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George H.W. Bush and International Relations: A World in Motion After the Berlin Wall

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When George H.W. Bush passed away in November 30th 2018, he was the longest living US President at the age of 94. Bush had a lengthy stay in Washington – he had already served as vice-president for two consecutive mandates by the time of his election in 1988. His administration, however, would prove to be a brief spell. Bush was the last POTUS not to be granted reelection, in contrast with all his successors – including his son George W. Bush (2001-2009). Three decades after, the legacy of Bush presidential years remains shrouded in contradictions.

Between 1989 and 1992, the Berlin Wall fell, the USSR imploded and the Cold War came to an end. After a surprisingly successful collective security operation in the Middle East under the United Nations aegis (1991), Bush announced the onset of a “new world order”. Nevertheless, he was the last US president to indulge in military interventions in the Americas (Panama, 1989).

In this article, we analyze the impacts of Bush’s administration in regional relations in Asia and the Americas – with long-lasting effects that cast a shadow over 21st century international relations. The Bush years were marked by economic competition with rising Asian powers (Japan) and renewed institutional investments in Latin America after re-democratization (such as MERCOSUR). Those processes modified the US’ status in both regions – and remain compelling well into the 21st century.

President George H.W. Bush 1989-1992

30 years ago, Ronald Reagan’s Vice-President had just obtained a landslide victory against Democrat Michael Dukakis. That meant a continuous stretch of Republican administrations across the 1980s. Heir of Ronald Reagan’s game-changing “conservative revolution”[1], Bush promised continuity. No new taxes at home[2] and imperial presidency overseas, keeping the twin bargain that brought the United States from a late 1970s reluctant superpower[3] towards euphoria at the end of Cold War. 1989 was the year the Berlin Wall fell down without a bang; the enthusiasm was justified.

His brief administration (1989-1992) delivered both more and less than what was promised in his electoral campaign.

On the one hand, a reckless intervention in Panama (ousting collaborator Manuel Noriega) mixed Theodore Roosevelt’s Big Stick doctrine with Reaganite war on drugs. On the other hand, a cautious pursuit of an international response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait meant the collective system of the United Nations (envisioned in 1944) was triggered for the very first time. And it worked just fine.

1991 seemed a magnanimous year for President Bush Sr. In February, a successful Desert Storm pushed Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait – bringing newfound urgency to his “new world order” speech in September 11, 1990. By Christmas, the USSR was no longer, after the failed *putsch* against Mikhail Gorbachev in August. As maps were hastily reassembled from old memories, the leader of a revamped Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, revealed in the imagery consecrated by Reagan and actualized under Bush Sr. The world’s sole superpower enjoyed an unexpected unipolar moment, in the words of Charles Krauthammer[4].

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At the end of Cold War, the prospects of a long-lasting liberal multilateral order seemed inexhaustible[5]. In 1992, the European Communities became the European Union in Maastricht. Disquieting signs from the Balkans and the Horn of Africa motivated the UN to build upon the latter-day efficiency of Kuwait. The year closed with a high-level Security Council meeting, launching a broad “agenda for peace”[6].

However, the Bush years were also marked by strenuous contradictions. Benefitted by the CNN effect, Bush saw his approval rating getting closer to 90% in early 1991. However, this was also the first year of negative GDP growth in the United States after a decade of post-austerity recovery. Cracks on the wall were noticeable. Bush faced the looming shadows of international competition.

America’s Growing Economic Competition?

Japan, under Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, had just reached the tail end of three decades of sustained growth initiated by the 1965 Izanagi boom. Those impressive postwar achievements put the country at the forefront of global economy. As an exports powerhouse, Japan posed additional pressure on an US already losing ground to the reunited German Federal Republic under Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In comparison, the victorious superpower emerged highly indebted and fearing overstretch.

As Clement Attlee did in the UK in 1945, Bill Clinton defeated the triumphant Bush in 1992. If the election outcome was surprising, the reasons for the loss were less so. Paved by “it’s the economy, stupid” as the new motto, Democrats bounced back to Washington with promises of affluence and downsized military efforts.

Ironically, both Japan and the new EU would experience a prolonged economic standstill into the new decade, as the US delved in a brief golden age of globalization under Clinton.

Unfinished Business and Controversial Legacies

Bush Sr’s unfinished business would motivate reiterated efforts on the part of his older son, George W. Bush Jr, who became president in a contested election in 2000. Bush Jr would not only keep his father’s collaborators (such as Dick Cheney) in key positions at the administration, he would also make sure this time Saddam Hussein would be toppled (much in the same way Noriega was)[7].

