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“The Decline of the West”: What is it, and Why Might it Matter?

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ABSTRACT

The international order created under the auspices of “American hegemony” appears to be unraveling during the erratic and nationalistic leadership of Donald Trump, and the growing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between the United States and China. Many commentators fear that such tensions will lead to the demise of the so-called rules-based international order in particular, and to the declining influence of values, principles and norms associated with “the West” in general. This paper analyses these developments by putting them in historical context, considering what was distinctive about the “rise of the West”, and explaining why the relative decline of American influence may prove so consequential. The key questions that animate the discussion are: what is at stake in the possible decline of the West? Does the rise of China presage the emergence of a very different sort of international order than the one currently dominant?

Keywords

United States, China, Hegemony, Asia Pacific, Bilateral Relation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Few people today would remember a world not dominated by the United States (US). This dominance has been both challenged and controversial at times, but American foreign policy for more than half a century has exerted a powerful influence across much of the world. Even countries that disliked the US — and there were and are plenty of those — were shaped in part by their response to the reality of “American hegemony”.¹ Significantly, the US saw itself as championing a particular set of values that were quintessentially “Western” and a product of a distinct historical experience that originated in the European Enlightenment (Smith 1994). That unparalleled period of global influence may be coming to an end, many observers believe (Layne 2012, Pape 2009). At the very least, most of the ideas, institutions and interests that distinguished this period are less powerful now than they have been for decades (Bremmer 2012, Wade 2010).

To understand such an unprecedented change in the prevailing international order, deciding what this might mean and whether it will be a good or a bad thing rather depends on the perspective. International orders have collapsed and empires have fallen before, but none has had quite the global reach as the American imperium. The world’s people are stakeholders in the international system that the US had such a prominent role in creating, after World War II; one way or the other, they will all be affected by its possible demise. Many American policymakers and commentators think this would be an unmitigated disaster — if they acknowledge the possibility at all (Krauthammer 2009, Joffe 2009). Yet many people in other parts of the world would regard this as a potentially welcome development, not least because it may allow them a larger, less constrained role in national, regional or global affairs (Hurrell 2010, Mead 2014, Rachman 2016).

The biggest potential beneficiary of, and contributor to, the international reordering is the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Its re-emergence as a great power is unprecedented, especially in terms of the speed and scale, and this has materially contributed to the relative decline of American power (Rachman 2011). China’s remarkable ascendancy has also made it difficult to decide quite what sort of order will emerge as a consequence, and whether it will be orderly. By contrast, American power for long periods of time — most obviously during the Cold War — imparted a degree of predictability to international affairs.

¹ The literature on hegemony in general and American dominance in particular is vast. See Agnew, John. 2005. *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Bacevich, Andrew J. 2002. *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of US Diplomacy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press; Brooks, Stephen, and William Wohlforth. 2016. *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century*: Oxford University Press; Cox, Robert W. 1987. *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History*. New York: Columbia University Press.

At least it did for countries fortunate enough to be either away from the sharp end of superpower rivalries or cut off from the prosperity that distinguished and *legitimated* much of the era of American dominance (Brooks and Wohlforth 2009, Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990). Indeed, a frequently remarked-upon feature of America's global role has been the nature of its "soft power", which made the actual pursuit of various geopolitical goals potentially that much easier (Nye 2004). Belief in the desirability of these goals is not necessary to recognize that the acquiescence or active support of other powers significantly reduced the transaction costs associated with perpetuating American hegemony in particular and Western influence in general.

However, as Marx famously observed, all that is solid can melt into air. This is precisely the situation as the foundations of the old order appear to buckle, not least because of the actions of the US's unpredictable, erratic and nationalistic current president (Haass 2018, Beeson 2020). Still, Donald Trump may have only accelerated a process that was already in train, as a series of material and ideational forces undermined Western dominance. As such, it is timely to ask how the West came to rule and what is at stake in the possible decline of its most important contemporary champion. If the US is no longer prepared to defend the order it did so much to create, can the order possibly endure? Would that outcome be as disastrous as some predict? Could other powers, particularly China, pick up the leadership mantle? What would a China-led order look like?

These are important questions at this moment in history. Much of the discussion focuses on the different historical experiences, values and ambitions of China and the US, as their actions and bilateral relationship will have an outsized influence on the future of the international system. The rise of "the West" and the US must first be placed in historical context. While much about this process remains admirable, its continuity is not guaranteed. Indeed, the rise, fall and re-emergence of China are a powerful reminder that the fates of nations and civilizations can change. The second part of this essay then maps the forces that have contributed to the apparent waning influence of Western values — and the US's rather paradoxical role in this decline. The final part of the paper considers the subsequent impact on the future of the international order, especially at a time that the world also faces immense collective-action challenges. The ability to deal with the ongoing Covid-19 outbreak, climate change and environmental deterioration will be not only a test of the efficacy of a possibly post-American international order, but also — for better or worse — a help in defining the order itself.

2. THE RISE OF THE WEST

For much of the past few hundred years, something called “the West” has exercised an enormous influence over international affairs. Indeed, the most important constituent of the international system is still the state, an institution that emerged in its modern form in Western Europe 400 or 500 years ago (Spruyt 2002). A lively debate continues about the origins and drivers of state formation in Europe and elsewhere. But the particular form that the state assumed in Western Europe, and its close association with highly effective forms of organized violence (Tilly 1990), help to explain why it was the European powers that colonized the world rather than vice versa.² What does “the West” mean, and the more nebulous concept of “Western civilization”?

Talking about “civilization” in either the singular or plural form has become rather unfashionable and contentious, not least because of the contribution of the late Samuel Huntington (Huntington 1996). His claim of a looming “clash of civilizations” that would spark confrontation between different parts of the world, unleashed a torrent of commentary, most of it negative (Chiozza 2002, Barker 2013). To be sure, much of Huntington’s analysis was sweeping, but it did highlight the surprisingly enduring differences across the world in cultural values, beliefs and attitudes to what might broadly be described as “modernity” (Appadurai 1996). This is another loaded concept, but some observers — most notably Francis Fukuyama, Huntington’s student — thought that particular forms of economic and social organization that prevailed in Europe, North America and other liberal democracies, would eventually become universal (Fukuyama 1992).

Like Huntington’s ideas, Fukuyama’s generated an abundance of observations, much of them unfavorable, especially as subsequent events undermined the claims about the durability and attractiveness of ideas, principles and values associated primarily with the West. Yet, it is unsurprising that Fukuyama thought the way he did in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when the spread of global capitalism seemed inexorable and alternatives to some form of liberalism or democracy appeared to have been permanently discredited. Of course, far from ending, history continues to profoundly shape the present, and much of it is decidedly non-Western.

