III.2. The End of the Superpower Era – Retrenchment of the USA and the Resurgence of Great Power Politics

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Abstract

My paper tries to answer the question what actions should the USA take in order to keep its pre-eminence in the medium to long term future. The 21st century presents the USA with several challenges around the globe and the country needs to adjust its commitments to the new era. I try to examine the balance of power with the help of the neoclassical realist school. The increasingly multipolar world changes the contemporary realities of international relations and with the help of balancing strategies my paper tries to identify how the actions of the United States will shape the international relations in the coming decades. In my opinion, the inevitable retrenchment of the United States will bring back traditional great power politics.

Keywords: USA, neoclassical realism, balance of power, retrenchment, multipolarity

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III.2.1. Introduction

The 21st century ushered in a new era in international relations. The quick dissolution of the Soviet Union and the fast integration of Central and Eastern European countries into the European Union increased the relative power of the United States tremendously. It seemed that the unipolar world has finally arrived and the United States would dominate the world virtually uncontested.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and the USA's prolonged quagmires in Afghanistan and Iraq were not foreseen by the leadership of the country because their perception about the capabilities of the United States were excessive. Quick and decisive victories were envisaged in both states by then President George W. Bush (Butt, A. I. 2019).

However, as the United States got overburdened by the costs of these foreign adventures the balance of power started to shift. Russia elected Vladimir Putin, a strong

president to lead the country out of its miserable place where it got after the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition to that, after the end of the 1970's China's GDP growth has been outstanding thanks to several reforms the country implemented (ZHU, X. 2012).

The costly "war on terror", the new challenges of a rising China and a defiant Russia coupled with a more and more inward looking American population have caused the United States to re-evaluate its place in the world. The threats to continued global primacy are summarized *(Table 2)*.

actors	external threats		internal threats
state	Rising China	Opportunist Russia	
non-state	„War on Terror”		disillusioned population

Table 2: Problems that threaten the global primacy of the United States of America
Source: edition of the author

III.2.2. Isolationism or Global Leadership?

The vast majority of international relations experts see the problems that the United States of America, the current strongest state in the international system faces. However, there are different approaches to these problems. What does the United States need to do in order to ensure its primacy in the coming decades as well? Isolationism or leadership around the globe?

America faced similar questions in the 20th century as well. After each world war, different approaches were adopted. The main question is, what should the USA do now, when the balance of power seems to change. In my opinion, neither isolationism nor global leadership should be the answer.

The Case Against Isolationism

In my opinion, the isolationism that the country practiced before and after the First World War cannot be repeated in the 21st century. The international system that the USA built after the Second World War, globalization and the global interdependence of the world economy make it virtually impossible to withdraw from the world stage as the country did a century ago.

The post WWII system is still dominant regardless the attempt of emerging (or re-emerging in case of Russia) powers' efforts. The Bretton Woods system ended in the 1970s, but the USD is still a major reserve currency and its role in the international economy is still substantial. No other currency comes close to its influence on the international economy. The Russian ruble or the Chinese renminbi are both far behind the USD in importance.

Furthermore, the United Nations is still a cornerstone of the system, and every major power is heavily invested in maintaining its relevance. There are no alternative institutions in the world that substantially threaten the power or

influence of the post-Second World War ones. There were initiatives to create rival economic institutions without the Western powers. The most glaring example for an effort to create a quasi-economic alliance is the BRICS.

This informal group of states comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa could have been the most threatening initiative to the power of the United States. However, the threat of combining the major emerging powers never really materialized. Nowadays thanks to the different growth of its members the BRICS countries do not seem to be successfully cooperating against the USA. Its alternative international financial institution the New Development Bank (NDB) which intended to provide an alternative to the IMF and World Bank has only a capital of $100 billion (Harper, J. 2019). In comparison the IMF has more than two and a half times more money to distribute immediately if necessary (Wroughton, L. 2010).

In addition to the weak alternative institutions that the rivals of Western states half-heartedly started, all the major powers stayed committed to the above mentioned international institutions (UN, IMF, WB etc.) that are the cornerstones of the post-WWII international system. This means that the United States cannot withdraw from the existing structure. If it would like to abandon or decrease its role unilaterally, the rising economic powers such as China could utilize the vacuum and fill it, thereby taking advantage of the system and exerting influence through it with relative ease. Additionally, the cautionary tale of the League of Nations serves as a powerful analogy that dissuades the United States to leave the international structure. The story of the League showed that without the backing of the great powers another major conflict could broke out.

