The Future of the International Community and the Role of Medium-Sized Powers

1. Crisis management and crisis prevention will be an increasingly important task of the international community, and the very future of the international order may well depend on it. Crises proliferate as a consequence of globalization, and often even simply because globalization changes our perception. Tsunamis in the past, as the Japanese well know, whatever the size of the disasters they caused, were not regarded as global crises. The tsunami of 2004 was, because today's means of communication made us instantly aware of what happened anywhere between Aceh and Kenya. As a consequence, the international community installed a pre-warning system for tsunamis worldwide. 9/11, too, indeed a terrorist act of extraordinary dimensions, could only be regarded as a declaration of „war“ by Al Quaida because all the world had followed events in real time on tv. Actually, the very act of flying into the World Trade Center could possibly not have been organized as effectively, had the terrorists not had all modern communication means available at their fingertips. And even a „typical“ global crisis such as the World Financial Crisis of 2008 („typical“ in that it seemed to be one of a kind the world had seen before) arguably only developed as rapidly as it did because what followed the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy led to instant reactions by real time-informed stock markets worldwide.

Thus, the international order is already endangered today by crises ever more global in nature, and will be even more so in the future, as globalization processes advance. The question therefore is whether the international community can deal with this challenge, and how. And: who actually is to act for the international community?
2. No more – or a new - international order?

During the Cold War, the international community organized itself in the United Nations and its sub-organisations as well as through a number of regional organisations for different purposes (EEC, SARC, ASEAN, Comecon, CSCE, NATO etc.; proliferating in Asia more than elsewhere). Even during that time it became clear that the only truly global organisation, the United Nations, became increasingly anachronistic. It represented the postwar order of a „pax americana“, and was not truly a „democratic“ representation of the world's population. Therefore, those countries got together that represented the majority of economic activity worldwide and which at the same time profited most from the workings of a safe international system. This was first the G7 and, after the end of the Cold War and the democratic transformation of Russia, the G8.

At the end of the Cold War, in 1992, the American professor Francis Fukuyama published a since famous book in which he declared the „end of history“, meaning that with the victory of liberal democracy's form of governance established worldwide, pluralist change would still be possible while at the same time the world now had lasting reliable structures and order. What we have seen in reality since then, however, can rather be called a new phase of history. First, there was the idea of „multi-polarity“. Thinkers in some countries such as China, Russia and France assumed a world was coming about where a number of equally strong centers of power permitted various coalitions, and would balance each other's strength. Then came the recognition that the sole remaining super-power was not going away so easily. In order to keep some sort of order, America as the „indispensable power“ (Albright) was desirable to remain; a kind of „policeman“ in the international system. That notion, however, soon gave way to the American neo-conservative vision of the USA as an almost crusading power enforcing democracy and liberal market economies worldwide, even if it meant employing military force against countries like those of the „axis of evil“.

All during that time, with the structural restrictions of the Cold War period
removed, the processes of globalization increased in speed and scope. The dotcom boom permitted the digitalization of communication globally, the „Little Tigers“ after getting through the Asia crisis of 1997/98 grew even bigger. China, after its accession to the WTO in 2001, became the locomotive of the economies in East and South East Asia. Soon, the newly developing economies of other major powers, namely India and Brazil, moved ahead to follow China's uninhibited market economy model. The competition for access to natural resources brought riches to those countries that possess them, lifting four fifths of the world's population towards gradually increasing chances not only to survive but also to achieve a level of - relative - prosperity.

Those countries where the elites failed to share their new riches with their population, however, tended to become breeding grounds for extremist ideologies (often based on Islamic traditions) aimed at destroying the order of a world perceived to be unjust. The countries of the „bottom billion“, disadvantaged by nature or social development and not being part of the general positive economic developments in the world today, are less and less able to implement even the least bit of governance. They become so-called „failing states“ where extremists and terrorists are able to find refuge. The international order is still based on the assumption of a working Westphalian structure. It assumes thus that states are souverain, territorially intact, and that exchange between them is that of equal partners. Today not only communication but new transnational structures such as multinational enterprises, social movements (whether they be Greenpeace, Attac, Al Qaida, or simply migratory movements) or transnational threats such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction have turned that Westphalian international order into a shell - not yet completely empty, but less and less corresponding to reality. Similarly, international trade exchange is assumed to be free and based on a minimum of social security inside states. In today's reality, the competition on a almost global labour market has led to a downward competition of wages, and thus deteriorating social security.

In short, twenty years after the end of the Cold War, we have on the one hand
an international community that is knit tighter together than ever before in history. This international community, on the other hand, exists in an environment less and less clearly structured. The international order, if it does not yet crumble, is presently in the process of dissolving into a multitude of centers of influence of different strength, coalitions of willing and less willing allies, ever more organisations of interaction whose interaction tends to be increasingly fuzzy.