September 11, 2001 and the ensuing war on terror turned semblances harder to recognize. In the current era of “Make America Great Again”, 1991 remembrances seem weirder and even puzzling. The Bush Sr and Jr years were shed in shock and awe[8] – though not motivated by a cornered, reactive United States, as it was often the case with his successors. Yet, during the early 1990s, Bush Sr. was trying to catch-up with the dynamic affluence of an Asian rising power. The same applies to Donald Trump, but differences are striking. Now China, an industrial powerhouse, claims respectability as an indispensable stakeholder in international regimes, and a challenged US retreats behind protectionism and punishing bilateralism[9]. If wars waged by the US in the Middle East seemed overburdening by then, this perception only grew stronger.

In the Americas, the Bush-led intervention in Panama was the last of its kind in the 20th century. There was no similar action ever since, as relations between the US and Latin American countries reached a new level. Across three decades, regional integration also increased by leaps and bounds. A successful free trade area tying the US, Canada, and Mexico (NAFTA) became a synonym of globalization, predating the rise of the World Trade Organization out of the GATT’s Uruguay Round.

Latin America witnessed the mushrooming of regional institutions motivated by different branches of integration, in spite of the rejection of a Free Trade Area of the Americas in the late 1990s. Arising from the Asunción (1991) and Ouro Preto (1994) treaties, MERCOSUR was initially an economic bloc that provided indispensable contributions to economic recovery of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay after the “lost decade”. Later on, MERCOSUR provided an incipient mechanism for political articulation in the subcontinent. A border war between Ecuador in Peru (1995) and a coup d’etat in Paraguay (1996) were duly avoided. The bloc eventually adopted a set of democratic

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clauses in 1998 (the Ushuaia Protocol).

The rise of *Chavismo* in the paradoxically poverty-stricken Venezuela saw the possibility of a regional game-changer. Venezuela's oil-fuelled rising profile in the Caribbean and its prominent role in the creation of *Alianza Bolivariana de Américas* (ALBA) motivated Brazil and Argentina to look for a middle ground. At the apex of the "pink tide" of left-wing governments in Latin America[10], and after another failed attempt of coup d'état (this time in Venezuela, 2002), UNASUR was born as a political mechanism for coordinating regional integration in South America. Venezuela was also slowly co-opted into MERCOSUR until a window of opportunity for full membership reared its head in 2012. MERCOSUR members responded to the fast track impeachment of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay with democratic clauses. Paraguay was suspended and that allowed Venezuela to become a member[11].

In the Organization of American States (OAS) fighting corruption became a priority since early 1990s. The OAS also unveiled a democratic charter before the end of the century, and that played a vital role in the crises that followed the coup d'état in Honduras (2009) and the current standoff in Venezuela. For a while, with US support, the organization looked for normalization of relations of Cuba, strained since the early 1960s. Regional players also provided relevant contributions to the end of a lengthy civil war in Colombia (2017).

The period also saw a rising profile of China in the Americas. In spite of deepening and widening ties of regional integration, major regional players (US, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Colombia) have become increasingly dependent on Chinese trade and investments[12]. The former 'middle kingdom' has become the first or second most important economic partner of almost every state in the continent in the last three decades – and that sent shockwaves across the continent. Through institutions such as Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, China made audible its prominence in the Caribbean. China became an indispensable stakeholder in regional affairs, including Venezuela and economic recovery in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis.

Conclusion

In the past three decades since President Bush Sr. the world has seen a shifting of power between the US and other rising global and regional states. In a shifting world order, new rules of the road are needed, in order to accurately represent a new constellation of major actors. If governance remains a challenge, it may be so for familiar reasons. A broader, more complex web of negotiations will not be limited to the negotiating skills of any side. Most importantly for US dominance has been the Chinese 'arrival'. The US does not consider China's rise to be peaceful and has met it with antagonism, most prominent during the Trump era.

Regionally, the escalation of the Venezuela crisis was triggered by a concerted action in regional institutions. Since 2016, Venezuela was suspended from both MERCOSUR and OAS and it currently faces increasingly harsh economic sanctions. Negotiations between Nicolás Maduro's government and Juan Guaidó-led National Assembly take place far away from the Americas, in Norway – under the auspices of the US, China, and Russia. In 2019, we speak of regional affairs in terms that depart significantly from the Bush Sr and Jr years. The world has changed for the US; unipolarity was short-lived and unilateralism will not bring it back anytime soon. A world of many sides implicates contributions from different standpoints, for which dignity and tolerance are paramount.

Notes

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