

The End of Pax Americana or a New Realignment?

Written by Maurizio Geri

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/02/26/the-end-of-pax-americana-or-a-new-realignment/>

MAURIZIO GERI, FEB 26 2017

The international shift from *cooperation* to *conflict* that the Trump “business” administration of America has made in just the first weeks is based on the continuation of the former administration with opposite means. America keeps retreating in isolationism because of the global disorder, and has been said without a grand strategy because of his “transactional president”, but now with a conflicting attitude instead of a cooperative one, being led by a businessman instead of an educator. And plus a businessman with core believes, as Wright says, of “opposition to America’s alliance relationships; opposition to free trade; and support for authoritarianism, particularly in Russia.” This at first sight might seem dangerous for the US and for the world, as it could cause an escalation of conflict among states and even against America. And as a recent article on National Interest says, there are a lot of limits to a transactional foreign policy: “no one would be willing to die fighting to protect the interests of ExxonMobil or to improve the Trump brand”. Nevertheless in the longer view could also open space for the world actors to build new alliances independently and alternative to the US hegemony, for a global balance of power like during the Cold War, this time with China and his allies.

From Mexico to China, from the EU to the banned Middle Eastern countries non-aligned with America, the US is saying today: I will reduce the collaborative relationship with you following only my national interest, now you have to come to me in a needy or “minor” position, if you want to deal with me. It is the business idea: if I am more powerful than you I will get a better deal so better picking fights. “Think big and kiss ass in business as in life” is the title of a book coauthored by Trump ten years ago. Mistrust, competition and “prisoner dilemma” is what this aims to: defection should get more result than collaboration in the protectionist, nationalist and “business model oriented” foreign policy that Trump is creating. This is what he wants to see, from Mexico reactions to the wall, to China retaliations to the possible trade war, from EU reactions to the American de-legitimization (Trump defines the EU as the “consortium”), to Middle Eastern retaliations after the ban on the seven states that US consider “sponsors of terrorism”. But it is not necessarily the path that these states will take.

After WWII the liberal order was guaranteed by the US and NATO, also thanks to the stability of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. After the end of the Cold War the new instability and the multipolar (or zeropolar) world made the liberal global order impossible to retain, given the risk of imperial overstretching, as Paul Kennedy (1987) famously argued. Today we are witnessing therefore the end of the Pax Americana as we are on a new path in this transition towards a new order: the US, together with the UK (being the two that created that order) are reshuffling the cards, trying to end the liberal order that was already eroded, to reduce the importance of international institutions that were already weakened, and to push the international system back to its traditional “anarchy” and the nation states back to its traditional “power” struggle, in order to create new alliances for their own interests.

This is actually supported by scholarship too. The new process of competition and aggressivity could create conflict in the international arena as not having the hegemonic presence of America that provide “public goods” like possible protections or “public threats” like possible attacks, the international system will be more instable. It is the concept of the “Hegemonic Stability Theory” applied to reality today. This theory was explained by Charles Kindleberger (1973), who argued that the chaos between the two world wars was caused by the lack of a world leader with a dominant economy. Actually according to the theory, the stability of the international system relies on the presence of a hegemon that can enforce the rules of the system. So when the hegemon is not there anymore this not only creates chaos but also open space for power transition, according to another theory called exactly “Power Transition

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Theory". The father of this theory, A. F. K. Organski (1958), argued that periods of 70/90 years of hegemony are followed by periods of conflicts that last around two decades. Independently by the exact duration of these periods it seems that we are really entering a period of change and power transition, from the so called "West" to the "Rest". But this process of conflicting is also related with the Offensive Realism theory of John Mearsheimer (2001). According to Mearsheimer states struggle for power in an anarchic system, following strategies like regional hegemony, maximization of wealth or nuclear superiority. And when a declining power face a rising one conflict is inevitable. While the recent globalization seemed to make this theory failing Trump seems to wants to try all he can to revive it.

So what we are witnessing with the new populism, nationalism and "conflictism" of Trump, it is not only a political, economic and cultural shift, it is also an ideological and paradigmatic one: from cooperation we are passing to conflict as a legitimate tool of international relations, similar to the economic-materialist concept of Marx and Schumpeter of "creative destruction". The creators are destroying what they created in order to reborn as new leaders in the future chaos. But still we don't know if will be a conflicting transition, as the US seems to desire, or more a "convergence", as Mahbubani (2013) and other scholars would argue. Will be a clash among states, not yet of civilizations as clear "civilizations blocks" have not been created yet (even if Huntington foresaw them) or a convergence among states? In other words will be there a major war for power transition or a grand bargain for a new balance of power? Much will depend on how the actors will respond to the US moves. They could start for example with regional alliances and integrations turning the back to the US. China and India as leaders in Asia, Mexico and Brazil as leaders in Latin America, Iran and Turkey as leaders in the Middle East, are natural developments when the hegemon is not there anymore. Regional leaders could take the lead for cooperation and regional integration could represent the next steps after the failure of globalization. The EU for example could reinforce itself after the Brexit, exactly as a reaction to the risk of nationalistic conflict one country against the other again. Canada could try to become a new leader of the liberal world, and already step in as possible substitute of the US accepting the refugees that the US is rejecting and fighting against Islamophobia. And furthermore China could find a way for regional alliance with ASEAN countries or even India, becoming the balance of power towards the US without any escalation of conflict. Actually the US seems to go towards a grand bargain too, surprisingly with the old foe: Russia. A grand bargain to fight the Islamist terrorism (and probably some Islamist countries, first of all Iran) and at the same time balance China.

Which one of the two paths will be taken in the long run has to be seen. As said much will depend on how the power transition will be made, if with escalating conflict between rising and retreating powers or with the gradual convergence of regional leaders. Hopefully the second option will be the chosen one, as if history can teach something is that the belief in only the realist-rationalist-materialist of all against all or of the declining power against the rising one, with conflict as "the great equalizer" and war as "continuation of politics with other means", produced the most violent and inhumane century of humankind.

About the author:

Maurizio Geri is a PhD candidate in International Studies at ODU and strategic analyst at Allied Command Transformation/NATO, both in Norfolk, VA. He is an independent analyst on international affairs, security, world order, democratization and democratic crisis especially in the Muslim world and Western world. Originally from Italy, where he got his BA in Political Science and MA in Cultural Studies, he has past experience in peacekeeping and human rights in Latin America and South Asia working with different INGOs. His publications are available here.