2.1 AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS YET TO COME

Asked what he thought of Western civilization, Mahatma Gandhi famously quipped that it sounded like a good idea. He was being ironic, but in many ways, it still does. Indeed, the inherent attractiveness of some Western thought and principles is precisely why Fukuyama and others felt that educated, rational people everywhere would inevitably recognize the

² Even this fairly unremarkable claim has been criticized as excessively Eurocentric and mono-causal. See Sharman, Jason C. 2017. “*Myths of Military Revolution: European Expansion and Eurocentrism.*” *European Journal of International Relations* 24 (3): 491-53.).

superiority and advantages. However, to suggest that some ideas, let alone civilizational values, might be superior to others is decidedly unfashionable in the current intellectual environment (Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

This is partly a good thing: defining “the West” is difficult, and tends to erase the histories, values and achievements of other parts of the world. In Fernand Braudel’s thinking, civilization is “something which can persist through a series of economies or societies, barely susceptible to gradual change” (Braudel 1995), and is only understandable from a long-term perspective. Not only do other civilizations persist, but also Western civilization is far from the oldest or most enduring. Indeed, China can lay claim to having the world’s longest-continuing civilization, and one that exerted a powerful influence over the surrounding region. Moreover, there is a scholarly growth industry dedicated to drawing attention to China’s impact on development at a global level (Frank 1998, Hobson 2004).

Recognition of non-Western values and achievements raises as many questions as it answers, however. For example, why did China fail to develop the sort of modern states and social relationships that allowed capitalism to flourish in the West? Why does the idea of democratic emancipation — for all its current flaws and problems — continue to inspire revolutionary movements such as the short-lived Arab Spring? Similarly, are some ideas and principles — female emancipation comes to mind — unambiguously better than others? Are critics of culturally specific phenomena such as “Asian values” correct to suggest that they are a convenient legitimization for authoritarian rule and much else, rather than equally valid manifestations of cultural difference (Thompson 2004)?

These are complex and ideologically fraught questions. Yet, champions of the Western Enlightenment that transformed so much of Europe ever since the 17th century would claim “all ideas have to come from somewhere, and their birthplace has no bearing on their merit” (Pinker 2018). In other words, some ways of thinking rationally and scientifically about the world are unambiguously better, and more productive and accurate than others; the Earth really does orbit the Sun rather than vice versa and this is true no matter where we live or to what cultural values we may subscribe (Collins and Evans 2008). Whether the secular rationalism that underpins scientific reasoning is compatible with some cultural values and beliefs, though, is another question (Hornsey and Fielding 2017), and one that can be conflated with hostility to Western imperialism (Harding 1993).

Seen in historical context, it is understandable why some peoples, cultures and civilizations might feel threatened and resentful. After all, as Niall Ferguson points out in his historically grounded defense of British and by extension, American hegemony, when Britain was the world’s dominant power, Victorians “dreamt not only of ruling the world, but of redeeming it” (Ferguson 2003). This rather patronizing assumption of cultural superiority has been embedded in both the American and the British hegemonic eras, and grates so much with subject peoples, lesser powers and many contemporary scholars (Barkawi and Laffey 2002).

That “civilization” could also denote a form of superior moral values is a controversial idea at an historical moment much more sensitized to the possibility of plural values and social

practices, but much less dogmatic and much less willing to make judgments about which might be more desirable or defensible (Rorty 1991). This lack of confidence in defending Western values has become part of the so-called culture wars, and has major implications for the status of scientific knowledge and of collective capacity to address problems such as climate change (Hoffman 2012). It has also become a source of the growing tide of nationalism and populism, and of the shrinking faith in expertise and democratic governance that is becoming a feature of the Western world.

2.2 THE IDEA OF THE WEST IN THE WIDER WORLD

Critics of the negative aspects of Western imperialism are legion, and have been since Lenin, Marx, Hobson and others drew attention to the exploitative and disempowering impact of the European powers on much of the world. The destructive consequences of European colonial rule on local cultures and the debilitating effect of the core-periphery relations that became such a structurally embedded feature of the evolving global economy have been exhaustively documented. Clearly there were, and are, decisive first-mover advantages in economic development patterns that have become increasingly internationalized. Recently, several sophisticated analyses have emerged of how such processes contributed to the enduring patterns of “uneven development” that continue to distinguish the international economy.³ This does not necessarily mean that the ideas and cultural practices arising in Western Europe during the Enlightenment were without value. Nor does it mean that the European experience did not provide potentially valuable lessons — even if they were only about how to exercise “geoeconomic” influence more effectively (Luttwak 1993, Scholvin and Wigell 2018). As explained later, growing geoeconomic competition between the world’s major powers is a defining feature of this era; an examination of its evolution helps to clarify what is at stake in the possible decline of Western influence.

The Western powers in general and Britain in particular benefited enormously from the development of capitalism and the subsequent industrial revolution. There were major negative social and, more recently, environmental consequences (Klein 2014), but the increase in productivity and wealth creation associated with capitalist economies was remarkable. The big question is why this happened in Europe rather than China, which in many ways was more “advanced”. Possible explanations have generated a good deal of debate, but a few uncontroversial points remain relevant for the way development and international relations are thought about at a theoretical and practical level.

³ See *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press; Smith, Neil. 2008. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Third ed. London: Verso; Chacko, Priya, and Kanishka Jayasuriya. 2017. "A Capitalising Foreign Policy: Regulatory Geographies and Transnationalised State Projects." *European Journal of International Relations* 24 (1): 82-105.

First, if it is accepted that social development broadly is dependent upon an effective “bundle of technological, subsistence, organizational and cultural accomplishments” (Morris 2010), then evidently some parts of Europe managed to develop the material and social conditions for more productive economic practices to flourish. Crucially, according to Joel Mokyr, cultural change in Europe encouraged the development of technical knowledge, scientific progress and economic expansion. “The unique power” of the European Enlightenment was that it eventually affected not only Europe but also every corner of the world, he suggests; “to stress this asymmetry cannot be dismissed as Eurocentric or ‘essentialist’” (Mokyr 2017). That different societies might have different institutions that not only reduced transaction costs, but also encouraged economic activity and expansion, is a well-established and relatively uncontroversial idea (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, North 1990). More challenging and contentious is the implication that some patterns of social relations might be less suited to successful economic development (de Soto 2000).

Second, China possibly did not become the epicenter of global economic expansion because it lacked the type of entrepreneurial dynamism and class tensions that seemed an essential part of the European experience. Fukuyama claims that, like Europe, the early Chinese state was a product of war and a struggle for political survival but, unlike Europe, China “created a modern state that was not restrained by the rule of law or by institutions of accountability to limit the power of the sovereign” (Fukuyama 2011). While some parts of Europe went through a painful and drawn-out process of overthrowing absolutist rule and giving power to a rising bourgeoisie and then to the population (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992), this did not happen in China. One reason for this noteworthy difference, and the persistence and legitimacy of a “strong” state in China, is that “democracy in Asia is conceived of as a means of strengthening the authority of the state”, argues Bruce Gilley (Gilley 2014).

