

## THE UNITED STATES: NEW ISOLATIONISM OR HEGEMONY WITH CHANGING ALLIANCES?

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In February 2016, the renowned Munich Security Conference, known among experts as *Verkunde*, was held without managing to make much media impact. Nevertheless, an analysis of the list of subjects this conference has addressed each year since 1963 allows us to retrace the long evolution of the perceptions of global security over half a century. The limited media coverage of the latest conference focussed on Dmitry Medvedev and his denunciation of NATO and the West's culpability for leading us into a "new Cold War". This is one of many challenges for whoever succeeds Obama. But though it is true that under Vladimir Putin's presidency Russia increasingly seeks to act as "the other superpower", with falling oil prices, half of his economic balance sheet dependent on the European Union and the brutal devaluation of the rouble, how does Russia intend to fill its various deficits? The proof that we are not in a new cold war is that the United States and Russia have collaborated decisively on crucial issues of international policy and they have done so both in a bilateral format and, on occasions, in a discreet multilateral format: the 5+1 agreement on the Iran nuclear dossier and the six-way process to handle the drift of the regime in North Korea. The last condemnation of the country in the Security Council in September 2016 was voted for unanimously by all 15 members, including of course the five permanent members of the Security Council.

However, at the end of 2016 other issues fill the US security agenda as decisive presidential elections approach. Some are not, or do not seem to be, "hard security" issues. They are usually addressed using the parameters of military force, but are at the heart of the complex concept of security we face in the 21st century. Of course, climate change is also discussed. The real negotiation of the new routes opening up in the Arctic ice cap – particularly what is known as the Northeast Passage – has been ongoing for five years and only involves the countries that surround it: Norway, the United States, Canada and, of course, Russia. There is general agreement, in theory, to condemn the latest generation of transnational terrorism, but much more discretion on how to fight it effectively, discreetly and in a coordinated manner on a large scale. No need to go into detail on

the case of ISIS and how to fight it in Iraq and Syria. Coordination is confused or volatile but, in any case, vital in the short and medium term. We are faced with a highly volatile agenda due to the diversity of threats and the interdependences involved.

This translates, in the US elite, to two attitudes of differing types in the successive administrations. From Clinton to Obama via George W. Bush there have been significant differences relating, above all, to the respective global conceptions of the United States' role in the world (soft power or hard power, lead or impose, multilateralism or unilateralism). The first attitude, deeply rooted in the US isolationist tradition, strongly distrusts Europe and does not discount a strategy of relative disengagement based on the premise that the Europeans should take on their own defence obligations. This argument is above all about budget. This school of thought measures security capabilities in terms of military capability and this in terms of budget. Even by their own logic this leads to a fairly questionable equation. Of course the «Bush/Rumsfeld/Cheney version”, according to which the supremacy of US power is sufficient to govern the world alone, based only the US agenda of interests, has been eroded. Important American think tanks take this position, from the Cato Institute to the American Enterprise Institute via the Heritage Foundation.

A second, more centrist, cosmopolitan line, still pursuing the defence of the *national interest* (the real yardstick of all US foreign policy since F.D. Roosevelt), really concerns itself with multilateralism (a la carte, naturally) and relations with Europe. This school of thought would therefore like European progress on security and defence, including the improvement of their own capabilities in a way that is at once compatible – or even in synergy – with NATO. It also considers that NATO should be much more flexible so that on issues that are solely European all or some of the European partners are able to act by themselves (after consulting the Atlantic Alliance to check the United States does not feel that the issue lies outside NATO's agenda). Notable institutions like the Brookings Institution, *Foreign Affairs* magazine, the Rand Corporation (with some nuances) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace represent this version.

The well-known Samuel Huntington published an article called “The Lonely Superpower”<sup>1</sup> in 1999 (during Bill Clinton's presidency) that had little to do with the clash of civilisations. He analysed US foreign policy along the following line of argument: “Neither the Clinton administration nor Congress nor the public is willing to pay the costs and accept the risks of unilateral global leadership ... The American public clearly sees no need to expend effort and resources to achieve American hegemony. In one 1997 poll, only 13 percent said they preferred a preeminent role for the United States in world affairs, while 74 percent said they wanted the United States to share power with other countries (...) Majorities of 55 to 66 percent of the public say that what happens in western Europe, Asia, Mexico, and Canada has little or no impact on their lives. (...) In acting as if this were a unipolar world, the United States is also becoming increasingly alone in the world. (...) On issue after issue, the United States has found itself increasingly alone, with one or a few partners, opposing most of the

1. Huntington, Samuel P. “The Lonely Superpower”. *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1999) (online). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1999-03-01/lonely-superpower>

rest of the world's states and peoples. These issues include U.N. dues;<sup>2</sup> sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and Libya; the land mines treaty; global warming; an international war crimes tribunal; On these and other issues, much of the international community is on one side and the United States is on the other.”

The United States is undoubtedly a superpower and, according to widely held opinion is *the superpower*. But, in our understanding, the past fifteen years have convincingly disproved the thesis of the unipolar world. According to that thesis, after the bipolar world we find ourselves in an international system ruled by the principle of a unipolar world under the hegemony of a single superpower. This thesis, we think, has been repeatedly disproved since 1991, and even more so since 2001.

But does anyone really believe that the complexity of US security is at the centre of the presidential election debates? And yet, nevertheless, it is in there one way or another.

2. It is well known that the United States was one of the largest donors and simultaneously the greatest defaulter but, surprisingly, those payments were revised in the weeks following September 11th 2001.

