Some simple questions for a complicated future

Are we witnessing the end of American leadership?

The American leadership, as was gradually built after the end of the Second World War, rested upon four elements. The first of such pillars was the will of the United States to guide the destiny of the "free world" and its ability to do so; this will underpinned the idea that the United States had a prominent role to play in history, the essence of "American exceptionalism". The second element was a strong network of alliances, both economic and military, woven around America. The third was constituted of a national order who objectives were multilateralism, liberalism, and the respect of civil rights. Finally, the fourth element was the full disappearance of systemic rivals since the collapse of the USSR. Since the turn of the 20th century, these four elements have been strongly eroded.

The end of "American exceptionalism"

The incentives offered by the United States to the rest of the world were made up of a mix of *hard power* and *soft power*, and rested upon three components. The first, economic by nature, encompassed the universality of their currency and the privilege it gave them of indebtedness at will, the dynamism of their enterprises, their scientific potential and their seemingly limitless ability to innovate. The second component was the force of their armies, victorious outcome from the Second World War, and their ability to deploy forces on any battlefield in the world. The third and final component, and maybe the most important, is the cultural component. This rested upon the progressive spread of the English language, Hollywood's ability to spread the idea of the "American dream" across the globe, promoting democratic values and pushing the boundaries of both the known and unknown universe in the collective imagination of humanity. All of this, of course, was made possible through the existence of institutions whose solidity seemed fool-proof and which prevented, via a subtle balance of powers, a government of one man.

These three components are mutually beneficial, reinforcing and strengthening one another. Thus, the wealth created by the American economy enabled the financing of a powerful armament effort, which in itself generated innumerable technological innovations that benefitted all Western society, all heavily praised by the Hollywood machine. What could be more effective in showing the way forward for other nations than to put a man on the moon. The cold war was probably won on that day. Whatever the qualities and flaws the American leaders possessed, they were largely forgiven due to their ability to coordinate the efforts of democracies, reassure their allies, intimidate their enemies and to pave the way for scientific progress, whether that be in the conquest of space or the internet.

America was not only powerful, but she was loved and admired. This admiration drew the most entrepreneurial individuals from all countries, convinced that there, anything was possible. America was the new Athens, *the place to be*, an exceptional nation. This "exceptionalism" of freedom, equality before the law and personal responsibility formed the essence of the American strength.

This "American exceptionalism" has been challenged since the turn of the 20th century. The attacks on September 11th 2001 in their incredible brutality forced George W. Bush to react, and it was this reaction which led to a greater concentration of power in the office of the President, disrupting the subtle game of balances and counterweights. The Presidency of Barack Obama was marked by the

start of a withdrawal from Europe – the famous "pivot" towards Asia – and the desire of the United States to no longer be on the front line, and instead adopt the approach of *leadership from behind*.

However, it was largely Donald Trump who, from the day of his inauguration, declared that the policy of the United States would henceforth only be concerned with protecting American interests. With this he threw the existence of a Western camp into disarray. True to his word, he has shown no willingness to coordinate the efforts in the West in the fight against Covid-19 and, in the midst of the pandemic and, in the midst of the pandemic, the only coherent aspect of his foreign policy was the continue the withdrawal of the United States from the international community. As the former French ambassador to Washington said, "his vision of the world is the conviction that only nation states count and that their relationships can only be based on power struggles."[1]

The result is that today America is no longer envied, at least much less than it was before. Even if the relevance of the dollar persists, and the superiority of its armed forces is indisputable, in the eyes of world America appears as a terribly unequal nation in which sexism, racism and violence are rampant. Now less attached to defending the values that united the Western Camp, America seems to be preoccupied with its own interests, seemingly tired of the role it has occupied since 1941, as the leader of the "free world".

The disintegration of alliances

Of all the Presidents of the United States, Donald Trump is the one who, with apparently no other plan than to follow his impulses, weakened each of the alliances that formed the strength of the Western camp. He paid greater respect to dictators and pseudo-strong men than to his Western counterparts. His slogan "America First" in practice becomes "America All Alone" and "Trump First".

The alliance with Europe, its most longstanding, has been affected in both commercial and military dimensions. On trade, not only have negotiations surrounding transatlantic trade and investment partnership been frozen, but Donald Trump has declared the European Union an "enemy" of the United States. As for NATO, if its description as "brain-dead" by the French President was shocking to many, no one can deny that politically it is in poor condition. The consequence of all of this is that the security guarantee of the US against the Russian threat is being questioned. Even Germany, who were amongst the most pro-American European nations, is now doubting the reliability of their ally.[2]

In South-East Asia, Donald Trump threw away, in January 2017, the draft treaty of the trans-Pacific partnership, for which negotiations had begun in 2008. However, this did not prevent all the other parties from signing it, namely: Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam. In addition, his "friendship" vis- à-vis the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has not led to the nuclear disarmament of this country. Simultaneously, it damaged the relationship of the United States with South Korea and Japan, and so much emphasis had to be placed on these two countries and on the importance of financial compensation. As for America's alliance with the Philippines, that is now a thing of the past.

