

Questions

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POST-BIPOLAR WORLD: The Interdependence Paradigm

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British columnist Seumas Milne (in his latest, just-published book *The Revenge of History: The Battle for the 21st Century*) argues that in the late summer of 2008, two events in quick succession signaled the end of the New World Order (a unipolar world based on the uncontested US military supremacy and western economic dominance) inaugurated by George Bush Senior in 1990.

These two events were: the defeat of the US client state of Georgia in a brief but bloody war with Russia over South Ossetia –which put an end to two decades of uncontested US power— and, three weeks later (on 15 September), the collapse of America’s fourth-largest investment bank, Lehman Brothers (“a sort of right-wing equivalent to the fall of the Berlin wall”, according to historian Eric Hobsbawm) –which engulfed the western world in its deepest economic crisis since the 1930s.

In short: after a decade of continuous warfare, the US succeeded in exposing the limits, rather than the extent, of its military power; on the other hand, the neoliberal capitalist model that had reigned supreme for a generation crashed (and was only rescued from total disaster by the greatest state intervention in history).

The old international order (prior to 2008) is no more, and Pere Vilanova believes that the world –except for the varying intensity of the local nuances of the crisis, particularly in Europe— has not changed much since Barack Obama first took office as US President.

In January 2009, Obama inherited a heavy inertial load from the George W. Bush administrations: how to get out from Iraq and Afghanistan, tense relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds, the Guantánamo question. In foreign policy matters, prudence is a virtue and continuity a value, sudden turns are to be avoided, change of course requires some time. But in January 2013, the course set is this: prudence towards Russia, political and diplomatic multilateral firmness towards Iran, containment of Israeli unilateral military temptations, and multilateral/UN diplomatic action. Obama feels now vindicated by the dynamics unleashed in North Africa and the Middle East by the Arab Spring revolutions, which are consistent with his Cairo speech in 2009, he will keep on leaving Afghanistan and keep up his fight with Congress over Guantánamo. Obama's second inauguration, however, happens in a post-bipolar world we are still trying to define, at a time when we are beginning to realize the implications for decision taking of having too much information and too little time for processing it. A practical example: what is to be done with Syria?

In today's world, would Europe qualify as a global geopolitical problem?

European leaders strive to reconcile a non-existent Europeanist discourse with "national interest" in a so-called union where everyone has veto power. The European institutional structure is not a means to solve problems, it is the problem. Some argue in favour of direct presidential elections, but what for? It is the whole structure of power in Europe that needs to be changed. The EU is a great idea, but the current crisis has shown that it is, at present, its main foe. The Nice Treaty of 2000 sentenced to death the federalist potential of Maastricht. The crisis has all but worsened the prospects of overcoming the shortcomings of a union where its component parts tend to act as traditional nation-states. European leaders are buying time (which is what you usually do when you do not know what to do), but they cannot help but look at things (for example, de-regulated globalized finance) from a 19th century perspective. Take the Greek debt: the IMF is for condonation, who is against? French and Spanish banks. So, Greeks are condemned to life sentence in a no-way-out prison, because European states, very unwisely, bought Greek debt and now want their money back –all of it, no losses. For more than a decade now, the EU has been unwisely acting as if it were an important global actor. Since the advent of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (1999), the EU has not "spoken with one voice" except on occasion, when the big ones have decided to go together (for example, in the case of Montenegro). It is really very difficult to see how the EU, where decisions have to be taken with the unanimous approval of the twenty-seven member states, can make adequate progress without changing its power structure. The EU has, in fact, the same problems as the UN: a sum of states is less powerful than a single state –this is well-known since Westphalia.

A discredited West as a defender of human rights in the world (after partial but strategic "non-victory" in Iraq and Afghanistan), and a faltering western-dominated capitalist order which is quickening the pace of US and EU relative decline. Now, what?

