

From stability to uncertainty: geopolitical transformations and democratic challenges in the last 50 years

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Members of a Chinese military guard of honour march during a welcoming ceremony for the former Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Peter Pace at the Ministry of Defence in Beijing, China, 22 March 2007. Photo: Staff Sgt. D. Myles Cullen (USAF)/Wikimedia Commons

“The concept of crisis has become the fundamental mode of interpreting historical time” [1]

Reinhart Koselleck

The Carnation Revolution of 1974 marked the beginning of a period of political transition in southern Europe that led to the almost simultaneous disappearance of the last autocratic regimes in Portugal, Greece and Spain. These events were part of what Huntington dubbed the “third wave of democratisation” [2]. The question raised in the present article is whether this wave of democratisation, facilitated by the easing of Cold War tensions or

détente, was part of a more profound transformation that repositioned the tectonic plates of the world order, producing the fissures that have brought about the current crisis of the last Western empire and its neoliberal order. From a geopolitical perspective, in this article we delve into the processes of profound transformation of ideological, economic and political power structures that have taken place, interweaving regional and global scales to properly contextualise the events of the past and elucidate what the future may bring.

Analysis of the structures that sustained the Western imperial order

Discussion of the geopolitical shifts to occur since 1974 requires a brief analysis of the macro structures of power that have shaped our times since the second half of the 20th century: (i) the rise of the liberal capitalist economic order (and its alternative Russian- and Chinese-type versions in the new millennium); (ii) the universalisation of the nation state; and (iii) the attempt to construct a United States hegemony as the last of the Western global empires. These structures constitute the three pillars of the historical period known as *globalisation*, whose unequal impact has led some to question the term, referring instead to *globalisations*, and even *anti-globalisations*. [3]

These macro structures have coexisted in a co-constituent process in which the crises and transformations undergone by some have produced the transformation of the rest, and United States hegemony and its informal empire project have suffered the worst consequences of these tectonic-plate collisions. In what follows, we will analyse why and endeavour to pinpoint the causes and situate the origin of this decline in time and space.

United States, world power or nationalist globalism?

From an ideological point of view, imperialism has been both the central element of political modernity and, since the 19th century, the primary perpetrator of the fragmentation of globalisation. This fragmentation produced a rupture along racial, economic and “civilisational” lines that was dominated by European and Western attempts to explain and legitimise their superiority, and gave rise to the inequality and lack of cohesion that continues to scourge our world and is the main obstacle to its governability.

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From this historical past emerged two informal empires that would become the main drivers of geopolitical rivalry between the Second World War and 1991: the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union (USSR). Thus, the Cold War era was a time marked by the quest

for balance between what might be termed *rival globalisations*. This gave rise to ad hoc geographies that were defined by the regionalisation of a “free” world and a “communist” world, under the hegemony of the U.S. on the one hand, and the aegis of a militant Soviet anti-Westernism on the other.

Since the United States was the only survivor of this geopolitical competition for world dominance, in this article we will focus on the U.S. and its eventual decline. Such an analysis must be prefaced with a brief conceptualisation of what is meant by the term *empire*. An informal empire of the American type is an organisation which, despite the political power at its core, allows peripheral political powers to develop some form of formal sovereignty, while significantly limiting their autonomy by the use of military or economic intimidation. [4] According to Michael Mann, informal empires can be divided into three sub-types by the type of coercion employed: (i) the informal empire of the gunboat, characterised by intense but brief military interventions in non-colonised territories over which the empire wishes to exert an influence; (ii) economic imperialism, whereby the coercion is economic rather than military, and is achieved through intervention in peripheral economies by means of “structural adjustments” imposed by the international financial organisations led by the empire; and finally, (iii) informal empire by proxy, whereby the coercion is subcontracted to local proxies in exchange for the concession of economic or military aid.

Thus, in the realm of military coercion or hegemony, the U.S. has exercised its hegemony through international security institutions such as the United Nations Security Council or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as by building a network of client states whose loyalty is maintained through defensive alliances and arms contracts.

In the economic-financial sphere, until 1971 the United States dominated by means of the dollar and its parity with gold in the Bretton Woods system, as well as other by-products such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Finally, in the trade sphere, the U.S. has exercised ideological and normative dominance through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization, and made free trade a condition and a guarantee of U.S. hegemonic influence.