In the Middle East, US policy seems to be solely determined by two factors: domestic policy and money. Donald Trump has given multiple gifts to his ally Benjamin Netanyahu by transferring the American Embassy to Jerusalem, in proposing the "deal of the century", and finally in accepting the

[1] Gérard Araud – Why we must stop despising Donald Trump – Interview for Le Point journal, 31st May 2020
[2] Survey conducted for the Körber Stiftung – The Berlin Pulse - German foreign policy in times of covid-19, May 2020

idea of an annexation of large swathes of occupied territory, the reason for which seem to be exclusively to satisfy the American Evangelical electorate, which is very much in favour of the restoration of the State of Israel within its biblical boundaries. As for his abandonment of the campaign of America's Kurdish allies in Syria, it only serves to devalue the word of the United States. With regards to Saudi Arabia, the President maintains his support for Mohammed Ben Salmane, irrespective of his actions, without attempting to conceal the fact that American jobs in the arms sector are at risk. This was demonstrated by the Jamal Khashoggi case. Whilst the American President cannot be blamed for hypocrisy, any semblance of moral consideration seems to have disappeared from his foreign policy. Especially following Trumps threat to withdraw missile protection for the country if oil output isn't reduced, in an attempt to save part of the American shale gas industry, staying true to his policy of "America first". In short, this is the question posed by great American political scientist, Joseph S. Nye: *Do morals matter?*[3] As for the policy pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan, whether it be the execution of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani or the "peace agreement" with the Taliban, it is unclear where this policy would lead except to a hasty withdrawal.

Only the alliance forged in the so-called *five-eyes* intelligence community (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom) has so far managed to resist the American President's ramblings. Nevertheless, it comes at a heavy price to these countries; their unconditional alignment to the policy of the United States.

The erosion of multilateralism

The idea of multilateralism was developed by the United States and implemented following the Second World War. Their objective was to stabilise international relationships by weaving a web of interdependency between the constituent states. It founded upon respect for the rule of law and ensures a relatively democratic system, functioning to allow each sovereign state's voice to be heard. It is based on multilateral institutions, both international and regional, which are defined by certain principles such as non-interference, non-discrimination and respect for human rights. The countries adhering to this international system are bound by mutual interest, or reciprocity, in order to achieve "'order above chaos' on a ternary bases: peace and security, prosperity and well-being."[4]

The first true break in multilateralism occurred in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by the United States, without mandate from the UN, at the instruction of then President George W. Bush. This invasion showed the Western camp could be exempted from respecting the rule of law should it be too inconvenient. Barack Obama was also persuaded by his French and British Allies in 2011 to intervene in Libya and remove Muammar Gaddafi from power, well beyond what the 1973 resolution allowed for.

Indeed, the breaches of international law do not come from the United States alone. The actions of Russia in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine in 2014, as well as its unflinching support for the Syrian dictator demonstrated that the most basic human rights could be violated with impunity, with the Security Council powerless in response. China has also played a role in the erosion of multilateralism, if only in its refusal to abide by the decision of the International Court of Arbitration of the Hague in 2016, when the court ruled against China in its litigation with the Philippines. The daily official *Renmin Ribao* even dared to publish the headline: "The abuse of International law will be a blow to

[3] Joseph S. Nye – Do morals matter – Presidents and Foreign Policy from Ford to Trump – Oxford University Press 2020

[4] Régine Perron - The end of multilateralism - A victory for Donald Trump? - Diploweb.com November 4th 2018

international order." Since then, China has notably militarised the *Sprately Islands* and has just dealt a fatal blow to the special status of Hong Kong, in defiance of its international commitments.

It must also be said that Barack Obama also failed to show significant respect for international rules, in particular those pertaining trade, by pushing as far as possible the extraterritoriality of American jurisdiction. One should remember the fine of $9 million imposed on BNP Paribas for braving the financial embargo on Iran and that of a $772 million imposed on Alstom in relation to matters of corruption of non-American officials outside of American territory.