This is not simply an historical curiosity. As Barrington Moore points out, without an independent and powerful bourgeoisie, the chances of making a transition to democracy are significantly reduced (Moore 1966 [1987]). Bin Wong argues that China’s agrarian empire followed a different, less economically and *politically* dynamic logic (Wong 1997). The result? Contrary to the expectations of many Western scholars who assumed that their own historical experience provided a universal template, China has inconveniently failed to replicate European history, despite rising living standards and an increasingly educated population (Wright 2010). This awkward social fact is a challenge to Western scholarship, and the basis of growing competition between Chinese and American models of economic and political governance. To assess what this competition might mean for the hegemony of the West in general and the US in particular, it is worth exploring how America came to dominate international affairs and why its values became so influential.

3. THE WORLD AMERICA MADE

In many ways, the US is the quintessential expression of the Enlightenment and of the values, ideas and principles that emerged in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries. America's own struggle for independence was inspired directly by European ideas about political and religious liberty, and was powerfully enunciated in the writing of Thomas Paine in particular (Hunt 1987). But once they achieved independence and unified an enlarged nation-state, America's leaders immediately had to turn their minds to their relationship with the rest of the world. From the outset, it was evident to Alexander Hamilton, for example, that the US would ultimately be "able to dictate the terms of the connection between the Old and the New World" (Drace-Francis 2013). It is not hard to see why. America's geographical advantages, natural resources and sheer social and economic dynamism meant it would inevitably play a major role in international affairs (Bayly 2004). The only real questions were how soon and to what purpose.

George Washington's farewell speech urged Americans to avoid foreign "attachments and entanglements", especially with Europe. At one level, this advice seems to have been followed, as America's belated and unenthusiastic involvement in both World Wars suggests. The reality is a good deal more complex. A nation with the inherent power and external influence of the US could not have remained "isolated" even if it had wanted to. It still cannot. Indeed, Walter McDougall completely rejects the isolationist label and claims that the US has always pursued a form of "global meliorism", or the "socio-economic and politico-cultural expression of the American mission to make the world a better place" (McDougall 1997). American "exceptionalism" and the belief that it provides a model for the world resulted in what Tony Smith describes as a sort of "anti-imperial imperialism" (Smith 1994), a contradictory set of ideas that has led many American commentators and people to reject the notion of the US as a "normal" great power, much less an imperial one. This essentially benign and productive vision is captured well by Robert Kagan, from whom this section's heading is borrowed:

The most important features of today's world — the great spread of democracy, the prosperity, the prolonged great-power peace — have depended directly and indirectly on power and influence exercised by the United States. No other power could have or would have influenced the world the way Americans have because no other nation shares, or has ever shared, their particular combination of qualities (Kagan 2012).

While the values and interests associated with the US doubtlessly influenced the international system profoundly, there is less agreement about the impact of "American hegemony", and about the best way to describe the unparalleled extent of American power. Many American commentators have, like Kagan, emphasized the positive aspects of US foreign policy, stressing the role of "soft" rather than "hard" power. Soft power, as articulated by Joseph Nye, is "the ability to set the agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others" (Nye 2002). Even "critical" scholars have recognized that part of the success and durability of so-called American hegemony has derived from its creation of "an order based ideologically on a broad measure of consent, functioning according to general principles that

in fact ensure the continuing supremacy of the leading state or states and leading social classes but at the same time offer some measure or prospect of satisfaction for the less powerful” (Cox 1987). Put differently, other capitalist states and allies of the US derived clear potential advantages from the order the US ultimately established, even if broadly conceived American interests were the main beneficiaries.

The idea of American isolationism remains so powerful because the nature of its engagement with “international society” looks strikingly different before and after World War II.⁴ Hegemony in this context can be thought of as “an institutionalized practice of special rights and responsibilities, conferred by international society or a constituency within it, on a state (or states) with the resources to lead” (Clark 2011). The period between the two World Wars was distinguished by an unprecedented global economic crisis that Charles Kindleberger’s highly influential analysis attributed to a failure of leadership. To function effectively, Kindleberger argued, the dominant power of the era must provide the sorts of collective goods that were vital elements of a functioning “open” and liberal international order. The principal cause of the depth and duration of the Great Depression “was the inability of the British to continue their role of underwriters to the system and the reluctance of the United States to take it on until 1936” (Kindleberger 1973).

Yet, even if leaders seek to lead, historically specific domestic and international constraints may hamper even the most powerful states from asserting influence decisively. Woodrow Wilson may have desired to lead when he tried to make the world “safe for democracy” after World War I, for example, but the failure of the League of Nations and the restraining impact of domestic politics seemed to confirm the difficulties in achieving international cooperation. Realism rather than idealism was taken to be the natural and enduring order of things (Carr 1939), and America’s foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II was shaped by the power politics of thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau (Morgenthau 1973). Post-war policymakers and strategic thinkers in the US saw it as an integral part of *America’s* “national interest” to impose order on the international system and to accept what US President Harry Truman described as the “continued burden of responsibility for world leadership” (Weldes 1996). The definitive imperative animating American policy was the perceived need to counter Soviet expansionism. Like the US, the Soviet Union had emerged from the war with its strategic influence and capability greatly enhanced.

Many saw the Soviet version of communism as a more promising and durable economic model than a capitalist order that had become synonymous with stagnation and crisis between the wars. Indeed, the ideological competition between the US and the Soviet Union that was such a distinctive feature of the Cold War, prefigures in some ways the current

⁴ The “English School” of international relationship theory has done most to track the emergence of international society, which Barry Buzan suggests is distinguished by “the institutionalization of shared interest and identity amongst states” (Buzan 2001). The point is that international affairs are a dynamic social process.

confrontation between the US and China. Yet the US managed to ward off the Soviet challenge, and American influence has been enduring and may prove difficult to replace, the Trump presidency notwithstanding. Crucially, successful economic development was seen as a critical part of the new international order, as John Lewis Gaddis, the preeminent analyst of the Cold War, points out (Gaddis 1982).

3.1 INSTITUTIONALIZING HEGEMONY

Hegemonic leadership can be thought of as either consensual or coercive, and at times the US has demonstrated both aspects. Even in an era characterized by increasingly complex forms of “global governance”, states and the authority they can exercise remain decisive (Drezner 2007). One paradox in this context that confronts the US — and potentially China — is that “to safeguard its authority requires that the United States embed its coercive capabilities even deeper into multilateral institutions that can provide real checks on potential opportunism” (Lake 2010). For some observers, the willingness of the US to voluntarily constrain and institutionalize its power has accounted for its durability, acceptance and effectiveness (Ikenberry 1998). For others, the creation of an “empire of [military] bases” is the quintessential expression of American coercive power to which subordinate states are forced to contribute in return for security (Johnson 2000).

