

Book Review of 'International Politics in Times of Change' by Nikolaos Tzifakis (ed.)

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“International Politics in Times of Change”

Nikolaos Tzifakis (Editor)

The Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy - Series on European and International Affairs
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Any effort to examine and analyze the current status and the future development of International Politics is subject to the sense of vanity caused by the relentless course of history. The international scene is always full of changes, sometimes at a dramatic rate and degree, which differentiate to the point of complete transformation the existing state of affairs, either with regard to the key players of system, or with regard to the parameters of the international system itself. The constant struggle of the various states, to improve their position in the international scene, in order to increase their power and influence in any possible sector, is the catalyst for this situation.

Therefore, the effort made by the Editor Nikolaos Tzifakis, to collect and present, in a systematic and comprehensive manner, the views of several well-known scholars and academics in the field of International Relations is a very bold initiative. However, Nikolaos Tzifakis remains true to his reputation as a very careful and effective academic, who can put forward a collection of interesting analyses and arguments, ordered in a simple – for the average reader – and yet well-structured complex of views that may stand against any academic critical inspection.

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The cornerstone of the analysis, as Tzifakis himself identifies, is the ongoing debate on the future of the international system, a debate which

“revolves around three closely interrelated questions: (a) the evolving role of the US and the prospects of its global pre-eminence, (b) the nature of Sino–American relations and (c) the chances for the consolidation of multilateralism and cooperation among the leading powers.”

(pp. 1-2)

The attempt to address these questions in the context of this book, has led to the division of its contents into three parts. The first, in order to explore the role and the prospects of the USA's global pre-eminence, examines the role of the established global players, starting obviously with the USA as the only remaining superpower, and extending the analysis to the two other contenders of the title, in economic terms, the EU and Japan, and these three countries' significance and possibility of effective action in the new world configuration of power which is being established. The second part, in an attempt to examine the Sino-American relations and their consequences on the international system in depth, shifts the analysis' focus on the emerging "great powers" of our era, the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), by highlighting the prospects of their participation in the global order, and whether such a development may lead to their equal footing with the existing global players. This is also very instrumental for providing arguments with regard to the third question on the multilateral nature of the international system. These arguments are further analyzed in the third part of the book which examines the main features of the international system and identifies certain pressing issues of high politics on the world agenda, by examining the relevant underlying problems such as ethnic conflicts, international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, all issues which put considerable strain to the stability of the international system.

More specifically, the first part starts with an analysis by Dimitris Keridis, who, although does not doubt the US supremacy in the contemporary international system, mainly based on its military capabilities, as the indispensable force of maintaining order, claims that the use of military might by the USA should not be a "one-fits-all" solution for the existing international problems, but this will not reduce the importance of US involvement in resolving these problems. This is followed by Alexander Moens' examination of the changes introduced in the American foreign policy under the Obama Administration and the outcomes of this policy, especially with regard to improving relations with traditional allies. At the same time, however, Moens detects a lack of strategic vision which may be seen as a weakness. Such a weakness is believed, by Stephen Szabo, in his analysis, to lead to the diminishing of the US and more generally the Western influence in the international system, and the space allowed may be occupied by the BRICs, which, in turn, are inhibited by their own differences, thus not being able to develop a common interest concept among themselves. As for the European Union, as a global actor, Ifantis and Galariotis examine the EU's concept of addressing international affairs, due to its particular nature and structure, and despite the fact that there is potential for developing capabilities worldwide, as a second "superpower", the lack of a common European strategic vision deprives the Union of this global role. Rafał Trzaskowski, Olaf Osica and Joanna Popielawska discuss, in their chapter, the institutional developments within the EU, in order for the Union to effectively have, prepare and implement a Common Foreign and Security Policy, namely the establishment of a European External Action Service (EEAS), and their conclusion is that the main element missing from all these efforts is genuine political will to forge a common EU foreign policy. The first part ends with Malcolm Cook's very interesting attempt to unfold the multiple changes that are taking place simultaneously in Japan's domestic and international environments, which are marked correspondingly by a lengthy period

of economic decline and the deterioration of Japan's relative power position against China, thus identifying the early stages of a major shift in Japanese foreign policy, with a more proactive behavior as an international security provider.

Part Two of the book starts with Robert Sutter's analysis on China's possibility of assuming a leading role in world affairs, a possibility that remains remote, despite China's impressive growth rates and improved military capabilities, as the Chinese leadership avoids costs, risks and commitments at international level, putting forward mainly national interests. Huiyun Feng and Kai He attempt to elaborate on two Chinese leaders, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, from a political psychology perspective, by highlighting their beliefs about politics, supporting tolerance, moderation and cooperation and the impact that the moderate and conservative factions of the Chinese Communist Party may have on China's perspective as an international player. Efstathios Fakiolas's chapter is an analysis on Russia's effort for reestablishment as a great power, focusing on Russia's grand strategy on the stimulation of exports of energy resources and weapons, and domestic reforms aimed at restoring some of the state's control over the economy, based on stable political options upheld by both Putin and Medvedev. Harsh Pant analyses, in turn, India's effort towards the acquisition of a global power status, based on its economic power and the progress in India-US relations, while at the same time the Sino-Indian relations are characterized by mutual mistrust and China's continuous effort to marginalize India, by improving its relations with states in South Asia. The last of the BRICs, Brazil, is explored by Pedro Seabra's chapter, in an effort to examine the Brazilian attempts to upgrade the country's status in the international scene and institutions, by highlighting its positions on climate change and economic governance, its participation in groups of emerging powers and the adoption of a realistic stance with regard to the USA and the EU.

The third and final part of the book entails Harry Papatotiriou's analysis of the main features of the contemporary international system, focusing on the central role of the great powers and of the operation of the balance of power mechanism among them for the maintenance of international order, arguing however that violent means of imposing ideas or models of governance could have the opposite effects, and unite authoritarian regimes against such efforts. Dimitris Chrysochoou and Dimitris Xenakis seek to adopt an alternative approach regarding questions of order and anarchy in the international system, by acknowledging that in a complex and pluralistic world in motion, a "synthetic" rule-based international governance and several other processes may affect the contours of state sovereignty and provide for the symbiosis of a variety of actors in an emerging organized plurality. Irini Chila's chapter examines the outbreak of ethnic conflicts worldwide, by seeking their causes and identifying the interaction of factors, such as historical enmities, ethnic differences and grievances, territorial claims, weak state structures and intrastate security dilemmas fuelling collective fears that have reduced the effect of international efforts for pacification and stabilization of such war-shattered states. The chapter of Miles Pomper and Cole Harvey focuses on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by explaining the impact of technological developments on the capacity of many developing countries to access some of the most lethal weapons especially due to the dual use concept (several critical materials for weapons are useful for civilian purposes as well). Andreas Gofas's seeks to put the concept of contemporary terrorism, as exemplified by the 9/11 events, to the test, by arguing that all these actions are not so much different in terms of operational range, motives and tactics, and the real issue is to reevaluate the trade-off between security and civil liberties. The final chapter by Anthony Glee and Julian Richards entails the counterterrorism policies of Western democracies, by contrasting Gofas's conclusions, highlighting the – until recently – unnoticed domestic (so-called *home-grown*) dimension of international terrorism, and promoting intelligence-led instead of police or military operations as more suitable options.

It is well known that times change and we change with the times. This could not be more true for international politics. Nikolaos Tzifakis' edited book is a very good guide in such a volatile and uncertain field, both for academic reflection and study, as well as for political orientation, based on well documented analyses such as those contained in this book.