Notwithstanding, the U.S. has developed its informal empire through proxies by intervening militarily to defend or install client regimes. Representative of this trend are military interventions in Middle Eastern countries such as Iran (until 1979), Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, used by the U.S. to exercise geostrategic control by means of direct military assistance or the location of military bases. Since the 1970s, the U.S. has tended to establish dominance through the use of proxies and in a delocalised manner, motivated by the defence of capitalism far more than by the ideological defence of democracy, despite this being the dominant legitimizing narrative. United States elites have associated global economic prosperity with U.S. prosperity, and democracy with the concept of free enterprise, but fundamentally with the freedom of U.S. enterprise.

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Authors such as Cox and Wallerstein, from different theoretical perspectives, question the reality of U.S. hegemony on the basis that it is subject to the conditioning factors of other macro power structures or because of the mere presence of poles of resistance to its hegemony. They converge with Mann, however, on the idea that the United States' geoeconomic interest in controlling remote regions has been less of a hegemony and more a kind of "nationalist globalism" that fails to understand geographical limits. This is so because the symbolic projection of United States interests has been ubiquitous, converting any distant threat into a nearby one [5] in the process diminishing its capacity to influence many of the political, economic and ideological dynamics that exist in the interstices of the globalisation it seeks to dominate.

The 1970s: the great turning point

To locate the origin of the changes that crept in through these interstitial dynamics and led to the decline of the unipolar world that emerged after the Cold War, we must look back to the 1970s, a decade marked by major structural transformations at the economic and political level, including the United States' official withdrawal from the Bretton Woods system in 1971, the oil crisis of 1973, and the rise of new regional and transnational actors that would contribute to the final unseating of the United States as a hegemonic power in the 21st century. In what follows, we will analyse the relationship between these transformations.

The depreciation of the dollar that was caused by the financing of the Vietnam War, and precipitated its exit from the Bretton Woods system, encouraged the United States to limit its direct interventions abroad and decentralise its actions through the use of proxies or allies. This had three repercussions which have contributed, directly or indirectly and to varying degrees, to U.S. decline in the 21st century: (i) the rise of allied states or proxies that in the long term have come to undermine U.S. interests and its consolidation as a hegemonic power (e.g., Israel or Saudi Arabia); (ii) the rise of transnational anti-Western jihadist movements, which were able to finance their activities with petrodollars from the 1973 crisis; and (iii) the beginning of the emergence of Asia under the leadership of China, which, having redefined its foreign policy in the 1970s, has since aligned itself with the Arab cause, sought to establish relations with Third World countries, and stood out for its militaristic non-interventionism and political independence from the superpowers of the day. This was coupled with a new era of reforms implemented under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and the subsequent rapid economic growth that has made China the main rival to U.S. hegemony in the 21st century.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973

Of all these dynamics and events, it was U.S. intervention in support of Israel in the Fourth Arab-Israeli War or Yom Kippur War of 1973 that had the greatest impact on the structural transformations that would follow, as a new actor emerged from the Arabian deserts to lend a hybrid aspect to this war: oil. Oil-exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia now gained an unprecedented capacity to influence the world economy. The intrusion of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the economy threatened the prestige and political and military leadership of the U.S. empire. In this context, the U.S. support for Israel that was initiated under the Kennedy administration - to employ the Israeli "gunboat" against the spread of pro-Soviet Arab nationalism - became incompatible with the previously established two-pillar doctrine. Based on support for Saudi Arabia and Iran, this doctrine had guaranteed oil supplies and ensured the continuance of U.S. hegemony over its allies, mainly Europe and Japan, which in turn could rely on access to cheap oil. But the balance provided by this two-pillar strategy was upset by the incorporation of Israel into the strategic game, and was eventually destroyed with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. As early as May 1973, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia warned Nixon that he would need Arab allies to defend U.S. interests in OPEC and that he "would not be able to find those allies as long as he continued to support Israel's occupation of Arab lands". [6]

The impact of the oil boycott on international power structures was such that authors such as Issawi write of an oscillation of power to the detriment of the United States, evidenced by the degree of arms parity with the USSR, by the incipience of the Asian markets, and by a growing political assertiveness and distrust of the United States on the part of the members of the European Economic Community, who preferred to negotiate terms and conditions of supply directly with the oil-producing states. [7]

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The most immediate result of the international economic crisis was the exponential enrichment of the oil-exporting countries and the strengthening of their influence in the Muslim world. Using petrodollars, they were able to finance their political project through the financing of their fundamentalist Wahhabi ideology among Muslims in the East and West, as well as politico-religious actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Afghan mujahideen (from among whom the Taliban would emerge) and, later, al-Qaeda. All were non-state actors that would drag the U.S. into the quagmire that became the war on terror that marked the first two decades of the 21st century, and caused it to fail in the military interventions that were supposed to lead to the democratisation of the Greater Middle East and a new Rimland, replete with grey areas that would unseat the last 20th-century empire

from its hegemony.