Indeed, the entire project of economic openness and the promotion of economic liberalism and “globalization” is, according to Andrew Bacevich, designed “to preserve and, where both feasible and conducive to US interests, to expand the American imperium” (Bacevich 2002). But whether hegemony is being conferred by international society or imposed by the dominant power of the era, it is clear that although the purposes, capacities and quality of leadership continue to matter, they are subject to contingent, historically specific constraints.

In this regard, the period after World War II was auspicious for the US. True, the Soviet Union presented a powerful ideological and strategic challenge, but this actually helped the US to enhance its influence over allies and states unsympathetic to the communist cause. Two complementary aspects of this process are noteworthy. First, the US oversaw the establishment of a series of strategic alliances that were designed to deter and counteract Soviet expansion. Second, the creation of the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) and a highly institutionalized form of hegemonic influence provided an enduring mechanism through which the US was able to promote its values and a liberal economic order (Beeson 2019b).

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was the most important manifestation of the strategic impulse in Europe (Ash 2004), but the US also established a series of “hub and spoke” relationships across much of East Asia. Significantly, these alliances and the dominant strategic position of the US allowed its policymakers to exercise “near-total control over the foreign and domestic affairs of its allies, and created an asymmetry of power that rendered inconceivable counterbalancing by smaller countries, on their own or in concert with others” (Cha 2016). Even though the original threat posed by the Soviet Union has long since disappeared, these alliances largely remain in place and present China with a major

strategic constraint within what its leaders increasingly regard as their own traditional sphere of influence (Zhang 2015).

However, though America's strategic alliances and troop presences across the region are significant, the most innovative aspects of US hegemonic power are the BWIs: the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade⁵. These institutions have proved to be a durable, influential part of an increasingly global form of governance. However, they are "global" in terms of geographic reach and influence, not in terms of equality of influence or participation. Indeed, the US from their inception has maintained a dominant sway over these notionally independent organizations, which remain committed to promoting and policing a broadly liberal economic order (Cammack 2003, Frieden 2006). Having said that, it should be acknowledged that the US was instrumental in creating the United Nations (UN) in the aftermath of World War II, an organization that, despite well-known problems, remains an expression of international idealism and potential cooperation. Indeed, Mark Mazower notes that with the UN, "an organization it had done more than any other to set up, the United States was back in the world, fully committed to a new version of the internationalist principles it had betrayed in 1920" (Mazower 2012).

The story of the creation of the BWIs has been often told (Steil 2013), but potentially important lessons can be drawn from their largely unprecedented development.⁶ First, the BWIs were a product of their time. The experience of the Great Depression, when the mistakes and misjudgments of interwar policymakers contributed to the trauma of a massive economic downturn, was something their post-war counterparts were desperate to avoid. There was a widespread belief — thanks in no small part to the brilliant analyses of John Maynard Keynes (Keynes 2004) — that policymakers could and should manage international economic activity to avoid similar catastrophes in the future (Ikenberry 1992). The Soviet Union notably offered a plausible alternative to a discredited capitalist model. Powerful incentives existed therefore for American policymakers to create an international order that offered some prospect of encouraging economic development and restoring the reputation of capitalism. The US did this with a key instrument now described as "geoeconomics". It is another policy paradigm from which China appears to have drawn important lessons.

3.2 PIONEERING GEOECONOMICS

The idea that powerful states might use economic leverage to influence other states or private-sector actors is not new. David Baldwin, for example, provided an influential guide to the economic tools and strategies potentially available to policymakers in economically consequential states (Baldwin 1985). Significantly, despite the US's emergence as the

⁵ The World Trade Organization has superseded the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

⁶ Although the growth of international institutions is a feature of modernity, the scale and impact of the BWIs were of a different order from what had gone before.

notional champion of free trade and an open international economic order, some of these techniques such as tariffs, boycotts, blacklists, import controls and preferential buying strategies are coming back in fashion under the Trump administration. America's current approach to trade is radically at odds with the multilateral approach to economic relations that had characterized — rhetorically, at least — previous administrations. To be sure, the administrations of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan were prone to acting unilaterally or to applying bilateral pressure when it suited them, but the Trump administration wears its repudiation of multilateralism and America's notional role as the foundation of a rule-governed international economic order as a badge of honor (Rachman 2018, Ip 2018).

Leadership matters in explaining policy shifts, but so does historical context and calculation of the best way of pursuing national interest. After World War II, seemingly facing a credible threat to its dominance and to capitalism's status as the principal mechanism for fostering economic development, the US embarked upon the largest aid and assistance project the world had ever seen at that time (Kunz 1997). The Marshall Plan may have been primarily an economic project, but it was part of a broader Cold War security strategy that was predicated on restoring the devastated economies of Western Europe and Japan (Pollard 1985). One key issue that the Marshall Plan was intended to address, alongside the more obvious, ostensible issue of restoring economic stability, was “how to harness Germany's resources to the cause of European recovery without restoring its pre-war hegemony or reinvigorating the economic nationalism and autarky that had twice led to world war” (Hogan 1988). Much the same combination of grand strategy and economic statecraft informed American strategy towards Japan. American policy wanted not only to see a restored Japan as a necessary bulwark against communist expansion in Northeast Asia, but also to ensure that its former foe posed no threat to future strategic stability, something the post-war security relationship guaranteed. As Kenneth Pyle points out, “The purpose of the alliance was not only to defend but also to restrain Japan” (Pyle 2007).

As circumstances changed, however, so did the calculus of US national interests. If geoeconomics was thought of as “applying economic instruments to advance geopolitical ends” (Blackwill and Harris 2016), then one paradox of America's post-war geoeconomic strategy was that it was all too successful (Stubbs 2005). Not only did US policy restore the fortunes of Germany and Japan in particular, but it also created formidable economic competitors in the process. Expanding trade deficits — still considered a major problem by American policymakers despite real doubts about these figures' usefulness in a globalized economy — added to acute budget problems as the US fought a ruinously expensive conflict in Vietnam. This combination of economic pressures caused the Nixon administration to unilaterally abandon the dollar's notional relationship with gold, effectively ending a key element of the overall Bretton Woods regime (Gowa 1983).

