

WILL AMERICA AND CHINA SHAPE A ‘PACIFIC CENTURY’?

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Which are the states that determine the global order? International politics has been focusing on this question at least since the beginning of the 19th century. Answering it today is hard, for we appear to be living through a phase of transition, as indicated by two developments: one is China’s rise to world power, the other the alleged slow decline of the USA. But – is China really able and willing to assume a leading role? And is it true that the hegemonial power of the USA is waning? And there is another question: what would be the implications of a Chinese-American century for the Pacific region and the world at large? Only one thing appears certain: the purely uni-polar order that dominated the nineties will hardly have a chance in the future.

To be sure, China’s swift economic growth, its size, its geostrategic position, and its self-interpretation as a leader in civilization are good reasons for granting the country greater influence on the geopolitical stage in the long run. On the other hand, there are factors that oppose such a rise in importance:

1) It is true that China’s economic growth rates are impressive compared with those of the established economic powers, but such figures should always be seen in the light of the economic level achieved previously. Moreover, such data are relative and cannot therefore furnish any basis for conclusions regarding the distant future.

2) For quite some time now, China has been plagued by domestic conflicts that also threaten its economic growth. Tensions may explode at any time, and the massive damage done to the environment in the interest of economic growth is sure to have consequences. Ethnic disputes such as those in Tibet or Xingjian might encourage potential secessionists elsewhere. Polarization between rich and poor and between town and country is another contributive factor. Then again, demographic developments are slowing down the country’s growth, for the government’s one-child policy leads to societal senescence, causing explosive increases in the cost of health and old-age provisions.

3) China’s energy policy is a problem. Immense amounts of energy are being consumed, and to maintain its growth rate in the future the country will have to launch a revolution in energy policy.

4) China has little military strength, and its ability to project military power is defective. The USA, on the other hand, will go on spending more money than

the rest of the world on its military power even after the recent change of government. Moreover, it is unlikely that China will ever become a player in security policy since it has neither the will nor the capability to claim a hegemonial role in such matters.

5) Lastly, China's options within the region are limited because many of its neighbours view the country's rise not with sympathy but with suspicion. China's reputation is at low ebb, and soft power is out of the question. Whereas the leading role of the USA is generally supported or at least accepted in the Atlantic region (bandwagoning), most of the Asian-Pacific states will probably seek to forestall China's rise (balancing), especially because the country's political system shows no sign of liberalization as yet.

America's loss of power is not inescapable. The country's failure has been prophesied again and again ever since its foundation – by communists and fascists as well as by European aristocrats. *The End of the American Era*, a book written by politologist Charles Kupchan, was a bestseller in the seventies, as was Andrew Hacker's eponymous publication. As late as 1987, Paul Kennedy foresaw the decline of the USA in his *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Yet all the prophets of decline were proven wrong, and Mr Kennedy even confessed to his error in 2002.

It appears that America's powers of regeneration are considerable. There still are convincing arguments for America's hegemonial position: the first is the country's military strength that has already been mentioned. Enjoying support across all party boundaries in the US itself, it will probably remain unrivalled in the future. After all, the USA are still the only country that is able to project its military power worldwide, and its technological lead is without parallel in history. This is true in spite of repeated assertions that America's military might is being stretched to the limit by the complexities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, there is the country's strong economy. China will not be able to take advantage of its stock of government bonds to increase its political influence in the USA because it is dependent on the US market. Moreover, the USA is bound to go on opening up new markets and safeguarding its prosperity. Third, the country's culture – which includes Hollywood and the iPod – constitutes an economic factor that is reinforced by the attraction of the American civilization. It is true that the political decisions made by the Bush administration dealt a heavy blow to the country's reputation, but now that Barack Obama is in office, the world's judgement has improved a great deal. What is more, the USA are set up much better today than in the phases of the now-averted decline. The myth about America's exceptionalism is certainly not an anachronism. Rather, it is and always will be the mainspring of the country's strength. The foundation of the USA was based on an idea that turned the foundation itself into an incomparable

political experiment. Even today this idea, which has lost nothing of its brilliance, still serves as a basis on which the American polity defines itself.

However, even though America's hegemonial position appears hardly threatened in the medium term the global fabric of political power has shifted markedly after 1989. Rising states are increasing their influence, and America's power to assert itself has encountered its limitations. Theorists in international politics do not find it easy to characterize these changes. Richard Haass, for one, talks of a 'non-polar order' by which he probably means the multipolarity that is emerging. However, his theory is probably as far off the mark as the one which postulates continued unipolarity. Samuel Huntington proposes a uni-multipolar order in which the USA will remain the only power with a claim to universal leadership although it will be dealing with new leading powers at eye level. However, he does not say which new powers he is referring to. Enlarging Huntington's approach, Joseph Nye suggests that the international system will resemble a three-tiered chess board. The first board will deal with conventional global and security policy where military strength tips the scale. The second will deal with economic matters where power is more evenly distributed. On the third board with its less sharply defined contours, matters relating to cultural attraction and soft power will be played out, with diverse actors acquiring greater influence. According to Mr Nye, the future will be dominated by a system that will basically duplicate American patterns of order.

Whenever Germans talk of multipolarity there are always undertones of expectation as well as *Schadenfreude*. Reasons include the way in which America's foreign policy under George W. Bush has been perceived as well as certain aspects of the Germans' socialization in the post-war period. Be that as it may, convinced Europeans will never wish for multipolarity because it would imply a renewal of the dissection of the world into spheres of influence occupied by opposing value systems. However, negotiations at eye level between the autocrats in Beijing and the White House would be just as undesirable for Europe, besides being irreconcilable with its interests.

Although the reorientation of international politics is a slow process, Europe threatens to be left behind. There is no one who doubts that the main stage of international politics will be located not in the Atlantic but in the Pacific region in the 21st century. On this stage, the USA, unlike Europe, is a natural member of the cast. And the prosperity and security of the Europeans considerably depend on geopolitical developments. This is why the continent's politicians are called upon to react: on the one hand, transatlantic relations need to be enhanced urgently because it coincides with the interests of the West that the USA should be successful in designing the Pacific century. On the other hand, it is necessary for Europe to mount initiatives of its own in order to reinforce existing partnerships. This includes improving its

military potential as well as formulating an effective European foreign and security policy.

Even in the medium term, the USA as *primus inter pares* will have a sound foundation for starting into the Pacific age. While China's part in that age is still uncertain, it is certain that it is for Europe to decide whether it will play a part in that age, and if so, what part that will be.

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