

sues of transnational nature also calls for close collaboration despite competition and confrontation among major powers.

The most important priority is to prevent the strategic competition between Washington and Beijing from degenerating into a spiral of suspicion and escalation leading to open war.

In this long and challenging process, **the role of middle powers such as South Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada, Indonesia and New Zealand is crucial** in playing the balancing role for the maintenance of a sound and stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific. Sharing common values and driven by common interests to protect the liberal international order, they should create a forum at which they seek close collabora-

tion to bolster the liberal international order and **engage the Global South whose voice assumes growing weight in global governance.**

Close cooperation and linkage between the Indo-Pacific and Europe are necessary to deter the axis of disruption in Eurasia. The grave threat to the security of Northeast Asia and Europe posed by the Russo-North Korean strategic convergence highlights the urgency for cooperation. Beyond mere recognition of their security indivisibility, the two regions should move to take joint actions to stabilize Eurasia in the face of rising menace.

It is welcoming to see many new initiatives in this vein intensify recently. The regular meeting between NATO and the AP4 countries in the Indo-Pacific, namely Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea, is a good example of such joint efforts. The increased number of joint naval and air

exercises, the conclusions of reciprocal access agreements between states in the two regions, the joint surveillance activities against North Korea's sanctions violations and Germany's recent accession to the United Nations Command can further partnership.

Lastly, states in the Indo-Pacific should do their utmost to maintain their economic vitality from diverse headwinds. **Today, we are witnessing an increasing number of adverse forces trying to undermine the free trade system.** While eliminating non-level playing fields to make international trade fairer is important, this should not be a license for protectionism or preferential industrial policy. Excessive securitization of trade, fragmentation of supply chain, and creeping encroachment upon free trade by exploiting gray zones in the fields of labor, climate change and the environment must be inimical to regional thriving.

The defunct WTO regime must be resuscitated at an early date to play the role of rule-setter and dispute settlement mechanism. In the arena of de-risking for economic security, objectivity and transparency should be guaranteed to minimize its adverse impact upon international trade and investment and prevent its misuse or overuse.

Various hurdles are ahead on the road to peace, freedom and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. The current strategic environment in flux is not favorable for the region to weather them. We must return to the time when the international community first conceived and created the liberal international order from the ruins of the Second World War. **In the spirit of progress, human dignity, solidarity and collaboration, we in the Indo-Pacific, together with the other parts of the global community, should strive to prevent wars and sustain economic dynamism.** ■

VIEWPOINT

The Fading Pax Americana

How the International World Order Became the House of Cards

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The global dominance of the United States was unchallenged following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its power had

been predominant and growing since World War I, superseding the old European nations, with an alternation of engagements and withdrawals. This culminated in America's self-affirmation as the "indispensable nation", both as a global power and as a democracy, when the West won the tense competition with the USSR and the communist regimes in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire.

The paradox is that just as the international community, faced with global challenges such as climate change, more than ever needs an efficient system of governance, now such a governance becomes more elusive.

9/11 was then a watershed moment that deeply shook up America, both domestically and as an actor in the international arena. It was also a watershed moment for the international dynamics worldwide.

Three elements have subsequently contributed to a sea change.

First, the failure of the interventions in Iraq and then in Afghanistan had significant consequences inside and outside the US. Domestically there was a growing reluctance to get involved abroad, in particular through a massive cultural change of the Republican Party from Reagan to Trump. This has translated into a marked reluctance to risk any new military involvement abroad. Internationally, there was a certain loss of credibility, not only of the United States but more broadly of the West, which was accompanied by the accusations of double standards by the South, even when the countries pointing the fingers are rife with their own double standards.

Second, the increase in assertiveness and the rise to international prominence of the "revisionist powers" (those looking to change the international distribution of power and for territorial gain), in particular China but also Russia, has filled the vacuum left by the lack of strategic action of the West. In parallel, the United States and the West have repeatedly neglected to take decisive action in crucial situations to support values essential to them. In the launch by Moscow of its own military operations (in Georgia, Syria and Ukraine), two aspects have played an important role: the impression given by the West that it would not stand up to protect its

own principles (the "red line" against Assad and his use of chemical weapons against his own people in 2013); and the development of the hybrid forms of warfare/influence like in Africa (use of "private" militias) or increasingly on the front of disinformation (manipulation of information).

Third, the collapse of the multilateral order, which had been mostly created and shaped after World War II by the Western powers (including the focus on Human Rights and Democracy) and the growing difficulty for its central body, the UN Security Council, to assume its global responsibilities. This has been exacerbated after Russia, one of its permanent members, decided to blatantly violate the most sacred prin-

ciples of the international community.

The long statement issued by the Presidents Xi and Putin in Beijing just before the invasion of Ukraine is the so-called political program of those "revisionist" powers. The message of this statement, aimed mostly at the audiences in the South, was "we are entitled to have our own conception of democracy and human rights. The so-called global South is indeed the audience to convince. It consists of countries in circumstances very different from the West, all naturally determined to use this competition to the best of their interests, some of them having the capacity to carve out a very influential position in this new world.



The paradox is that just as the international community, faced with global challenges such as climate change, more than ever needs an efficient system of governance, now such a governance becomes more elusive. The old, largely dismantled, order is not being replaced by new, better adapted rules. Ironically, some of the members of the much-criticized West have been among the most active advocates of building such an improved international order, based on the United Nations and its values, but leaving room in the decision-making processes for new countries (in Africa, Latin America, Asia) and prioritizing the needs of the South. France is one of those nations, *inter alia* having in 2023 hosted a plurilateral Summit organized in Paris in 2023 to establish a new pact for people and the planet, aimed at reconciling development and climate goals.