The temptation to unilaterally exploit hegemonic power in pursuit of national rather than collective interests is ever present (Skidmore 2011), and highlights the sometimes-incompatible nature of coherent geoeconomic goals. In a forerunner of today's trade war with China, the US during the 1980s put enormous political pressure on a close ally, Japan,

to revalue its currency in an effort to reduce America's trade deficit. That this policy was unsuccessful and eventually produced a major economic crisis in Japan from which that nation has never entirely recovered, has not discouraged the Trump administration from trying similar tactics against China, its current economic nemesis. One common aspect of both periods was the sense that the US was disadvantaged by the supposedly unfair economic practices of Asian rivals, rather than any domestic problems in the US economy. Drawing attention to the changing calculus and techniques of economic policy in the 1990s, Edward Luttwak argues that in peacetime, "the support of technologically advanced companies or entire industries is an instrument of state power. Thus, it is not more or not less than the continuation of the ancient rivalry of the nations by new industrial means" (Luttwak 1993).

These historical examples foreshadow many of today's problems between the US and China, and help to explain why, despite its status as a foundational element of the Western model, the US is not always a champion of economic liberalism and often has abandoned the political variety.

3.3 HEGEMONY UNRAVELING

The Trump administration's actions have done much to undermine the BWIs and the institutionalized relationships with other Western powers that underpinned the post-war international order. Donald Trump's disdain for security organizations such as NATO (Erlanger and Bennhold 2019) and his deliberate undermining of key institutions such as the World Trade Organization (Brewster 2018) have dismayed staunch US allies. Equally importantly, Trump's unpredictability and lack of commitment to the very order his predecessors did so much to construct has created an opportunity for China in particular to try to position itself as a champion of globalization and a force for stability in international affairs (Xi 2018). No matter how intuitively unlikely this may seem, that such claims are taken seriously at all is a testimony to the diminished leadership credentials of the US (Bremmer 2018). However, while the Trump administration may have accelerated the relative decline, this was already in place before he came to power. Some of the drivers have been external, but some have been homegrown.

Perhaps the single greatest contributor to the waning of American influence and authority was the administration of George W Bush. Egged on by his neo-conservative supporters (Mann 2004), Bush embarked on an entirely needless, ineffective and expensive war of choice against Iraq, the unresolved consequences of which have continued to haunt subsequent administrations (Beeson 2019b). At the same time, the Bush administration's lax oversight and regulation of the domestic financial system created the preconditions for the strikingly misnamed global financial crisis (GFC), the impact of which was largely restricted to the US itself and the European Union (Breslin 2011b). The continuing depth of financial ties between the US and Europe is often overlooked. But as Adam Tooze points out in a brilliant analysis of the GFC and its aftermath, "the entire structure of international banking in the early twenty-first century was transatlantic" in which "regulators were utterly subservient

to the logic of the businesses they were supposed to be regulating” (Tooze 2018). As a result of the GFC, from which the PRC emerged relatively unscathed, China’s international standing was actually enhanced relative to the comparatively discredited model of Western capitalism (Whitley 2009).

Barack Obama has been criticized for his alleged indecisiveness and caution regarding the Middle East (Dueck 2015), but any American president would think twice about making an open-ended commitment of US forces to yet another conflict in somewhere like Syria. Indeed, Donald Trump is discovering how difficult it is to extricate the US from places like Afghanistan (Harris 2019), despite all his pre-election talk about bringing the troops home. It is worth remembering that immediately upon taking office, President Obama had to stabilize the global economy and repair the damage inflicted by the GFC, and not just on the domestic economy. Indeed, a problematic legacy of the Bush years was the enormous damage to American soft power (Pape 2009), something the Trump administration seems determined to repeat.

Much of this story is well known, if often forgotten by revisionists keen to gloss over the mistakes of the past. But it is important to recognize the long-term injury inflicted on America’s authority and standing in the world, as well as some less obvious effects on the US’s economic position and influence. China has been at the forefront of countries drawing attention to the well-known benefits that accrue to the US as the provider of the world’s reserve currency (Johnson 2018) — an “exorbitant privilege” that a number of rising powers deeply resent (Eichengreen 2011). The US has long had a capacity to use its currency’s unique position for its own national benefit (Kirshner 1995). Jonathan Kirshner points out that as a consequence of the GFC and as the dangers of a poorly regulated economy and dominant financial system became clearer, “the scales have fallen from the eyes of Chinese elites...about the true (and dangerous) nature of uninhibited financial regulation” (Kirshner 2014). America’s problems had the perverse impact of encouraging Chinese policymakers to reinforce, rather than relax, their oversight and control of their domestic economy (Economy 2018b).

Being unhappy with the status quo is one thing, changing or replacing its principal architect is quite another. Nonetheless, that other countries are voicing unhappiness and attempting to respond to America’s increasingly nationalistic approach to the global economy is telling. To understand why America’s role as the standard bearer of Western liberalism might be in doubt, the complex range of forces currently undermining its hitherto dominant position need to be considered. The unprecedented rise of China has understandably attracted the most attention in this context, but this is not the only contributing factor to the diminished influence of the West. Also unclear is whether China could replace the US as the leader of a different sort of international order — should it really want to, which is also far from certain.

4. THE RISE OF THE REST

For much of the past 200 years, the West and many of the ideas and principles associated with it have been in the ascendant. To be sure, a number of Western states, including the US (Prestowitz 2003), have not always practiced what they preached about being good international citizens. But that has not stopped some ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment becoming the notional foundation of the contemporary international system. One vivid illustration is the creation of the UN and its commitment to common values that apply to all people, regardless of specific histories or cultures. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights with its focus on individual liberty, equality and the rule of law remains an admirable statement of Enlightenment values and rationality.

Achieving agreement on how laudable intentions might be operationalized has not been easy. The problems confronting the UN as it seeks to fulfill its manifold responsibilities are well known and have been extensively documented (Weiss et al 2018). The rather anachronistic power and conduct of the Security Council, and the difficulties in achieving democratic representation and legitimacy that confront all intergovernmental bodies, have been especially acute for the UN with its all-inclusive membership and daunting mandate. In some opinions, the European Union (EU) has faced even more challenges as it aims to address novel economic, political and strategic difficulties while maintaining the loyalty of European citizens (Zielonka 2012). Given the importance of the EU, not least as one of the very few relatively successful examples of institutionalized cooperation across national borders, much is at stake should the EU either fail or be reduced to a semblance of its formerly powerful and effective reality.

Simply put, the EU is the quintessential embodiment of many — invariably admirable — ideas associated with the West. It also was instrumental in pacifying a part of the world that was synonymous with state-sponsored violence on an industrial scale, and with forms of religious intolerance and prejudice. The levels of economic development in Europe remain impressive and enviable, which explains its attraction for many would-be migrants from poorer neighbors and/or former colonial subjects (Barber 2018). Few historical examples exist of successful and enduring transnational cooperation, so the EU assumes a talismanic importance in debates about future global orders. Its current problems are comfort to those who dislike its principles and would desire to establish an alternative international set of institutions animated by different values (Beeson 2019b).