Those who see problems the country faces *(Table 2)* can reach the conclusion that a major step back from the world stage would release the burdens the United States has to carry thanks to its global engagement. The USA pays a lot financially in order to maintain the international institutions it helped to create. However, the United States cannot relinquish its global commitments from one day to another. Its defence umbrella and its alliance systems keep a lid on a lot of problems. Nuclear proliferation and regional rivalries would multiply if the United States withdrew its forces and commitments rapidly (Hicks, K. 2020).

The Case Against Global Leadership

Isolationism seems not to be an option. Should the United States continue to be a global leader as was practiced during the presidency of George W. Bush? After the end of the bipolar world, for nearly three decades the United States has vastly extended its commitments and its military deployments (Wertheim, S. 2020).

The era of seemingly unchallenged unipolarity has ended, and the country seems to show the symptoms of overextension. The U.S. presidential election of 2016 showed that the American people would like to leave global leadership behind. Trump won the presidency with a nationalist and more inward looking message. Global leadership and extension of external commitments are especially hard in a democracy where the voters are disillusioned. The prolonged and unsuccessful endeavours to topple hostile governments and non-state actors in the Middle East and replace them with strong friendly democracies failed to convince the voters to commit more resources around the globe. A lot of them wanted Trump's "America First" approach (Kagan, R. 2018).

More than three years have passed since the inauguration of the new president, and the new 2020 presidential election seems to follow the pattern of a decreased importance of foreign policy as well. Trump's approach to foreign policy has not changed. The debates among the leading Democratic candidates were heavily focused on domestic issues and the topic rarely changed to the foreign policy realm. Former Vice President Joe Biden stresses the importance of American leadership around the globe (Biden, J. R. 2020). As of this writing the former VP is defeated all of his rivals and he is the leading democratic candidate for presidency (homepage[44] of FiveThirtyEight). Even if Joe Biden would win the 2020 US election, his rhetoric is focused more on relying on allies rather than on going in alone. Furthermore, Congress would be a check on Mr. Biden's more active foreign affairs, because a vast portion of the American population would not support a foreign policy similar to the approach of President George W. Bush.

The second top democratic contender (who dropped out of the race, but had a lot of support in the beginning of the Democratic primary) Bernie Sanders would not have changed the course of the

44 https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-primary-forecast – 2020. 03. 23.

Trump administration's 'America First' approach a lot. The former candidate would have implemented a more value based foreign policy, although it would have backed this approach by diplomacy. Sanders (as well as Trump) would like to avoid another endless war, and would even roll back support for regimes that have been important U.S. allies for decades such as Saudi Arabia. (homepage[45] of Bernie Sanders)

It seems that the American public left the idea of the global leadership behind. If the public does not endorse this policy the leadership of the country cannot go down a path that resembles the course of American foreign policy in the 1990s and early 2000s.

This domestic factor cannot be left out of the equation when it comes to evaluating the foreign policy of the country. Structural theories lack the importance of unit level factors and emphasize the international system instead of paying attention to the internal characteristics of the states. However, Innenpolitik theories overemphasize the importance of domestic variables over systemic ones. In my opinion this approach is flawed as well, because the relative power should be the chief independent variable as neoclassical realists suggest. (Gideon, R. 1998 pp. 149–151.)

III.2.3. Balance of Power

I argued against the two extremes: isolationism and global leadership in the chapters above. The international system and the balance of power is constantly changing. This change explains the behaviour of states that is why it is important to define it carefully. The balance of power as a concept aims to describe the production of certain constellation of forces in the international system. Several international relations scholars tried to capture this phenomenon. My definition of the concept of what balance of power is: An inherent tendency of international politics to produce a certain distribution of power that is acceptable by the major players of the world.

The distribution of power in the beginning of the 21st century is no longer acceptable for several major stakeholders in the international system. States as China and Russia feel themselves emboldened to challenge the status quo and the factors *(Table 2)* explain the behaviour of the United States. The seemingly unchallenged global primacy of the USA has ended and the country has to adjust its

45 https://berniesanders.com/issues/responsible-foreign-policy – 2020. 03. 02.

course of action accordingly. On the surface the United States is still the primus inter pares, but the perception of relative power has changed over the years.

I use the neoclassical realist school to analyse the situation, because I think it describes the different foreign policy choices of the major powers better than other international relations theories. In my opinion structural realist theories (neorealism, offensive realism, defensive realism) do not take into account the unit level factors that influences the foreign policy decision making. And Innenpolitik theories highlight the domestic factors and downplay the importance of the systemic forces.