The emerging paradigm of the post-bipolar world is *interdependence*. It is the golden, objective rule of the times, and it means a great deal more than *globalization*. China is the perfect example of interdependence. As Hillary Clinton famously acknowledged ("How do you deal toughly with your banker?"), China is the US's banker; and it is in the banker's best interest to see that its

main client's economy does not go down the drain –in return for something, of course: regularizing China's membership to the World Trade Organization, for instance; and something else in exchange, like lending a hand in the Iran or, eventually, the Syria question. The same is true for Latin America, Africa, the global environment: this is a world where everything depends on everything –even for Obama.

The prospects are that the US will continue to be the overwhelmingly dominant military power in a multipolar world which is far from being risk-free...

One of Mitt Romney's main blunders during the 2012 presidential campaign (taking Putin's rhetoric at face value) was to identify Russia as the US's chief problem in foreign affairs –whereas Russia, in fact, has been rather cooperative (particularly in Afghanistan-related logistic questions). Putin, as a former KGB colonel, may still have the bipolar world scheme close at heart, but he knows full well that the Cold War is over. It was Bush's mistreatment of Russia as a result of unipolarity that prompted Putin to redefine and bold up Russia's foreign policy and Russian national interest and put it on stage: opposition to NATO's eastward expansion, veto on Kosovo's UN membership, the burgeoning of *de facto* states (such as Ossetia). Bush made a huge mistake by unilaterally deploying anti-missiles launcher systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, prompting Russia's reaction. Obama has solved this quite simply: after pretending he consulted all sides, the missiles are to reside at Rota base in Spain. Manners count.

You have not mentioned the Middle East yet...

Since the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East has been a complex conflict zone, riddled with old and even ancient causes --it is no coincidence that today Turkey is spreading its influence in the region. The new element is the Arab Spring, which nobody saw coming, and which is changing things in a wider area, encompassing the Mediterranean. How will the new dynamics interact with pre-existent causes –such as the Palestine question? Despite its preferential relation with the US, Israel must watch its moves: Erdogan and Morsi are two free electrons in a game where the dialectic between old and new is actually defining the match.

But recent events in Gaza have proved once again that the bilateral US-Israel relation is the most disappointing of Obama's foreign policy attitudes. Obama has backed down on the Palestinian issue, not from a legitimate concern over Israel's security, but by taking sides with the most extremist right-wing elements in Israeli politics --thus objectively supporting the settlers. At the end of the day, this is an issue of domestic politics in the US. The UN General Assembly vote on 29 November 2012 showed this: 138 states voted for the right of Palestine to become a (second rate) member state, only 9 sided with Israel and the US.

What about Iran?

Well, this is another good example of interdependence. The US guarantees that Israel will not act unilaterally against Iran. So, the US expects Russia and China (which are quite happy with this), in exchange, to lend a hand on Syria –which, in turn, allows Russia to feel his superpower status is back, and lets China manage its real superpower status in the global economy.

Pakistan is described by some as a faulty piece in global security.

Do you agree?

Not at all. Pakistan is not a weak state. The army is the strongest power in the country, it used to seize power every once in a while (military and civilian governments followed a fairly regular cycle), but is increasingly reluctant to do so --there is no need. On the other hand, the nuclear bomb has in fact had the effect of stabilizing Pakistan's relations with India. Obama should not worry too much about Pakistan.

Should he worry about international terrorism?

Al-Qaeda has lasted ten years, seems to be now in decline, has not managed to bring down any government, and the vast majority of its victims are Muslims. Its influence has been waning since the London bombings of 2005 and has been in fact residual in all the main global questions over the last five years. The lesson to be learned here is that you should be very careful not to make projections and jump to long-term conclusions on the basis of temporary / conjunctural situations. The main threat in Europe today, for instance, does not come from the Mali-based Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, but rather from East-European organized crime.

Interdependence means that the world has become a far more complex place?

The bipolar world was visually very clear and you could describe it --it produced theory. The post-bipolar world is extremely hard to describe --hence, we have a theory deficit. In so far as some theories are nevertheless produced, they tend to be very brittle (the end of history, the clash of civilizations). We lack a solid conceptual description of the world we live in --and this must mean something.

Like what?

Perhaps we find ourselves in a global system in total mutation --and we do not understand it yet.