

**T**he stability of the international system, the direction in which it is developing, and its ability to meet challenges all depend to a considerable extent upon how the central actors position themselves and the strategies they develop. This issue of INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND SOCIETY focuses on a number of big players that are perfectly capable of setting off international chain reactions and changes in international structures if they alter their approach to foreign policy or even only partly modify their policies. For example, France's rapprochement with the USA, as described by Winfried Veit, which President Sarkozy has pressed insistently in his first year of office, could lead to changes in the international architecture. If the structurally conflictual relations between France and the USA are superseded by harmonious cooperation on a long-term basis it will have consequences for Western – and in particular European – security policy as a whole.

Relations between Russia and the USA also have consequences that go far beyond the bilateral context. Hans-Joachim Spanger shows that the Bush administration's policy of casual indifference has the potential to generate conflict now that the former Cold War adversary has regained its strength after a period in the transitional wilderness. As a result it will become more and more difficult to address central common security interests.

China will undoubtedly have an increasing influence on international structures. How strong its external influence will be will depend on the extent to which it is able to overcome its internal problems: In 2005 alone, for example, over 87000 »incidents of a mass character« were recorded. The Chinese leadership is attempting, by means of social reforms, fighting corruption, environmental protection initiatives, and enhancing the market elements of its economic system to curb potential conflicts and to realize its aim of a »harmonious socialist society.« The Chinese development process will continue to be controlled and regulated by the Communist Party. Falk Hartig shows that as a consequence of its reforms and policy of »openness« the Communist Party itself has come under pressure to transform and adapt; that it has changed and is continuing to change. To be sure, the one-party system is non-negotiable but the Communist Party is likely to continue in the direction of more openness, internal pluralism, and ideological modernization.

The longer the economic boom lasts and the more China's international weight increases as a result the greater the Chinese interest will necessarily be in modifying and developing international structures.

Those who talk up the »Yellow Peril« fear that such changes could soon be imposed unilaterally and on a power-political basis. Such speculations do not really stand up analytically, however. The authors of the project »China 2020« show that the scenario method can outline creative and, at the same time, analytically well-founded models of the future that are not confined by conventional thought patterns. Whether by 2020 China will be a harmless, a hissing or an awakening dragon will depend, alongside its internal development, on the development of the international system and the world economy.

The second set of topics addressed in this issue of INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND SOCIETY comprises raw materials, energy, and the environment, which are increasingly important factors in international affairs. The responses of the international community to the challenges of energy and raw materials shortages will be central to world economic development in the foreseeable future. The multilateral world trade system is not prepared to deal with the growing competition and conflict resulting from the emerging powers' surge in demand and the industrialized countries' dependence on the world market, however. As a result, as Martin Stürmer argues in his contribution, reforms are necessary that prevent raw materials protectionism and facilitate investment.

Josef Braml examines the possible consequences for US foreign policy of a shift to a low carbon economy. A multilateral transatlantic energy and environmental partnership could – if a future administration changes course on energy policy in this way – not only make a significant contribution to solving international problems, but also open up all sorts of economic opportunities.

Until then, however, more has to be done to establish the environmental-policy benchmarks that are to be achieved in a low carbon economy. Hans-Jochen Luhmann and Wolfgang Sterk's analysis of the mechanisms arising from the Kyoto Protocol contributes to this. The industrialized countries' marked tendency to substitute domestic reductions in greenhouse gases with purchases from abroad represents a twofold danger: first, that the quantity of emissions reductions that must be achieved both North and South will not be attained, and second, that there will be less incentive to pursue the necessary environmental innovations.

Alongside the focus topics Wolfgang Merkel presents the results of research into the central and eastern European transition countries. The central question is why these countries completed their threefold transformation – the transitions to democracy and a market economy, and the

formation of new nation states – more quickly and more successfully than the countries of earlier democratization waves. Decisive in this were the existence of a strong state, the educational level of the population, the EU's insistence on democratization, and the support provided by neighboring countries.