The systemic pressures on the United States would encourage more engagement without leaving several parts of the globe to be handled by allies. The main thesis of John J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism is that states look for opportunities to gain power. And defensive realism claims that preserving power rather than increasing it is the main goal of states (Meirsheimer, J. 2014 p. 21.).

The United States has been worrying too much about too many problems connected to foreign policy in the past century (Waltz, K. N. 2008 p. 328.). This has made the country's population *(as Table 2)* and the presidential races of 2016 and 2020 show) disillusioned about the constant overseas engagements. Domestic factors such as this heavily affect the USA's foreign policy decision making.

On one hand, structural realist theories have a hard time explaining the changes in contemporary international relations. Offensive realism would prescribe the United States an approach that is more direct without leaving certain parts of the world behind. In contrast, the decreasing influence of the country in the Middle East is a good example of a decline in influence and a strategic modest withdrawal from a region thanks to mainly domestic factors. In addition, defensive realism would suggest that China and Russia would not have made several risky steps in order to upset the balance of power. The annexation of Crimea and the Chinese activities in the South China Sea are glaring examples that defy the logic of defensive realism.

On the other hand, neoclassical realist theory suggests as the relative power of a state rises, it will seek influence abroad. This is clearly the case with Russia and China and as the perceived relative power of a state such as the USA falls, its action and ambition will be scaled back accordingly. (Gideon, R. 1998 p. 152.)

It does not matter that the absolute power of the United States does still overshadows China's and especially Russia's. Both of the new contenders would like to challenge the United States even though their material and military capabilities in absolute term are dwarfed by the USA. The perceived relative power of China and Russia has been increasing and this phenomenon means the United States has to alter its course if it would like to maintain its position as the strongest state in the international system.

Balance of power theory suggest several approaches to the problems the United States faces. *Table 3* shows how the threat of China and Russia has been encountered recently.

type	mechanisms	objectives	examples
hard balancing	formal alliances matching arms build-ups	confront/ balance powerful/ threatening state	Triple Alliance vs. Triple Entente Allied vs. Axis Powers NATO vs. Warsaw Pact
limited hard balancing	coordinated military activity, short of formal alliances limited, asymmetrical arms build-ups	restrain power/ threatening behaviour	China vs. U.S. India and U.S. vs. China (2010-)
soft balancing	limited institutional alignments informal ententes	restrain power/ threatening behaviour	Concert of Europe (1815-53) Russia and China vs. U.S. (1996-) India and Japan vs. China (2014-)

Table 3: Types of Balancing
Source: Paul, T. V. 2018 p. 22.

III.2.4. Retrenchment

The United States has been trying to save the world order and its position with limited hard balancing and soft balancing behavior *(Table 3)*. The George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations emphasized a world without spheres of influence, and based their actions accordingly. However, the Trump administration de facto departed from this point of view. I agree with an international relations scholar, Graham Allison's assessment that now is the time to return to great power politics and revive the approach of spheres

of influence in the coming years (Allison, G. 2020).

This means that the United States has to rely more heavily on its allies to carry out operations especially in the anti-terrorist front to relive pressure on the country. A good example for this approach is France's operations in Africa, especially in Mali (Melly, P. 2019).

The alliance system of the United States is extensive and leaves no corner of the world behind. The country can utilize these relationships to contain the external threats. It shall retrench from positions that are not vital to its national interest. The question is: what are the regions and problems that the United States should no longer waste resources solving? The internal factors of the country pushes it out of regions such as the Middle East. Several endless and costly wars threaten the president's perceived leverage in the foreign policy questions concerning the region.

In addition to the domestic pressures, Russia entered the region through its ally: Syria. The resurgence of great power politics is the most visible in the Syrian civil war. The country is not vital to the United States' national interest and the Trump administration has tried several attempts to withdrew from the troubled region. Besides Russia, another regional power Turkey also stepped in as a major player in the Syrian civil war (Feaver, P. – Inboden, W. 2019). In addition to that Turkey and Russia are both active in Libya as well (El-Gamaty, G. 2020). This part of the world is not the major realm the United States should focus its resources. It should leave great power politics to decide the future of these regions instead of trying to solve the problems by itself.

The relative perceived power of the USA declined since the war on terror started in the beginning of the 21st century. Now, with a more inward oriented president the country is beginning to withdraw from Afghanistan and hopes to find a resolution to the 18-year-long war. It is not the outcome the country hoped for in the beginning of combat operations, but it can relieve a lot of stress and burden from the shoulders of the country (Gazi, S. 2020).

