decline in American power.

Quite a few members of the American political-military establishment see China as the next rival for global hegemony and as a threat to its security. Some of them even advocate military preparation for a war with China to prevent such a development.

The relationship between China and the United States, however, is not doomed to become one of hegemonic rivals. It is more complicated than previous great power contests which were primarily military (focusing on battleships or nuclear arsenals). Not only has the United States become financially dependent on China, and China for its economic development (exports) on the United States, China for now does not set a high priority on military strength, though it certainly does not neglect it either. In the nuclear field, security co-operation between the United States and China has started, and is now officially admitted. Though the power balance between China and the United States is changing, in terms of technological development and innovation China still has quite a way to go. Interdependence between China and the United States is complex.

In the short term a revival of hegemonic struggles between great powers does not seem likely. On the contrary, the danger of nuclear escalation makes increasing co-operation between the great powers possible. They have common security interests in preserving stability in different regions and in the world at large. The first subject for extending co-operation that comes to mind is nuclear non-proliferation. The Non Proliferation Treaty originally came about as a joint effort started by the Soviet Union and the United States whose common interest was not being drawn into a (nuclear) war between their allies. The Treaty was disregarded by Israel, India and Pakistan, and later North Korea. President Bush included the last country in his 'axis of evil' together with Iraq and Iran. The supposed possession of nuclear weapons was used as justification for the war in Iraq, while Iran was and remains faced with sanctions for its continuing uranium enrichment, supposed to lead to the development of nuclear weapons.

How dangerous is nuclear proliferation really? Probably less than is usually asserted. The main risk is the lack of safety measures and the inexperienced handling of nuclear devices in new nuclear states. If that is so, established nuclear states and the IAEA should, perhaps, teach new states – covertly – to learn how to control their arsenals. In more conventional terms: would an invasion of Iraq have been necessary and justified if

Saddam Hussein did possess nuclear weapons? What harm could a nuclear-armed Iraq have done to the United States, its allies or other nuclear powers (such as Israel) without having to fear for its own survival? Why was the fear of Iraq – and of Iran now – not also directed to the nuclear states not recognized by the NPT (India, Pakistan, Israel)? The great fear of Iran, expressed in the West and leading to different kinds of sanctions, has only reluctantly been shared by Russia and or China, though in the end they did agree to the sanctions for uranium enrichment as imposed by the Security Council of the UN.

Proliferation the world has up to now experienced, as Waltz (Sagan and Waltz, 1995) as argued, is not in itself dangerous; only a proliferation race in a particular region could be so. At present however, not even Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia have reacted significantly against Israel's becoming the sole nuclear power in the region, nor against Iran as a supposed nuclear power. Co-operation between the great powers – and extending the powers of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – should prevent regional strife and the rise of isolated and defiant states, oppressing their own population, like Iran at present.

It is more difficult to foresee the direction of development of the global power balance. The United States appeared at first to benefit from the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991. It seemed to have acquired the position of the only power able to initiate humanitarian intervention and solve regional conflicts, though in Somalia it felt already forced to retreat from the first, while in former Yugoslavia the costs of the second effort proved very high. During the Clinton presidency the United States did not see itself as a hegemonic power. Clinton did not use missile defense to complicate security co-operation on an equal basis with Russia, though he did support the enlargement of NATO. The foreign policy of his successor was based on the assumption of American hegemony, especially after the attack on the Twin Towers. The unexpected consequence was that the United States was drawn into long drawn out wars with and in Iraq and Afghanistan, with ramifications in a wider region. It had to take into account an increase of anti-Americanism and global recruitment of 'Jihad' fighters. Conflicting established-outsider ideological perspectives more and more endangered relations both within and between states. The relative stability of the bipolar era disappeared.

Contrary to the ideas of neoconservatives the policies they advocated led to a decline of American political and military power. But the United States is still the only great power – having extended its imperial reach during the contest with the Soviet Union – able to attempt stabilizing states like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Russia has surprisingly supported American policy in Afghanistan, warning against withdrawal of America and its allies. This may illustrate a new kind of interdependence between established great powers. Under the blanket of forced restraint these great powers may co-operate more than before. The clarity of the distinction between friends and enemies may become more fuzzy, as also the separation between international and domestic politics and interdependencies.

Elias's perspective may also help to understand the financial and economic downturn in Europe and the United States, beginning in 2008 with the over-extension of banks. This unexpected development has led to widespread disorientation. One sign was the dissatisfaction with economics as a way out of crisis. Also as striking was the level of disagreement within the U.S and beyond about remedies.

