

Global Scenarios for 2012: How the World is Changing

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No scenarios for 2012 can be traced, without taking due account of the events of 2011. There is no doubt that last year would be remembered as the year of the “Arab revolts” and there are two different perspectives from which we can look at this: an internal and an external one.

From the inside, it is clear that a breakpoint was reached within the Arab world, the main causes being socio-economic imbalances and political tensions. The ultimate tension is the one among the so-called “secular” (this term having a different meaning within the Islamic context) ideologies, parties, governments, and their religious counterparts. Secularists retained hegemony over the Arab panorama, and, more generally, the Muslim panorama, in the post-colonial era (though some exceptions like Wahhabi Saudi Arabia can be found). However, secularists did not maintain their promises: they did not achieve Arab unity, nor socialism or economic progress, but above all they were not able to face Israel. During the last decades, they ended up in the building of little national regimes, mostly self-referential and cleptocratic. In the background, there was the rising of the Islamists, already underlined by the landslide electoral victory of Hamas in Palestine and AKP in Turkey – even before, both the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the spreading of the Wahhabi religious schools were relevant events.

From the outside, the meddling of many great powers – among all the U.S. – cannot be ignored. The United States were the main sponsor of most of the Arab regimes, but at the same time they managed to insinuate into the civil societies of these countries, financing and manipulating groups of opponents. This is the typical scheme of the “coloured revolutions”, which contemplates the active action of professed American NGOs – headed by National Endowment for Democracy – as well as federal agencies related to Washington, such as USAID. It would be too simplistic to match the Arab riots with the coloured revolutions, but it would be equally lame to ignore this external dimension. Looking at countries like Libya and Syria which have been recently destabilized, the role played by the U.S. and some of their allies clearly shows.

The destabilizing role played by Washington in this region is a signal of both strength and weakness. It is a signal of strength for two reasons: first, it showed the United States can still bear on the regional dynamics; then, an infinite number of potential casus belli leading to a military intervention can be generated, since the area has been destabilized. This intervention would take place wherever it would be expedient (following the example of Libya), with the excuse of the R2P (right to protect). On the other side, it is a signal of weakness, since Washington progressively leans on subaltern allies, from France to Great Britain to Turkey: just like after Vietnam’s defeat, the United States relies on middle powers

to maintain its hegemony. Moreover, it clearly shows that the U.S. was compelled to accept the change within the region, even if this would cause the occasional discontent of both Saudi Arabia and Israel, and there would be the risk of leaving many countries under the Muslim Brotherhood influence (the latter could expand also to Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, Sudan, Libya, Egypt and Syria in the near future).

Most of all, this is a clear sign of weakness since the U.S. is destabilizing a region before reorganizing its influence in the strategic equation. There is no will to leave a "Greater Middle East" stable and close to the Atlantic approach, so there is the recourse towards the "geopolitics of chaos". More specifically, the main aim is to raise an irreconcilable struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, and a mutual balancing between Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and maybe Egypt too (this situation keeping Israel safe as well).

The recent strategic re-examination announced by Obama not only plans what Jalife-Rahme called "military deglobalization" – implying the reduction of American garrisons and army corps around the world – but also their reallocation in the Asia-Pacific region. Besides the difficulties in maintaining a global military presence, there are two more reasons behind this decision. The first is the probable declining geostrategic weight of both North Africa and the Near East in the next decades. In the U.S., wide shale gas and oil reserves have been recently found: at present, they are unlikely to be fully easily exploited, but thanks to a range of technological progresses they could grant the country a future complete energetic self-sufficiency. Moreover, the volume of Canadian hydrocarbon reserves is continuously re-estimated: the Arctic could become a new geostrategic pivot. The second aspect to be considered is, obviously, the rising of China, which Washington is hoping to contain by controlling the choke points (like the Strait of Malay) from which are coming the vital supplies for Beijing, but also leaning on India and Japan as local counterweights to the Chinese power.