4.1 CHINA CHANGES EVERYTHING

In this context, the rise of China is emblematic of a rapidly changing global order in which Western dominance and influence are less assured. But China is not the only one. A noteworthy feature of the rapidly evolving contemporary international order is the “rise of the rest” (Zakaria 2008), in which several aspiring great powers, most of them authoritarian, are jostling for influence and recognition. This was possibly an inevitable reaction to the dominance of the developed over the developing economies, or, to put it in more politically

correct language, the “North” over the “South”. While such a change could be overdue and welcome, it should be recognized as part of a wider fragmentation and transformation of established patterns of “global governance”, and the struggle to address international collective-action problems. As Stewart Patrick observes:

Collective action is no longer focused solely, or even primarily, on the UN and other universal, treaty-based institutions, nor even on a single apex forum such as the G-20. Rather, governments have taken to operating in many venues simultaneously, participating in a bewildering array of issue-specific networks and partnerships whose membership varies based on situational interests, shared values, and relevant capabilities (Patrick 2014).

Two eye-catching developments in this regard are the G-20 and BRICS (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and, more recently, South Africa). In the latter initiative, although the other countries are geographically, demographically and geopolitically consequential, they are all overshadowed by China economically. Despite much excited commentary, BRICS has yet to make a significant collective impact on the international system, and to entirely resolve its internal differences, national priorities and potentially competing world views (Beeson and Zeng 2018). The emergence of such groups and China’s efforts to construct an alternate institutional and even normative order are noteworthy, however. As Mazower points out, the relative diminution of Western influence has been at least partly self-inflicted:

Rushed and poorly thought through, a sequence of Western policies — from modernization through structural adjustment to the sweeping societal reforms the Wolfensohn-era World Bank sought to implement — have created a trail of havoc that makes the more ideologically minimalist approach from Beijing look socially responsible (Mazower 2012).

China has attracted so much attention, of course, because of its remarkable economic transformation, which has occurred at an unprecedented speed and scale. If nothing else, this is a powerful reminder that material transformations in the international system — redistributions in the balance of power perhaps — make some countries more important and potentially influential (Mearsheimer 2019, Brzezinski 2012).⁷ It is not necessary to subscribe to the currently fashionable assumptions about “hegemonic transitions” (Chan 2008, Beeson 2009), “Thucydides’ traps” (Allison 2017) or other realist-derived conceptual frameworks to recognize that China is of interest because it matters. Having said that, China’s prominent place in the international scheme of things is not unprecedented. For most of recorded history the Middle Kingdom has been at the center of things (Kang 2007); China’s current status may be no more than a return to the historical norm. Whatever the merits of that argument, the desire for international recognition and “greatness” animates both China’s contemporary leadership and its people (Deng 2008). The days of “hiding your strength and

⁷ For a contrasting perspective, see Acharya, Amitav. 2014. "Power Shift or Paradigm Shift? China's Rise and Asia's Emerging Security Order." *International Studies Quarterly* 58 (1): 158-73.

biding your time”, as advocated by Deng Xiaoping, arguably China’s most important recent leader, seem to be well and truly over (Yan 2014).

The high profile and controversial aspect of China’s re-emergence as a great power has been its growing strategic capability in general, and its contested territorial claims in the South and East China Seas in particular. Views differ on the validity of China’s entitlements, but a few points are worth making.

First, China’s increasingly assertive, some would say aggressive, behavior in the region, combined with its rapid military modernization, seems to conform the fears and predictions of realists (Mearsheimer 2018). This does not mean that war between China and the US is inevitable, but it does increase the risks associated with miscalculation, accident or unexpected crises, international or domestic (Gompert, Cevallos and Garafola 2016).

Second, regardless of how China’s neighbors view its behavior, there are limits to what they can do, and not just militarily. China is the largest trade partner for most of East Asia; that means a country risks damaging its economic prospects if it pushes back and incurs China’s wrath. China’s adverse response to the positioning of US missiles in South Korea is a striking example of both the extent of China’s growing geoeconomic leverage and its willingness to use this, and to do so effectively (Volodsko 2017). The uselessness of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the face of China’s direct threat to some members’ much-prized sovereignty illustrates the PRC’s use of economic leverage to divide and rule its smaller Southeast Asian neighbors (Beeson 2018b). The greatest example of China’s geoeconomic importance, and the potential impact of close alignment with the region’s most important economic and strategic power, is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

4.2 GEOECONOMICS AND THE CHINA MODEL

The BRI is in some ways rather like the Marshall Plan that did so much to reunify Europe and spark the “golden age” of capitalist renewal (Glyn et al 1990). Like the Marshall Plan, the BRI is an expression of “Chinese values” and President Xi Jinping’s vision of China’s place in a rapidly evolving world order. Given the remarkable concentration of power and authority that has occurred on Xi’s watch, the BRI is also a statement of the way elite policymakers in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) view the world (Pei 2018). The BRI is set apart by not only unparalleled ambition — eclipsing its American predecessor if successfully realized — but also economic and political practices very different from those of the West and the US. The “China model”, in short, is different at home and different exported, a reality that is making many observers in the West nervous and fueling the current trade war (Breslin 2011a, Zhou and Wang 2019).

Despite some breathless commentary in the West about the possible impact of the China model, China’s leaders have only just begun to suggest that such a thing might exist, and that it might have important heuristic value for would-be developing countries. Indeed, as Elizabeth Economy points out, China “is exporting its political values — in some cases to buttress other authoritarian-leaning leaders, and in others, to undermine international law

and threaten other states' sovereignty. China's governance model is front and center in its foreign policy" (Economy 2018a). This is yet another indication of the growing confidence of China's political and economic elites, and is a harbinger for some observers of a broader rise of authoritarian and illiberal rule (Halper 2010, Zakaria 2003). At the very least, the possible simultaneous emergence of a number of authoritarian great powers presents a major challenge to both the material and ideational dominance of the US and its liberal-democratic allies (Gat 2007).

Much scholarly debate revolves around the existence of the China model, its component parts and its possible impact at home and abroad. Sometimes subsumed under the rubric of the "Beijing consensus", Chinese ideas about development are, according to Joshua Ramo, "defined by a ruthless willingness to innovate and experiment, by a lively defense of national borders and interests, and by the increasingly thoughtful accumulation of tools of asymmetric power projection" (Ramo 2004). This model appeals to other states keen to replicate China's astounding developmental achievements. Whatever China's leaders have been doing, it has plainly worked, achieved under unpropitious circumstances from almost a standing start. Moreover, the Beijing consensus — unlike the better-known Washington variety (Williamson 2005) — does not come with intrusive, sovereignty-threatening demands about "good governance", transparency and democratic reform.

