

Trump Marks the End of a Cycle

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Let us stop debating what newly-elected US President Trump is doing or might do and look at him in terms of historical importance. Put simply, Trump marks the end of an American cycle!

Like it or not, for the last two centuries the entire planet has been living in an Anglophone-dominated world. First there was Pax Britannica (from the beginning of the 19th century when Britain started building its colonial empire until the end of the Second World War, followed by the United States and Pax Americana with the building of the so-called West).

The United States emerged from the Second World War as the main winner and founder of what became the major international institutions – from the United Nations to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – with Europe reduced to the role of follower. In fact, under the Marshall Plan, the United States became the force behind the post-war reconstruction of Europe.

As winner, the main interest of the United States was to establish a ‘world order’ based on its values and acting as guarantor of the ‘order’.

Thus the United Nations was created with a Security Council in which it could veto any resolution, and the World Bank was created with the US dollar as the world’s currency, not with a real world currency as British economist and delegate John Maynard Keynes had proposed. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – as a response to any threat from the Soviet Union – was an entirely American idea.

The lexicon of international relations was largely based on Anglo-Saxon words, and often difficult to translate into other languages – terms such as accountability, gender mainstreaming, sustainable development, and so on. French and German disappeared as international languages, and lifestyle became the ubiquitous American export – from music to food, films and clothes. All this helped to reinforce American myths.

The United States thrust itself forward as the “model for democracy” throughout the world, based on the implied assertion that what was good for the United States was certainly good for all other countries. The United States saw itself as having an exceptional destiny based on its history, its success and its special relationship with God. Only US presidents could speak on behalf of the interests of humankind and invoke God.

The economic success of the United States was merely confirmation of its exceptional destiny – but the much touted American dream that anyone could become rich was unknown elsewhere.

The first phase of US policy after the Second World War was based on multilateralism, international cooperation and respect for international law and free trade – a system which assured the centrality and supremacy of the United States, reinforced by its military might,

The United Nations, which grew from its original 51 countries in 1945 to nearly 150 in just a few decades, was the forum for establishing international cooperation based on the values of universal democracy, social justice and equal participation.

In 1974, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States – the first (and only) plan for global governance – which called for a plan of action to reduce world inequalities and redistribute wealth and economic production. But this quickly became to be seen by the United States as a straitjacket.

The arrival of Ronald Reagan at the White House in 1981 marked an abrupt change in this phase of American policy based on multilateralism and shared international cooperation. A few months before taking office, Reagan had attended the North-South Economic Summit in Cancun, Mexico, where the 22 most important heads of state (with China as the only socialist country) had met to discuss implementation of the General Assembly resolution.

Reagan, who met up with enthusiastic British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, stopped the plan for global governance dead in its tracks. I was there and saw how, to my dismay, the world went from multilateralism to the old policy of power in just two days. The United States simply refused to see its destiny being decided by others – and that was the start of the decline of the United Nations, with the United States refusing to sign any international treaty or obligation.

America's dream and its exceptional destiny were strengthened by the rhetoric of Reagan who even went as far as sloganising "God is American".

It is important to note that, following Reagan's example, all the other major powers were happy to be freed of multilateralism. The Reagan administration, allied with that of Thatcher, provided an unprecedented example of how to destroy the values and practices of international relations and the fact that Reagan has probably been the most popular president in his country's history shows the scarce significance that the average American citizen gives to international cooperation.

Under Reagan, three major simultaneous events shaped our world. The first was deregulation of the financial system in 1982, later reinforced by US President Bill Clinton in 1999, which has led to the supremacy of finance, the results of which are glaringly evident today.

The second was the creation in 1989 of an economic vision based on the supremacy of the market as the force underpinning societies and international relations – the so-called Washington Consensus – thus opening the door for neoliberalism as the undisputed economic doctrine.

Third, also in 1989, came the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the "threat" posed by the Soviet bloc.

It was at this point that the term "globalisation" became the buzzword, and that the United States was once again going to be the centre of its governance. With its economic

superiority, together with the international financial institution which it basically controlled, plus the fact that the Soviet “threat” had now disappeared, the United States was once again placing itself at the centre of the world.

As Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, once said, “Globalisation is another term for U.S. domination.”

This phase ran from 1982 until the financial crisis of 2008, when the collapse of American banks, followed by contagion in Europe, forced the system to question the Washington Consensus as an undisputable theory.

Doubts were also being voiced loudly through the growing mobilisation of civil society (the World Social Forum, for example, had been created in 1981) and by the offensive of many economists who had previously remained in silence.

The latter began insisting that macroeconomics – the preferred instrument of globalisation – looked only at the big figures. If microeconomics was used instead, they argued, it would become clear that there was very unequal distribution of growth (not to be confused with development) and that delocalisation and other measures which ignored the social impact of globalisation, were having disastrous consequences.

The disasters created by three centuries of greed as the main value of the “new economy” were becoming evident through figures showing an unprecedented concentration of wealth in a few hands, with many victims – especially among the younger generation.

All this was accompanied by two new threats: the explosion of Islamic terrorism, widely recognised as a result of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the phenomenon of mass migration, which largely came after the Iraq war but multiplied after the interventions in Syria and Libya in 2011, and for which the United States and the European Union bear full responsibility.

Overnight, the world passed from greed to fear – the two motors of historical change in the view of many historians.

And this brings us to Mr. Trump. From the above historical excursion, it is easy to understand how he is simply the product of American reality.

Globalisation, initially an American instrument of supremacy, has meant that everyone can use the market to compete, with China the most obvious example. Under globalisation, many new emerging markets entered the scene, from Latin America to Asia. The United States, along with Europe, have become the victims of the globalisation which both perceived as an elite-led phenomenon.

Let us not forget that, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, ideologies were thrown by the wayside. Politics became mere administrative competition, devoid of vision and values. Corruption increased, citizens stopped participating, political parties became self-referential, politicians turned into a professional caste, and elite global finance became isolated in fiscal paradises.

Young people looked forward to a future of unemployment or, at best temporary jobs, at the same time as they watched over four trillion dollars being spent in a few years to save the banking system.

The clarion call from those in power was, by and large, let us go back to yesterday, but to an even better yesterday – against any law of history. Then came Brexit and Trump.

We are now witnessing the conclusion of Pax Americana and the return to a nationalist and isolationist America. It will take some time for Trump voters to realise that what he is doing does not match his promises, that the measures he is putting in place favour the financial and economic elites and not their interests.

We are now facing a series of real questions.

Will the ideologue who helped Trump be elected – Stephen Bannon, chief executive officer of Trump’s presidential campaign – have the time to destroy the world both have inherited
Will the world will be able to establish a world order without the United States at its centre?
How many of the values that built modern democracy will be able to survive and become the bases for global governance?

A new international order cannot be built without common values, just on nationalism and xenophobia.

Bannon is organising a new international alliance of populists, xenophobes and nationalists – made up of thee likes of Nicholas Farage (United Kingdom), Matteo Salvini and Beppe Grillo (Italy), Marine Le Pen (France) and Geert Wilders (Netherlands) – with Washington as their point of reference.

After the elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany this year, we will know how this alliance will fare, but one thing is clear – if, beyond its national agenda, the Trump administration succeeds in creating a new international order based on illiberal democracy, we should start to worry because war will not be far away.

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