Against this backdrop, countries most interested in a functioning international order do understand the need to manage or prevent global crises, to deal with the world financial and economic crisis, or with armed conflicts such as in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, the Great Lakes area in Africa, or with nuclear threats from North Korea or from Iran. However, the recent G8 summit in Toronto once more mainly served as a reminder that the G8 possess less and less the ability to deal efficiently with the major crises of global governance.

The G20 then? Here those countries have gathered that have the greatest influence upon developments in the world, both economically and politically. When in late 2008 for the first time the leaders of the G20 met – a forum previously existing on Finance Ministers’ level only -, the world was persuaded that this was the magic bullet of diplomacy. This group includes all actors of global importance: industrialized countries, rising powers, exporters of natural resources. One and a half year later indeed the G20 are the major global economic coordinating mechanism. A mechanism, however, that does not really would run well enough to bring about a consensus in major areas of concern: taxes on financial markets, banks, regulation measures, currency, monetary policies, dealing with debts, how to stimulate growth. Not to speak of political questions. It thus becomes clearer that countries that demand the right to co-determine the rules of the international order are not necessarily as willing to share the responsibility that comes with strength. Instead of investing their own political creativity, political energy, financial and personnel resources (even the lives of their citizens, possibly), they prefer to still ask the traditional powers to shoulder all the burdens of keeping the world functioning – and most
of the time that still turns out to be United States of America.

3. A role for states, still, and which ones?
Many who may have celebrated the weakening of Americas influence now possibly long for that „benevolent hegemon“ showing the rest of the world where to go. The United States, however, as has become clear over the past few years, after the excesses of the Bush years is neither willing any more to take on the ever heavier load of responsibilities for the world, nor, given the state of its economy, is it able to. Not only that – although still the most powerful and influential country in the world, it invites criticism and antagonism almost as often as it asked to help, suffering losses in popularity even in countries that cannot do without it.

That leaves medium-sized powers, in Europe and elsewhere. In fact, medium-sized powers depend in their political and economic well-being more on a functioning international order than continental countries like the U.S., Brazil, China or India. These can sustain themselves better on their own, if need be. Smaller countries on the other hand are not as involved in globalized communication and trading systems. But what means do medium-sized countries have?

First, by way of example, a look at the most stable country, both politically and economically, in a very fragile Asian environment: Japan. It is striking what a difference there is between Japan’s soft power and its real power. „Soft-power“, as we all know, means the influence exerted by societies, not by governments. So we have to look at economic influence, scientific influence, life style, including music, fashion, film, literature etc.

Obviously, the Japanese economic influence in Asia (and elsewhere) is enormous, both directly and indirectly. Cars, machines, cameras, DVD-players and TV-sets, they all carry Japanese brand names to anywhere in the world, and products with non-Japanese brand names – such as the i-Phone - have Japanese high-tech components inside. The establishment of Japanese production
facilities has an impact on local economies and on local social structures, as does the division of labour between countries in order to accommodate global consumer demands; and even the environment is impacted by Japanese companies logging in Brunei or Indonesia, or mining in New Guinea or in Central Asia; fish for the fish market in Tsukiji is brought from anywhere on the Seven Seas.

Then, cultural soft power: architecture, research and development, scientific studies, and music (not the pop variety) - there hardly is an orchestra of classical music in Europe without one or more Japanese members. In the year 2005 when anti-Japanese emotions ran high in China, and Chinese went protesting into the streets or threw stones at the cars of Japanese diplomats, these same young Chinese bought Japanese cars, went to Japanese restaurants, read Japanese manga and watched Japanese anime movies; and they studied Japanese. Today they still do so, in ever greater numbers, hoping for a post-graduate position at some of the great universities of Japan. This same soft-power influence is observable not only anywhere across Asia, but also, though to a lesser degree, anywhere in the world. In Europe you are bound to discover not just sushi restaurants but also avid readers of manga in German or English or French, who are tailoring costumes for themselves to make them look like right out of an anime movie, going to meet other youngsters dressed in a similar way. There are not yet the Akihabara-type anime coffee shops in Europe, but it may not take long until there are.

„Real“ power (meaning mainly direct and official efforts by governments to exert influence, thus avoiding the military connotation of the word „hard power“) is a different matter altogether, though. The values upon which Japanese politics and Japan's position in the world are based are those of liberal, pluralistic, democratic market economies. Japanese interests and objectives are therefore quite easily definable: peace and freedom, conflict management or conflict resolution, prevention of man-made or natural disasters. Japan has the financial means to support policies that promote these objectives. How actively, however, is Japan pursuing them? Who requests Japan to help devise
new global crisis management strategies? While its soft-power is so great, Japanese „real“ power does, at the present time, seems not to completely correspond to it.