Nonetheless, China's containment cannot exclude the role of Africa. In the last years, Beijing has been protagonist of a deep and thorough economic penetration into the black continent, based on commercial relationships, loans and aids considered fairer than Western's. NATO answered with the institution of an ad hoc military command, AFRICOM, and with an aggressive policy. The attack of Libya, the latter being a great sponsor of the African Union, is to be regarded in the context of the contemporary French armed intervention in Ivory Coast, South Sudan's secession from pro-China Khartoum, as well as the bombings of American drones in Somalia. The Atlanticists want to get Africa back, even if by force of arms.

Why is China so scary? From a military point of view, the country is still dropping back with respect to the United States, above all when taking in consideration the offensive capacity (or "power projection", as it is commonly and euphemistically called), but it is making giant steps. China managed to develop its own aircraft carrier as well as a stealth aeroplane: these are "qualitative" bases for a future "quantitative" expansion. The main issue for the country to be scary for Washington is its economy. It is commonly known that China's growth is hectic and it seems that it will overtake America's; nevertheless, the deceiving use of nominal GDP leads to believe this event will happen in a distant future. Apparently it is not like that. Purchasing power being equal in 2010, Chinese GDP (PPP) amounted to 70% of the American one, talking about a 4,000 billion international dollars difference: in the past

decade, Beijing managed to recover 2,500 of that amount. In this decade it is likely that China will recover even more rapidly, since the U.S. is more dangerously hit by the economic crisis. Despite the bleak predictions on a dramatic slowing down of Chinese growth due to the explosion of the real estate bubble, data are still reassuring. According to economist Attilio Folliero, we should only wait for 5 or 6 years to see the Chinese GDP overtaking the American one.

Another trend which has been strengthened by the financial crisis of 2008 is economic regionalisation. During the last months, the Eurasian Union, the CELC and the UNASUR were born; these all organisations aiming to integrate, respectively, the ex-Soviet Union, Latin America and South America. The African Union could be included, too, but after Gaddafi's death it is a limping a bit. Additionally, the European Union, already progenitor of the regional integrated organisations, seems about to implode.

The trend towards regionalisation has been already experimented after the last great economic crisis of 1929, and even before, when the 1873 crisis emerged. The latter opened the so-called "age of imperialism", during which the great powers tried to build up their own colonial empires, partially closed to the others' investments and trade. In the Thirties, Germany gave birth to a closed economic system in the Central-East part of Europe, which was based on international barter; at the meantime, France and Great Britain were expanding their empires and Japan was proposing a "sphere of Asian co-prosperity". Nowadays, beyond the rise of integrated regional organisms, there are many countries starting to reimburse their trades not through dollars, but through national currencies: this is the case of Russia and China or China and Japan. This is causing troubles for the U.S., since much of its power is based, as Henry Liu said, on the "hegemony of the dollar". Just after Bretton Woods, the United States tied their currency to oil, managing to keep it as international reserve currency, but with the advantage of not having to convert it into gold. Therefore, it can still print paper money and distribute it around the world in return for real commodities.

History seems to be repeating itself. The will towards an economic regionalisation is not the only analogy between today and the post-1929 years. Just like that time, even if with different modalities and results, countries like China (and in some ways the U.S.A. too) at present, or Germany and the Soviet Union then, aimed at focusing on expansive economic policies; even if they did not re-launch the economy, at least they sustain it. Others, like the European Union, choose depressive policies. The United State does not intervene to push the economy: it intervenes, on the contrary, to drain liquid assets through the taxation of the producers, in order to redistribute money to big rentiers (more specifically, banks and funds). In the post-1929 era, this myopic and corporatist policy brought to the great depression. Nonetheless, it is well-known that 2012 will be a year of recession for most part of the European Union countries.

The events that happened in 1929 teach us another lesson: the worst does not come immediately. Even if Wall Street fell down in October, the bankruptcy of Creditanstalt (the event which saw the hastening of the situation) dates back to 1931.

In more recent days, Wall Street's crash dates back to 2008, but it seems the worst is about to come now, in 2012. Hoping that Lehman Brothers could be the alias for Creditanstalt (causing quite mild consequences on the global economy, in comparison to what happened 80 years ago) is only a feeble illusion.

It really seems appropriate to say that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, since we are now experiencing some critical situations that are very similar to those of 1929. It is useless to remember that, after the Great Depression, the Second World War started, so I really suggest that our leaders recall to themselves these historical events in order to avoid repeating it again all the way.

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