At first sight it may appear as if Elias has little to offer by way of an explanation for the current financial economic crisis in Europe. It probably requires a clear step forward towards a much more powerful 'Europe', to solve the financial-economic problems of excessive debt and to control budgetary reform. From a longer-term perspective 'Europe' has to form a larger and coherent economic entity to keep up with the increasing competition of China, India, Brazil, the USA and other strong economies. The transition from nation states to a European whole has stagnated for some time now, but the avalanche of current problems may now force a new relaunch of Europe.

In the present discussion the term 'market' is used frequently. It is curious that the precise meaning of this term remains unclear. 'Financial markets' are discussed as if they are personified, endowed with will and capacity to plan and to frustrate government policies. What precisely are financial markets? What are the power resources their members command? What are their aims? Research on the composition, power and interests of their members, as well as on their links to governments is clearly needed.

The term 'market' has a long history and ideology. Markets developed from being local to regional, to national and now to global. Some states possess large internal markets, others are more dependent on international trade. The 'internal market' and its rules form the backbone of the European Union. But it hides uneven power relations. In all markets, real or nominal, we find concentrations of power. That brings us to its ideological function, as expressed by the term 'free market economy'. It meant originally the opposite of a government-planned economy of the Soviet type. It justified deregulation (and privatization) i.e. extending the freedom of economic agents from effective external controls, without being effectively controlled. Markets are no longer what they were supposed to be: a locus of exchange between participants possessing equal power and full information. But even in classic markets power was unevenly distributed. With market members becoming invisible their power resources and activities were also hidden. They could indulge in price and other trust agreements, again if insufficiently controlled by independent agencies.

Elias does not use the concept of market, I suppose because it is no longer reality-congruent, if it has ever been so. For Elias changing figurations of power relations as driven by the monopoly mechanism are more reality adequate. Though the monopoly mechanism cannot unravel the intricacies of financial-economic interdependencies in detail, it can help to understand the dynamic of oligopolist competition. There is no clear distinction between 'economic' and 'political' relations (though a discipline 'power economics' might help). For example, the present small number of large banks and corporations is the outcome of competition which eliminated a large number of small banks and companies, either by takeover, bankruptcy or mergers. In that sense the conduct of large banks and corporations is similar to that of great powers. Rivalry between great powers also took place between oligopolists, whether straightforward or through (secret) agreements and alliances. States often used their position for the benefit of their own ruling establishments, now considered as corruption. Similarly, the executives of banks and large corporations profit from their 'freedom'.

The European 'Balance of Power' between great powers was inherently unstable, as Napoleon, Emperor William II and Hitler demonstrated. The number of oligopolist corporations and banks is much larger, and though their operations may be global, they have to take account of the states which 'house' them. Oligopolist banks felt forced to improve their position against competitors. Bankers wanted to improve the position of their banks on the global listing. The bad reputation of bankers – as having been 'guilty' of triggering the global economic crisis – is justified if one looks only at their harvesting the fruits of their oligopolist position for themselves and their loyal staff (in the form of very large bonuses), but perhaps less so if it is realized that they were engaged in a coercive elimination contest, forcing them to improve their ranking and to find new ways to compete, which can be harmful to themselves. Such competition is driven by 'Who does not increase his or her power, becomes in fact weaker'.

But it has now become clear that that the elimination contest of banks and other financial players was too 'free', not sufficiently controlled either by their home state or by international institutions. Deregulation in the name of promoting economic development went too far. It was not seen that what was called a free market was in fact an arena for an elimination contest which some participants can win (sometimes with the help of co-operative agreements with competitors, as the equivalent of alliances between states) but all participants can also lose, though some more than others. Free competition eliminates the weaker, but even some large banks or corporations. They can then only be saved by governments. The problem is that once thus kept in

business, banks felt forced to start competing again, with the same risks as before, as long as they were not effectively controlled by state and international institutions. Control is not easy as interdependencies between political and financial- economic institutions between and within states have become immensely complex.

Which directions global development will take, no one can tell. Whether the authoritarian regimes of China and Russia will avoid the problem of their dependence on global finance and the global reach of their own corporations also remains uncertain. A loss of functions of all nation-states is clear enough, but, large and small, they all want to preserve (or increase) their powers. That shibboleth still hangs over humanity as a whole.

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