Europe's situation in Asia is a different one. First, its soft-power is mainly traditional in nature: science and technology, academic attraction, architecture, classical music, fashion or food. Economically, the fact that Europe's market is almost five times the size of that of Japan naturally has an impact: Volkswagen this year will produce more cars in China than in Germany. The EU is China's major trading partner (Germany accounting for 40 percent of that trade). Secondly, Europe's „real“ power is still considerable. For one thing, because „Europe“ today usually means that many countries, including middle- sized powers, not just one, are speaking. Then there are the traditional channels of communication, established over decades (often by colonialist means) between European countries and other parts of the world. Lastly, and most importantly, there is the will of European countries to commit themselves in order to solve problems, even if these are located far away.

Yet, this influence is decreasing. In fact, it has been decreasing since the beginning of the last century. One reason is that the United States is such a powerful partner to everybody, overriding the influence of almost anyone else. The second reason is the increasing interdependence of countries of any region or continent. More and more it is important to governments in Asia to listen to what fellow governments have to say. Corresponding to the increasing interaction and interweaving of the economies of East and Southeast Asia, policies too, while not yet being truly coordinated, take each other into account. As a result, there is less concern for the wishes of partners outside of the region - and certainly more that of the United States than that of Europe.

A similar phenomenon occurs in Europe with regard to Japan. First, there is the simple fact that with the progress of globalization all countries have so many more partners. Countries that used to be of not too much importance to the industrialised world, are now becoming suppliers of important natural
resources, or culturally interesting (for example in popular music), or markets or location for outsourcing production. Having more new partners means that each of the previous ones declines relatively in importance. Then, there is the shiny light of China. China is a large market that attracts investors who previously would not have even thought about moving there. This is true for the countries of South East Asia as well which now have become important because of their interregional activity (two thirds of foreign trade of Asian countries take place within the region - comparable to the situation in Europe or North America). In comparison, Japan is a known and saturated market. Thirdly, manga, anime and sushi may be parts and parcel of the image of Japan, having been amalgamated with older images of Japan shaped by architecture, art, movies, or literature. But this image of an extremely modern Japan, too, is a known one in comparison to the as yet completely unknown surprises China seems to offer the curious.

As far as the „real power“ of Europe is concerned, there are the established channels of mutual influence, be it bilateral consultations or cooperation in multilateral frameworks, like the U.N., the G8 and G20. Everything seems to be in order, so much so that the image of „Japan“ in Europe actually pales - which corresponds to an equal „paling“ of Europe's image in Japan.

4. An obligation, or a chance, for Japan and for Europe?
This might be considered a strange phenomenon. Strange because the grid of both Europe's and Japan’s interests and values is so much the same (and may be becoming more so). Neither Japan nor Europe can imagine wanting a society that is undemocratic and denying individual freedoms to its citizens, a society where the individual as well as enterprises are subjected to arbitrary decisions by the state, a society where creativity and cultural curiosity are stifled, ordered and manipulated by the government. But suffering from declining global influence, both are hard put to implement policies dealing successfully with today’s situation of paling influence and increasing crises. Cooperation across half the globe often is difficult to achieve (or maybe even to imagine). Ahead of the COP 15 in Copenhagen, both Japanese and Europeans knew that
without the US moving, China, India, and Brazil would not be the first ones to initiate new policies. Both Europe and Japan recognized the situation, both tried talking to the US, China and India, failing at the same time. But they failed to coordinate Japanese and European policies and strategies ahead of the Copenhagen meeting.

Recognizing the situation as it is may help us understand what Europe's and Japan's improved roles in the international community might be. And here it is, where Japan and Europe come in. Or: could come in if they realized how much they have in common. Europeans and Japanese see eye to eye on how to deal with climate change, on how to deal with the development of renewable energies, not so much on how to regulate financial markets but on keeping those markets as liberal as possible, how to deal with global problems such as migration or failed states, or threats to free trade such as piracy. They are confident that their democratic and liberal values are stronger than corrupt autocratic, even if militarily strong, powers. If they were ready to take on more responsibility together than they carried before, they could mutually increase each other's global influence. They could possibly make a difference for the new international, post-Westphalian order by contributing to shaping its future. Certainly, a new international order is not something that can be invented or designed. It has to evolve. That is why it is important that those countries get together and try to influence where the world is going which are most dependent on a functioning international system. These are the medium-sized powers.