In terms of the United States as a key leader in the international community: it would be wrong to describe the present position of the United States in the world as a new isolationist consensus. Currently the main focus of most political stakeholders in America is an external challenge, a competition, first and foremost technological, with China. The wave of measures announced every month in Washington, aimed at better equipping the US to outpace China, gives rise to a kind of contest between the Democrats and the Republicans on who will be more efficient in containing the rise of the Chinese power.

The result of the next US election will thus be very consequential for the world but will not change some fundamental aspects of the American foreign policy: the priority given to the competition with China and the reluctance towards new military engagements abroad

In order to keep its influence and positions in the Indo-Pacific, Washington is also engaged in strengthening its relations in the region, as well as the capacities of its most important allies and partners there (Japan, South Korea, but also more and more in South and Southeast Asia), and in coordinating more closely these efforts with its Atlantic allies.

This new American consensus on the “Chinese challenge” has obviously its limits, especially in this election year, with the Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump insisting on getting more money from the US allies for the military support the US provides to them, and announcing, if elected, a new wave of tariffs which would hurt, beyond China, those same allies, both in Europe and in Asia (as was already the case during his 2016-2020 mandate with measures on steel and aluminum, taken on a legal basis related to national security). Another big difference between the Democrats and Republicans is the rejection of the multilateral insti-



Photo: Paul Martinet

tutions by the new, Trumpian, Republican Party, whereas the current Democratic administration has recommitted to these institutions, also as a way to contain the rise of Chinese influence.

The result of the next US election will thus be very consequential for the world but will not change some fundamental aspects of the American foreign policy: the priority given to the competition with China and the reluctance towards new military engagements abroad (reinforced by the terrible impression left by the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021). In all scenarios, the US will look closely at its relations with allies but will handle them differently depending on who will become the next President.

The Europeans have four lessons to draw from these observations.

The *first* is naturally to get prepared for all cases, in particular for the case of a Republican victory which would lead to very tough bilateral negotiations on trade and regulations.

The *second*, probably the most important, is that, whatever the result of the US elections –the choice of the American people– they will have to get their act(s) together as Europeans and develop their own collective sovereignty in order to have the necessary policies, instruments and resources in place to keep or to regain control of their collective future. The awareness of this necessity has grown a lot across the EU, following the brutal aggression of Russia against Ukraine, but much remains to be done.

The *third* is that the European Union, more than ever, will have the role of a responsible global power, faithful to the values which are not “western” but universal, and working with others, in Latin America, South-East and South Asia, the Middle East and Africa to rebuild a collective framework that can create trust and stability and tackle our common issues.

The *fourth* is that the Europeans will have to make every effort to keep their close alliance with the United States, the nature of which will depend on the evolutions on the other side of the Atlantic. Indeed, the best interest of the transatlantic community prescribes that each partner, keeping to their common fundamental interests –in particular the defense of our democracies– and coordinating their positions as closely as possible, plays its own part and respects the choices of the other partner.

But in the long run, everybody will lose, and will lose big, in the absence of a new international order, considering the level of threat to all from potential worldwide instability.

In fact, the Pax Americana has never been complete, even if its vulnerabilities were hidden for some time. It corresponded to a rather short period in the span of history, and its fading would, as such, not be a problem for the world if it were not accompanied by a growing chaos in the global governance and the rise of existential threats such as climate change, terrorism and proliferation of the weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, the world seems to continue drifting along this worrying path, but that need not continue forever.

It may be a paradox, but the stakes of the fading Pax Americana may not be the highest for the United States itself, whose power will surely remain, if not unchallenged. The US will indeed continue being fully capable of affirming its influence and its interests in the world. The biggest question mark for the great American nation is of an internal nature: will its democracy find ways to adapt and resist the polarizing headwinds we see today? Most probably, yes, considering the strength of its institutions and the prevalence of the American dream; the upcoming Presidential elections will serve as a new test in this respect.

The consequences of the fading Pax Americana are neither maximal Asia or Latin America. China is retaking the place it considers it should never have lost at the center of the global community. India is becoming a superpower of its own. Many other countries find opportunities to increase their influence in this new situation.

The two regions with the highest stakes in this evolution, for better or for worse, are –for different reasons– Europe and the most vulnerable nations, notably but not only in Africa. The latter need more cooperation than confrontation to solve their own existential issues, for instance mitigation or the rise of sea levels in some island states, and of becoming too dependent on a few influential partners they might be obliged to choose between in the middle of an international confrontation. The Europeans have much to lose, to the point of becoming irrelevant, if they lag behind the Sino-American technological and industrial competition, if they continue to be seen as a part of a declining Western world, and if they are unable to join their forces to defend themselves against the increasingly aggressive behavior of some actors.

But in the long run, everybody will lose, and will lose big, in the absence of a new international order, considering the level of threat to all from potential worldwide instability. It is the responsibility of the United States, and of others like China, to understand this and act upon it, since they have the most leverage. But it is also very much the task of our good old Europe, considering its history which generates its own responsibilities, considering also the unique and successful experience of the European integration to date, which gives it the opportunity to propose solutions to its partners (see the report of the first Conclave in Portugal in November 2023: Europe 2040, Tomorrow is Today, co-building a global, sustainable and responsible power.) ■