Donald Trump will therefore have had no trouble drivint the last nails into the coffin of multilateralism. In September 2017 he proposed a reform of the UN, officially to render it "more efficient and effective", but in reality, the sole aim was to reduce the financial contribution of the United States. In September 2018, before the General Assembly of the United Nations, he denounced "the ideology of globalism" and declared bluntly that: "America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance". Thus withdrawing the United States from the council of human rights, stating it "will not return there for lack of reform", and will "only pay for the aid programs intended for countries that respect us[the United States]", reiterating that, in his eyes, the International Criminal Court has no legitimacy. Trump will not hesitate to impose sanctions against the judges in The Hague, should they question the responsibilities of American citizens.

The list of treaties and organizations from which Trump has unilaterally withdrawn the United States is long: UNESCO and the Paris climate agreement in 2017; the Iran nuclear agreement in Vienna in 2018; the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty in 2019 and the so-called *Open-Skies* in 2020. He also came close to withdrawing the United States from NATO in 2018. He succeeded in impeding the functionality of the World Trade Organization (WTO) by preventing, since March 2017, the renewal of judges within the Dispute Settlement Body which plays a central role in the action of the institution. The IMF and the World Bank are not spared from Trumps obsessed opposition to multilateralism. He public stated he was opposed to the financial regulation imposed by the IMF, and urged it to abandon aid programs for countries experiencing currency crises. Last but not least, he has just withdrawn the United States from the World Health Organization (WHO).

The emergence of China as a "strategic rival"

Leadership is a relative issue: one can lose it on their own, but one may also lose it due to the emergence of a more powerful rival. However, from the point of view that concerns us, the two scenarios combine. Not only has the United States deliberately undermined the foundations of its leadership, but China has developed itself considerably under the influence of its own dynamism. There have been a series of indicators that show China passed the US in 2014. According to the IMF, China's GDP that year, measured in purchasing power parity (PPP), was $18,205 billion compared to $17, 527 billion for the US. Since then this gap has grown steadily. Also, according to the IMF, China's GDP measured in PPP is expected to reach $30, 956 billion in 2021, compared to the predicted $21, 665 billion for the United States. Certainly, economic power is not all the power, but it constitutes a large part. In the domain of education, whilst the American universities are still in the lead, Chinese universities such as Peking University (Beida), Tsinghua, Fudan or Hong Kong advance each year in the world rankings. In the domain of Science, technology, engineering and mathematics, China produces 1.3 million graduates per year, compared to only 300,000 from the United States.

In the game of multilateralism, China has also played skilfully. Already, in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, it established the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), a sort of economic forum, competing with the G7. Though this organization was hardly more successful than

its western counterpart, it demonstrated the capacity of emerging powers to organize. Likewise in 2013, whilst the United States had for years refused a new distribution of voting rights at the World Bank, Beijing created a rival institution: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which succeeded in bringing together fifty-seven participants, including the United Kingdom, despite intense lobbying from Washington to dissuade states from joining this organization. However, the most noticed initiative is obviously that launched by Xi-Jinping in September 2013 of new silk routes or OBOR ('one belt, one road'), now renamed BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). It was also the most spectacular as it started with sixty-five countries, and today brings together one hundred and forty, including almost all of the African and Middle Eastern countries, as well as a few South American and, in Europe, in particular Greece, Portugal, Malta, Cyprus, Croatia. Today, it has nine hundred projects worth an estimated $1.4 trillion, the discounted equivalent of twelve Marshall Plans.

As nature abhors a vacuum, the withdrawal of the United States leaves the field open to China. So much so that during the Davos summit of 2017 Xi-Jinping did not hesitate to present himself as a defender of free trade! China strives, not without difficulty and not without failure, to build a network of accountable customers that it can influence. The very existence of this network has altered the balance of power between countries by weakening American leadership.

The world is now multipolar, with not real leader

To the initial question – are we heading towards the end of American leadership – the answer is, without hesitation, yes. Is it reversible? Perhaps. One can indeed imagine that a new President of the United States could repair the damage. This would be long and difficult, but nevertheless still possible. After all, only American *soft power* was affected by the Trump presidency[5]. Its *hard power* remains intact and the Western allies are only asking to reconnect with the America they have always known.

However, there is one thing that will not change: the formidable place taken by China in international relations. China will not stop growing in order to please Westerners. Neither it, nor India, Russia or even Brazil should it emerge from its difficulties in a competitive state. The unipolar world in which the West, through America, held first place is disappearing before our eyes and the Covid-19 Crisis, like lightning in a summer sky, has only brought light to the darker corners of this transformation. The question, then, is not so much that of the end of Western leadership, as that of whether the declining power of the West can peacefully exist with the rising power of China.

[5] Gilles Paris and Marie Bourreau – The United States: "Soft Power", game over? – Le Monde 23rd May 2020