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ARE WE SEEING THE END OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY?



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As we near the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, it seems a reasonable question to ask if we are seeing the end of what could be considered to be the American Century.

Of course, history does not always fit neatly into one hundred year segments. The Hundred Years War between France and England was from 1337 to 1453, and The Long 19th Century lasted from 1789 (French Revolution) to 1914 (outbreak of the First World War). However, it seems that if we consider the period from 1945 (end of the Second World War) until today, it seems that there are geo-strategic forces in play that could be identified, at least from a historical perspective, as signalling the end of what could be characterised as a century of US dominance.

To give context to that before we start the review of the evidence, it is clear that the idea of a natural world order where the US led by a combination of economic power (based on almost unfettered market-capitalism), political influence (through the seeming victory of social democracy over the centralised command-orientated hierarchies that had been characterised by the sudden and certainly unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990's) and the hegemony of US-led soft power that saw American films, music, fashion, terminology and even social movements (Black Lives Matter, Me Too Movement) become the de facto template for much of the world.

US dominance didn't start with the Second World War, and it certainly did not have a smooth or unchallenged passage through the almost eighty years under discussion. The US had been a global leader since the end of the First World War, and it is significant that the failure of the US stock exchange in 1931 led to global consequences that would not have been felt in previous ages, just as the Jazz Age of the 1920's and 1930's, which was also experienced in major cities around the world, was a demonstration of perhaps the first American-born mass populist cultural movement.

America was also torn apart by its own internal tensions, almost always spinning around three central and seemingly unsolvable issues – colour, race and poverty. Despite the fact that America has the largest economy in the world, and considers itself as the preeminent example of what capitalism looks like when it is done properly, it has deeply embedded fault lines and dysfunctions that run as a leitmotif through American history.

The legacy of slavery, that remains as one of the defining hallmarks of US society, means that in the 2020's one of the leading political discourses is over whether the US is institutionally racist, whether white Americans are caught up in systemic racial bias and their own empowerment and entitlement, and what is the role of the government in either engaging with, or in fact even acknowledging, historical grievances.

It is a sign of the politicisation of the race question that Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley was recently forced to backtrack after responding to a question concerning the root cause of the American Civil War by saying that it 'was basically how government was going to run, the freedoms and what people could and couldn't do', without once mentioning slavery, which was in fact the central issue that triggered the Civil War.

The racial divide in America is still evidenced in almost every social and demographic metric. The privatization of the US prisons system in the late 20th century saw a seemingly embedded culture of incarceration for young black males, where the black community that made up 13% of the US population made up 50% of the prison population. In 2020, black adults were still five times more likely to be imprisoned than white counterparts⁽¹⁾.

The United States is also intrinsically unhealthy. It ranks number one in the world amongst high-income nations for obesity, with 2 in 5 adults and almost 1 in 5 children clinically obese. The numbers are also deteriorating fast, with 19 states currently having obesity rates above 35%, compared to 16 one year ago and none ten years ago⁽²⁾.

There are also issues of embedded poverty, which is in itself closely aligned with issues of class, race and geography.

From a political perspective, America is also highly dysfunctional in terms of its own self-governance. The growing social and political polarisation means that there is little if any desire for bipartisan collaboration at every level of US political hierarchy. Combined with the fact that extremism on both the left and the right has meant that the political rhetoric in general has become increasingly radical and exclusionary, the outcome has been that the role of the political class has been to posture and retaliate rather than focus on developing effective structures, frameworks and protocols to engage with the significant challenges that the US, along with the rest of the world, is facing.

The period of the Donald Trump presidency has only exacerbated that tendency, but when his headline policies involved suggestions for banning Muslims from entering the US, taking America out of NATO, abandoning both nuclear and climate control agreements, and building both personal and political relationships with administrations that, in the kindest language, did not share what were traditionally seen as the US values of openness, democracy and decency, the fact that he has a significant chance of returning to the Presidency in 2024 is a reality that creates genuine nightmares in policy departments of governments around the world.

Trump's denial of the validity of the results of the 2019 election, which created an unprecedented wave of rejectionism across both the political and the social fabric of America. Previously unquestioned norms of democratic governance (such as the validity of elections and the smooth transition of power from one administration to the next) were not only questioned but were openly denied. This has left a legacy where there is genuine concern about what the results of the 2024 presidential might bring, whichever way the results go.

Geo-politically, the rise of China is a destabilising force that neither the US nor other major governments have come to terms with. There is still a lack of clarity in government agencies across the world as to whether China is an economic competitor, a regional disruptor or a strategic global threat.

The UK's 2021 report on Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy captured this dichotomy well.

'We will do more to adapt to China's growing impact on many aspects of our lives as it becomes more powerful in the world. We will invest in enhanced China-facing capabilities, through which we will develop a better understanding of China and its people, while improving our ability to respond to the systemic challenge that it poses to our security, prosperity and values – and those of our allies and partners. We will continue to pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China, while ensuring our national security and values are protected. We will also cooperate with China in tackling transnational challenges such as climate change'⁽³⁾.

The 2023 UK Integrated Review Refresh paper reiterated the point, stating that ***'China poses an epoch-defining challenge to the type of international order we want to see, both in terms of security and values'***⁽⁴⁾.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022 meant that major warfare had returned to Europe, and that, at the start at least, it was thought that a Russian victory would be the only possible outcome. That view was soon reversed when it was seen that there had been significant miscalculations both tactically, in the lack of Russia's ability to move its forces westwards at the pace that it had planned and thereby to take Kyiv in a matter of days, and doctrinally, in the response of the Russian-speaking eastern parts of Ukraine that had been considered in Moscow to be natural allies of Russia and to have seen the Russian invasion in the form of liberators from the Ukrainian occupation. In both cases, Russian military planners had misunderstood the situation, which would have significant impacts on both their immediate and longer term military efforts.