Can the Chinese experience be replicated? Visionary leadership in Deng Xiaoping and potentially significant economies of scale gave China internal drive and made it attractive to foreign investors (Wong 2013). Being part of the most dynamic economic region in the world was also fortunate, as was the willingness of the reigning hegemon to encourage the PRC's integration into the global capitalist economy. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) may have been the single biggest factor turbocharging its domestic growth and eliminating any lingering opposition to going down the capitalist road (Lardy 2002). Yet China's version of capitalism was, and still is, very different from the one the US tried to export around the world at the height of its powers. Significantly, the Washington consensus had limited impact and appeal in East Asia where a highly successful tradition of state-led development prevailed, which China enthusiastically adopted (Beeson and Islam 2005).

The developmental model pioneered by Japan appealed to China's communist party leaders. Although the Chinese economy is now plainly much more integrated with the outside world, this integration has been overseen closely by a powerful state, and the CCP retains control of industries deemed vital to national security. An Asian form of "comprehensive security" has been a widely recognized part of regional strategic thinking (Alagappa 1998). Chinese leaders also subscribe to a view of security that includes the economy, not least because it is dedicated primarily to preserving political stability and the primacy of the CCP. Ian Bremmer notes that in China's state-dominated version of capitalism, "the ultimate motive is not economic (maximizing growth) but *political* (maximizing the state's power and the leadership's chances of survival). This is a form of

capitalism, but one in which the state acts as the dominant economic player and uses markets primarily for political gain” (Bremmer 2010).

Despite all the talk about globalization and the supposedly irresistible impact of economic liberalization and market forces, China’s state-owned enterprises remain tightly controlled by the CCP (Szamosszegi and Kyle 2011). So does China’s domestic financial sector (Walter and Howie 2011). Although China has well-documented debt problems (McMahon 2018), and the extent of the central government’s control over the activities of provincial government and private-sector actors should not be overstated (Breslin 2014), the PRC is hardly the sort of liberal, Anglo-American version of capitalism that many expected would sweep the world, possibly trailing democratic reform in its wake. China’s apparent immunity to the attractions of democracy should not be entirely surprising, given democracy’s complete historical absence in that country, and the remarkable record of economic achievement under a one-party state. Significantly, this model has also been at the heart of China’s outward economic expansion, a reality that has caused growing anxiety to friend and foe alike.

The BRI is the most spectacular example of China’s “going out” policy. Just as Japan did in the 1980s (Hatch and Yamamura 1996), China is ensuring that the efforts of domestically based corporations are “bolstered by supportive policy even while overseas investment is not necessarily centrally coordinated” (Economy and Levi 2014). China’s policymakers carefully and cautiously managed the country’s initial integration with the global economy through special economic zones, and are employing similar tactics externally as part of an integrated strategy of domestic restructuring. In this context, “Beijing’s use of economic statecraft reflects the internationalization of the developmental state” (Bräutigam and Tang 2012). The ability of China’s policymakers to rapidly learn from experience through experimentation and adaptation is a striking feature of its initial domestic economic expansion (Heilmann 2009). Such lessons help, as China becomes a major source of foreign investment. (Bräutigam and Tang 2014).

Yet, China’s BRI arouses questions about the ability to deliver on such a grandiose project that dwarfs anything contemplated by other governments. The desire to recreate the old Silk Road across Asia, as well as build a new Maritime Silk Road in South and Southeast Asia, is both geopolitical and geoeconomic — in precisely the same way as was the Marshall Plan. For China, though, part of the agenda seems to be a wish to restore its former dominant position in a significantly expanded concept of the region, in which “the goal of China’s economic diplomacy is to create a modern tribute system, with all roads literally leading to Beijing” (Miller 2017).

Whether a modern tribute system will generate the same sort of cultural and normative influence that the older version did for centuries among China’s immediate neighbors is yet to be seen (Rozman 1991). Some countries evidently are happy to go along with aspects of China’s vision and use of “geocultural power” as they try to attract much-needed investment (Winter 2019). But signs of resistance are emerging as some countries fret about the dangers of debt diplomacy and becoming too beholden to the PRC (Hornby and Zhang

2019). Malaysia, for example, has pushed back against Chinese influence, possible corruption and the exorbitant costs of infrastructure provision (Wongd and Ngui 2109). Other Southeast Asian states, especially Cambodia (Bong 2019), have less capacity or political will to extricate themselves from China's embrace, with awkward consequences for ASEAN unity (Beeson 2015a). The key questions are: Is China's increasing geoeconomic and diplomatic impact sustainable? Does it actually want to replace the US's traditional leadership at either the regional or global level?

4.3 LEADERSHIP WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS?

Underpinning American support of China's accession to the WTO was the idea that by being part of the highly institutionalized, international order that the US largely created, China's elites would be "socialized" into the ways of the capitalist world (Johnston 2008). Having won the Cold War and eliminated its principal ideological adversary, all that remained for the US was to transform the PRC into another compliant and productive part of the global economy. In large part this plan succeeded. While China's leaders *are* very different from the genuinely Marxist revolutionary generation that dominated the country until the 1990s (Van Ness 1970), different ideas about the way domestic and international relations should be conducted persist in the PRC (Yang 2017). But, just as there are questions about how pervasive and influential American values and soft power have actually been (Gries and Sanders 2016), so there are fundamental questions about China's capacity to provide an alternative vision or world order — that could be enthusiastically supported by other states, at least.

John Ikenberry, one of America's most prominent liberals, suggests thinking of international leadership as the

ability to project a set of political ideas or principles about the proper or effective ordering of politics. It suggests the ability to produce concredited or collaborative actions by several states or other actors. Leadership is the use of power to orchestrate the actions of a group toward a collective end (Ikenberry 1996).

At one level, this is entirely uncontroversial. International cooperation *does* depend on encouraging cooperation; more powerful countries are likely to have a greater capacity to encourage or coerce such actions. At another level, a narrow focus on the actions of individual policymakers or states downplays the wider international institutional environment within which international relations play out.⁸ One principal reason that American hegemony or "leadership" — the choice of word employed by different observers is significant — has

⁸ See Ahlquist, John S, and Margaret Levi. 2011. "Leadership: What It Means, What It Does, and What We Want to Know About It." *Annual Review of Political Science* 14 (1): 1-24; Jervis, Robert. 2013. "Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?" *Security Studies* 22 (2): 153-79; and Beeson, Mark. 2017. "Why Has Leadership in the Asia-Pacific Proved So Elusive?" *Chinese Political Science Review* 2 (4): 567-581.

proved so durable is because it has been actively supported by other states and embedded in several powerful international financial institutions. Regardless of the impact and underlying policy rationale of the Washington consensus, it represented a coherent package of ideas that was easily understood, even if successful implementation was a different story (Babb 2012). By contrast, China does not have such a clear set of ideas or values (Beeson 2013), nor the institutions to promote its vision of world order. However, there are signs that China is attempting to overcome this deficit.