From “Make America great again” to the Belt and Road Initiative and data warfare: new geopolitical tendencies in the 21st century

If the 20th century was the century of the United States, the idea that the 21st century will be the Asian century looms large in the discourse of today’s geopolitical analysts. There are two reasons for this. The first of these is the above-mentioned decline of the informal U.S. empire, reflected in reduced interventionism and a return to the defence of its national interests, as expressed in the aspirational slogan of its most conservative political elements: “Make America great again” (MAGA). The second is China’s projected economic overtaking of the United States in the coming decades. China’s GDP in 2023 was \$20 trillion, compared to \$26.8 trillion for the US economy; [8] closing the gap between the two and boosting China’s assertiveness abroad, as reflected in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI envisages the construction of six land corridors and other maritime trade route hubs, creating the largest platform for economic cooperation and infrastructure development –roads, railways, ports and power plants – ever to connect Asia with Europe and Africa.

China’s economic growth and international projection place the U.S. in a major geopolitical dilemma, as the U.S. would have to rely on Russia to prevent its economy being overtaken, and the current war in Ukraine seems to have dynamited all bridges leading in that direction. In this respect, the worst-case scenario for the U.S. is the conversion of Russia into a vassal of Chinese economic power, fuelled by China’s energy dependence and the isolation to which the Putin regime is being subjected by Western powers. The equation of “anti-hegemonic” allies becomes still more complicated if we add Iran to the equation, an issue that set alarms ringing in Washington when, in Beijing in April 2023, China’s mediation efforts successfully brought together Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Middle East’s main antagonists, resulting in a restoration of diplomatic relations that could signal the prelude to a broader reconciliation.

But the new geopolitical trends of the 21st century will not revolve solely around traditional security issues related to poles of state power. Even supposing the trend towards multilateralism or Huntington’s “uni-multipolarity” takes hold, the main challenges to international security will come from issues arising out of climate change, or the emergence of disruptive information technologies that propel us into a “data war” which may derail the central role of states and foster the rise of non-state and transnational economic actors.



Representatives of China and the United States meet to discuss trade relations between the two countries on 21 February 2019. Photo: Tia Dufour/White House/Wikimedia Commons

Climate change-related famine and food crises have already begun to produce population displacements, and could in the not-too-distant future open up a new scenario of geopolitical confrontation between the great powers if the shrinking of Arctic sea ice continues at the current rate. On the other hand, the fight against climate change is encouraging the development of non-fossil energy sources, and this will provoke strategic changes for the control of resources as states currently considered fundamental for energy security lose influence.

On a different level, the competition for control of data will mean a transformation in the gathering, analysis and strategic use of information. This will be fuelled by the development of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, which will improve capacity for analysis and behavioural forecasting, both of which are essential to strategic decision-making. On the other hand, the influx of these technologies in the field of security will increase cyber-attacks and cyber defence, including the ability to break codes and ciphers through quantum computing or the use of blockchain to ensure the reliability of information. In this respect, it is not unreasonable to think that companies such as Google, Palantir Technologies, Oracle, Amazon or IBM may become as influential in ensuring global governance as states are today.

But if one element alone were to define the new dynamics of power and influence, it would be content manipulation technologies, so often employed by Russia or China as a way to influence political processes taking place in third states, so as to lead to practices in the hybrid grey zone, and blurring the lines between war and peace in the process. Advanced message manipulation tools, such as the generation of text and multimedia content through troll farms or artificial intelligence, will be used to create false information, disinformation or propaganda. This will be the main threat to Western-type democracies, which are subject to the vagaries of electoral cycles and based on the right to information and freedom of the

press. If technological development eventually steers us into a world in which fact and fiction are no longer easily discernible, increasing citizen resilience in the face of disinformation seems to be the most sensible way forward.

Content manipulation technologies, used to create disinformation or propaganda, will be the main future threat to Western-type democracies

In conclusion, just as the Carnation Revolution initiated a new wave of democratisation that put an end to the last vestiges of authoritarianism in Europe, the technological revolution could lead to a counter-wave in the 21st century, in which distrust and conspiracy theories eventually hijack the emancipatory project of political liberalism, sowing distrust among citizens of the institutions and states that sustain them. That being the case, the next great global confrontation may not take place in the Pacific or the Arctic, but in the hearts and minds of the people that uphold the world as we know it.

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