

Surviving the End of US Hegemony

by Leo Keay

Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States has occupied a position of hegemony within world politics. Hegemony is not necessarily harmful to an international system. A benign hegemon provides the necessary power to uphold international order.¹

Through a combination of multilateral treaties and international organizations, the US has not only advanced its own interests as a superpower, but also promoted global security and prosperity. It has safeguarded the sovereignty of nation states through its alliance networks and the UN Security Council. Furthermore, it has fostered the spread of free market capitalism through its own trade deals and bodies such as the World Trade Organization

¹ Paul W. Schroeder, "The Mirage of Empire versus the Promise of Hegemony", in Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft. Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, edited by David Wetzell, Robert Jervis and Jack S. Levy, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 200.

and the International Monetary Fund.²

The long-term foundations of American hegemony are now in relative decline. The US has lost its "Two-War" military capability, and China's economy has already surpassed America in purchasing parity power.³

President Obama was aware of these limitations: he shied away from direct military intervention in the Syrian civil war and oversaw the painful recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. Nevertheless, he maintained a broadly progressive agenda, fostering global security via Iranian nuclear disarmament and promoting free trade

² Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, London, Penguin, 2014, p. 362-363.

³ Patrick Cullen, "The Rebalance to Asia Under Trump: What Comes Next?", in *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 162, No. 2 (April/May 2017), p. 11; Graham Allison, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017, p. 10-12, 118-119.

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through the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

Under President Trump, the United States has abrogated its hegemonic responsibilities, thereby hastening the US's decline. The president's "America First" dictum signifies the unilateral pursuit of US interests at the expense of the international system as a whole. By questioning the utility of NATO and the viability of the Iranian nuclear deal, he has made the world a more dangerous place. Meanwhile, he threatens to slow global economic integration by abandoning TPP and TTIP and imposing trade tariffs.

The failure of a hegemon to fulfil its responsibilities has profoundly destabilizing consequences. With no power willing or able to safeguard the collective interest of the international system, the international order breaks down into unbridled competition between states. Diplomacy degenerates into a Darwinian struggle for survival, allowing the geopolitically dominant powers to pursue their interests at the expense of others.

Modern European history offers many examples of this.⁴ Following the Seven Years' War, Britain and France's unwillingness to take up the mantle of European leadership ushered in an era of ruthless partition diplomacy by Russia, Austria and Prussia. These states repeatedly violated the territorial integrity of weaker neighbours, principally Poland, Bavaria and the

Ottoman Empire. In the interwar era, the same motto of "America First" was used by the United States to justify a policy of isolationism. America refused to join the League of Nations and made no effort to stem Nazi Germany's dismantlement of the Versailles settlement.

These trends constitute a worrying precedent. An increasingly chaotic international system will allow larger revisionist powers – Russia and above all China – to pursue their territorial ambitions more assertively, increasing the risk of military confrontation over the Baltic states and the South China Sea. Meanwhile, smaller states will be overawed and exploited by their more powerful counterparts. Following Brexit, Britain's security will become dependent on an increasingly unequal "special relationship" with the US, while its economic interests will be ransomed by the rest of the world.

The European Union's position is perhaps the most ambiguous of all. In the short-term, it is a non-entity caught between the United States, China and Russia. Member states' prioritization of their individual foreign and defence policy agendas prevent the Commission from orchestrating a coherent grand strategy. This is especially evident in the broader Middle Eastern region: Russia's successful intervention in the Syrian civil war contrasts markedly with the EU's failure to manage the Libyan conflict. Operation Sophia has failed to stem the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean, and France's recent welcoming of Libyan General Haftar clashes with other member states' support for the UN-backed

⁴ Paul W. Schroeder, "The Mirage of Empire versus the Promise of Hegemony", cit., p. 202.

Government of National Accord.

Looking to the future, the successful achievement of greater fiscal, political and military integration could allow the EU to uphold its interests and values. The EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy has provided a definite strategic direction. The launching of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) could provide the institutional and financial tools to pursue it.

Europe's strategic priority must be to pivot between the US, China and Russia. Cooperation with Washington will remain substantial, above all in the security field. Ever since World War II, the US has used its nuclear umbrella to guarantee Europe against Russian aggression. Moscow's continued modernization of its nuclear arsenal, and growing interventionism in its "near abroad" will ensure the continued indispensability of this strategic partnership for both Washington and Brussels.

Nevertheless, the EU should nurture its ties with Beijing. Both have a common interest in areas where US leadership is lacking. President Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Accords requires the EU and China to lead the fight against climate change. Similarly, Washington's return to protectionism will lead Brussels and Beijing to vigorously promote free trade. The EU's relations with Russia will be more problematic. Both entities are direct strategic competitors in Eastern Europe, and the Kremlin's information war against European democracy is

deeply threatening. However, it is in both powers' interest to cooperate to fill the power vacuum left by the absence of US leadership, particularly in the broader Middle East. By "selective engagement" over the Iranian nuclear deal, Israel-Palestine and the fight against extremism, Brussels and Moscow could enhance their own collective security and gradually ease tensions between each other.⁵

The end of American hegemony thus represents a moment of profound change for the international system. One is reminded of Antonio Gramsci's maxim: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."⁶

We have now entered an interregnum characterized by unpredictability and change. The future cannot be known with certainty, but interested actors must heed history's warnings and reassess their positions accordingly. States will adopt a "transactional" approach to foreign policy, pragmatically cooperating in areas of common interest, but ruthlessly competing over disputed issues.⁷

⁵ Martin Russell, "The EU's Russia Policy. Five Guiding Principles", in *EPRS Briefings*, October 2016, p. 6, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)589857](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)589857).

⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York, International Publishers, 1971, p. 276, <https://www.scribd.com/document/326578518>.

⁷ Roberto Menotti, "Trump's Transactional Problem", in *Aspenia Online*, 17 January 2017, <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/node/7196>.

This will in turn diminish the influence of international organizations: non-cooperation between member states will stymie bodies such as the UN, giving scope for regional fora such as the BRICS-led New Development Bank to establish their own rules and norms.

Perhaps the best that can be hoped for in the short-term is the emergence of a sort of "ethic of enlightened pragmatism", whereby states recognize the value of stability and cooperation, adopting sufficiently coherent inter-regional initiatives to sustain global governance. Considering the active rise of new powers and the present period of turmoil and uncertainty gripping the international system, surviving the end of US hegemony is set to be a very bumpy ride.

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