Furthermore, the EU, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Canada are all major allies of the United States with substantial economic and military might. Even though the Trump administration withdrew the USA from the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), the trade deal was salvaged. Australia, Canada and Japan led efforts to preserve the

deal to create a free-trade zone of 500 million people with 11 member states. In addition to these countries Colombia, Indonesia and South Korea signalled their interest to join the TPP. These steps show how the allies of the United States could fill the place of the country in regions where the country needs to scale back its presence. (Daalder, I. H. – Lindsay, J. M. 2018)

III.2.5. Resurgence of Great Power Politics

The second half of the 21st century and the beginning of the 21st brought different eras in international relations. Now the inherent tendency of international politics produces a new constellation of world order that emphasizes great power politics more than in the recent decades. As the relative power of the United States declines, new challengers appear on the international scene. The American taxpayers seem no longer interested in paying virtually alone the bill of maintaining the current liberal world order. The United States has been encountering both internal and external factors that increase consumption and the costs of protection and production. If we take a look at the enormous military budget of the country it is easy to see that maintaining several overseas military bases and military operations in multiple countries cost a lot. The comparative advantages over other societies have been undercut by the diffusion of the country's economic, technological, and organizational skills. In comparison, the rising states on the periphery such as China enjoy lower costs, rising rates of return on its resources and the advantages of relative backwardness. The constant high growth rate of China has been increasing its relative position in the international system that produces a disequilibrium (Gilpin, R. 1981).

This disequilibrium is balanced by the United States and its allies *(Table 3)*. Compared to the past, the difference is the relative position of the United States in the system. In the coming decades the country has to rely more and more on its allies to carry out the tasks of maintaining the liberal world order. The partial withdrawal otherwise known as retrenchment of the USA paves the way for the revival of spheres of influence from their slumber. As the example of France shows, the former colonial power carries out anti-terrorist operations on the ground with its own forces in its former sphere of interest. The USA should pay special attention to rival great power's overseas military bases. China's base in

Djibouti is troubling (Headley, T. 2018). The USA should use its alliance system and already existing international institutions to counter the spread of foreign military bases of its competitors. The Russian naval base in Tartus (Syria) is a good example how these facilities can help expand the power projection capabilities of a great power (Karmanau, Y. 2019). These foreign bases are much more important tools for influencing the balance of power than the weak alternative institutions the emerging powers tried to create.

Russia is active not just in Syria, but in Europe as well. Eastern and Central European countries are threatened the most by the resurgent Russia. The sanctions of the EU and the increased military spending of European NATO member states shows the burden-sharing of the alliance that seems to take place. (Beswick, E. 2019) Even though the United States no longer has the position it held in the 20th century, its allies have major military and economic potential. The USA should encourage its allies to take up more responsibility to maintain the current international system and not let rival powers get opportunities to grow without balancing them.

III.2.6. Conclusion

My paper tries to show the external and internal factors that lead the strongest state in the international system to re-evaluate its positions around the globe. The seemingly uncontested primacy of the United States enabled the country to send its military into conflicts that cost a lot of resources. These engagements drained the USA and its voters and made them disillusioned about foreign endeavours. Furthermore, China and Russia have perceived their relative power grew in the international system. This phenomenon has been making them challenge the position of the United States in the system.

The USA has been trying to balance and maintain its dominant position around the globe with soft balancing and limited hard balancing. (Paul, T. V. 2018 p. 22.) On the surface, this strategy can remain the same. The country has a wide alliance system across the globe.

However, the approach to foreign policy and the international system needs to be changed. The United States needs to retrench from regions that are not vital to its national interest and share more burden of maintaining the dominant position in the system with its allies. European allies can help contain Russia since they are the ones who are the most incentivized to do so.

France and other stakeholders can help mitigate the threat international terrorist organisations pose. Australia, Japan, South Korea and other allies can use their economic power to contain China.

These developments have been resurrecting spheres of influence. The coming decades will no longer resemble the virtually unipolar position of the USA as was the case in the 1990's and early 2000's. In my opinion the resurgence of great power politics is inevitable. The United States and its allies can maintain their pre-eminence in the international system with burden-sharing. These states can use their economic and military might to balance against rising powers and keep them in check. If they miss this opportunity, and follow outdated strategies, their relative position in the international system will deteriorate.

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