The final major event of 2023 was the attacks by Hamas terrorists on Israeli settlements abutting the Gaza Strip, leading to the deaths of around 1200 Israelis and others, and the taking of up to 250 hostages, many of whom are still held in Gaza. The response from Israel was as predictable as it has been terrible. The dual tactics of massive airstrikes that have demolished a significant part of the Gaza Strip and led to over 70% of the population of 2.5 million people being displaced, combined with a total blockade that prevented fuel, food, water or medical supplies entering the area, at a time when they were needed more than ever, has re-set the global dialogue around support for Israel.

If the objective of a terrorist attack is to trigger a disproportionate response from the target administration, which in turn can lead to a cycle of alienation, polarisation and finally radicalisation, then the attacks of 7th October 2023 can be considered as a success on the same level as those of a previous generation on 9/11/ 2001 and the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon by Al Qaeda.

That attack, involving 19 terrorists using small knives, re-set the global geo-political frameworks, and led to the entrapment of the US in two major wars that it could not win (Iraq and Afghanistan). It saw the destabilisation of multiple Muslim regions that have resulted in significant impacts in terms of both national security and the way we securitise our daily lives, as well as the impact of increased rates of immigration, both legal and illegal, from areas that have previously been both destabilised and devastated by western intervention.

The Israeli response to the Hama attacks, and the US inability to condemn or control those responses, has meant that the hypocritical stance of the US in terms of defending the rule of international law when it suits it (as in the Russian invasion of Ukraine) and ignoring it when it is considered antithetical to its own interests (as in the Israeli response in Gaza), has created a red line in the sand beyond which many countries feel unable to go.

The level of destruction and Palestinian deaths (over 20,000 at the start of 2024, with the majority being women and children), and the increasingly hard-line rhetoric of Israeli politicians and official spokespersons, has meant that the global dialogue is now routinely featuring the phrase 'genocide' to describe Israeli actions, and there is talk of the possibility of the International Court of Human Rights investigating Israel for genocide, which leaves the US in turn open to prosecution for supporting genocide.

Israel has justified its use of overwhelming force against Hamas and the Palestinian population based on the historical facts of the Holocaust during the Second World War, and the perception that Hamas offers an existential threat against Israel because of its desire for its destruction. This went so far as the Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations wearing a yellow Star of David, the Nazi-era symbol of both Jews and the Holocaust itself. This was condemned by the Director of Yad Vashem, the Israeli memorial to the victims of the Nazi genocide, who said that such actions demeaned the memory of those who had died at the hands of the Nazis, and that Israel was no longer a weak country that could not defend itself, but was actually a regional military power that could use attack helicopters and fighter jets against a terrorist organisation that, in the phrase of one Israeli commentator 'fought us wearing flip-flops'.

The outcome of both these historical trends and regional conflicts has been an acceleration of the realisation that there are alternative models in the world other than the US-led hegemony that has been seen as the de facto normative state of affairs since 1945.

The recent expansion of the BRICS multi-national framework is a sign of the increasing independence of both Tier 1 and Tier 2 countries that would previously have seen little if any benefit from developing collaborative relationships with each other, or in creating an alternative non-aligned bloc. With an original membership of Brazil, Russia, India and China, later joined by South Africa, and the recent announcement that Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had been invited to join the framework (though Argentina later announced that they would not be accepting the invitation), it has both the size (42% of global population, 27% of gross world product) and the political vision (a range of multilateral economic and political frameworks that could rival the World Bank, OECD and other post-WW2 constructs) to offer an alternative to US control and management of global frameworks.

The fact that Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one side, and Iran on the other, are prepared to come together in the bloc, is seen as an open statement by China that they are able to facilitate global discussion, through their neutrality and impartiality, qualities that the US does not possess given its tendency to label countries it doesn't like (such as Iran) as being part of the Axis of Evil.

As we move towards the challenges that the world will be throwing at us in the second quarter of this century, it seems as though the fundamental frameworks on which we have built global interaction since 1945 are falling apart at exactly the time that we most need multinational framework, dialogue and political leadership. Whether it is the belief that democracy has won, which is being increasingly challenged by autocratic regimes across the world, or that globalisation is a natural historical force that will bring ever increasing benefits, we seem to be reverting to an older, simpler, and in many ways more brutal world order.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine offered the option for two historical perspectives. The first was 'How could this happen in the 21st century?'. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Francis Fukuyama wrote his famous book 'The End of History'. In that, he stated that 'What we may be witnessing is not the end of the Cold War but the end of history as such; that is, the end point of man's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy'. From such a perspective, wars in the traditional made no sense, had no value and brought no benefits.

An alternative (and perhaps more realistic) historical perspective would ask a different question: 'Why do you think that wouldn't happen?'. The idea that Russia would accept its loss as both a world and a regional power seems to show a distinct lack of historical awareness. The US's belief that it could act unilaterally in expanding its political and military influence through eastern Europe, moving ever closer to Russia's borders, demonstrates a political naivete that shadows that shown in the 1960's and the lead up to the Cuban Missile crisis of 1963.

It has been said that those that do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. As we move into a world that is seeming increasingly fragile, fractured and unstable, the question has to be as to whether we are able to learn the lessons of history, and in such a way that not only can we avoid repeating them, but we can use them as a foundation to begin to build a better world order.

(1)

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