A remarkable feature of China's recent international diplomacy — and one that complements the BRI — has been the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or AIIB (Beeson and Xu 2019). Some commentary and foreign policy responses around this initiative have been disproportionate, but it is a major development for at least two reasons. First, the creation of a parallel set of institutions over which China has greater control and influence may offer a potentially substantial alternative to the US-influenced BWIs. At this stage, the amounts of capital available through the AIIB and such innovations as the BRICS's New Development Bank are not that significant (Reisen 2015), but the AIIB has the potential to become a weighty component of China's economic expansion overseas. Second, other countries are taking the AIIB seriously. This has created divisions among normally stalwart US allies: despite US pressure on Britain and Australia not to join the AIIB, both countries did. Again, the significance of such developments should not be overstated, especially as China has had to make the AIIB's activities and governance more transparent to win support (Wilson 2019), but the impact on Western states is further evidence of China's geoeconomic influence and the difficulty of resisting it (Harpaz 2016).

This is still a long way from international leadership in the American sense, however. The BWIs remain influential, despite the lack of support from the Trump administration (Luce 2019), and the US security establishment remains deeply committed to a longstanding set of security relationships in Europe and Asia that help to underwrite its continuing strategic primacy (Layne 2017). The importance of these relationships has not been lost on Chinese policymakers. Indeed, not only does China actively resent America's existing alliances (Liff 2017), but the US also is being actively encouraged to cement its place as the dominant strategic actor in Asia through such new initiatives as the Quadrilateral Dialogue with Australia, Japan and India (Henry 2019). The effectiveness of such groupings remains to be seen, but some traditional US allies doubtless are as concerned as the Americans about the rise of China and its potential threat to US primacy. Tellingly, China does not have the sorts of close friends and strategic ties that have distinguished America's hegemonic era.⁹ Without willing followers, leadership is not possible.

⁹ See Beeson, Mark. 2015b. "Invasion by Invitation: the Role of Alliances in the Asia-Pacific." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69 (3): 305–320.

Although talk about China's soft power has become increasingly common (Beeson and Xu 2015), in reality it has nothing like the influence or the attraction of the US. Many citizens of the countries that are the sternest critics of American power would like nothing better than to move there.¹⁰ China, by contrast, continues to educate and export many of its brightest and best to the US. Deciding quite which country benefits the most from such relationships is not easy (Chung and Hamilton 2009), but a degree of paranoia has developed around the possible influence that China can exert over "overseas Chinese" (Wen 2016, Riordan 2018). Many of China's neighbors are caught between a desire to take advantage of China's economic rise, and a simultaneous worry about its strategic and intelligence-gathering potential, and its general ability to exert a malign influence over domestic politics and security (Walker and Ludwig 2017). Australia is the quintessential example of a state that has become heavily reliant on China economically, while simultaneously encouraging the US to maintain its strategic presence and commitment to the region (Beeson and Li 2014). Such contradictions have manifested themselves in an increasingly heated domestic debate about how to respond to Chinese influence (Hamilton 2018).

Australia may be an extreme and especially conflicted case, but it is by no means unique. All of China's neighbors try to balance the economic opportunity with the strategic threat. That China is widely considered an unpredictable danger is noteworthy — and resented in China — especially because it is the US that has been involved in endless wars in the Middle East and in the two largest recent conflicts in Asia (Korea and Vietnam). By contrast, the PRC points out that, other than a relatively brief conflict with Vietnam (in which it came off worst), China has not directly threatened, much less invaded, its neighbors. China's more bellicose image is a measure of its inability to convince other states about the benign impact of its "peaceful rise" and the merits of "win-win" diplomacy (Buzan 2014). It is testimony to the continuing significance of American soft power and embedded alliance relationships that, despite the Trump administration's efforts to undermine them, American influence remains palpable and productive.

Although confidence may be waning in the US's ability to provide the sort of leadership it once did, most would easily recognize the American "brand" as manifest in the Washington consensus, the championing of liberal politics and economics, and the rhetorical commitment to individual freedom. The same cannot be said about the PRC. Even those hoping to emulate the "China model", if such a thing exists, might balk at the difficulty of importing aspects of China's political system. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how China's unique historical and social circumstances could be replicated even if they were considered attractive. China simply does not have the same easily identifiable, transferable set of policies and values that were such a distinctive feature of American hegemony (Beeson

¹⁰ There is growing evidence that the Trump administration is managing to undermine even this longstanding asset, however. See Cook, Steven A. 2019. "The Middle East Doesn't Admire America Anymore." *Foreign Policy*, February 5.

2013). As mentioned earlier, whether China would want the world to adopt the sort of state-centric, neo-mercantilist policies that have underpinned its rise is also unclear.

Under such circumstances, Chinese leadership of the international system still looks like a distant and possibly inappropriate dream. That does not mean the US could or should necessarily retain its dominant position, but that perhaps the time has passed for the type of hegemonic dominance exerted by the US. Given the current complex global challenges, whether any country can provide leadership, either inspirational or coercive, is debatable. Yet, in the absence of some transformative (but not unimaginable) political and/or economic crisis in China, the PRC's influence over East Asia will continue to grow. If so, non-Western values may reassume prominence in the world's most economically and strategically important region. This could be a transformation of major historical significance, especially if China remains an authoritarian, politically repressive and economically interventionist state.

4.4 CHINESE LESSONS?

Even should China reassume its historically dominant position in East Asia as a source of cultural values, this is unlikely to presage a “clash of civilizations” or herald an era of more general ideational influence. To be sure, China represents a more enduring and coherent set of cultural practices and values than do most parts of the world. But such values do not necessarily have widespread appeal outside of China, and social life within the PRC has been profoundly transformed by the impact of globalization and the adoption of capitalism. One of the great “contradictions” in China, as the PRC's declining numbers of authentic Marxists might put it (Yang 2019), is that the CCP has managed a highly successful form of capitalist development, albeit with Chinese characteristics (Peck and Zhang 2013). Claims that China is “playing by our rules” may look rather Eurocentric and premature, but are not entirely wrong (Steinfeld 2010). The reality is that successful integration into a global capitalist economy *does* require some regulatory adjustment on the part of policymakers. International integration has also had a tangible impact on China's younger generation of consumers, its rapidly expanding middle class and the large number of billionaires it has created (Li, Sato, and Sicular 2013).

And yet one important feature of China's overall development has been its failure to replicate the West's historical experience or develop the civil society or independent bourgeoisie that marked Europe's transition to liberal democracy (Li 2012). In China, the expanding capitalist class has effectively been a creation of the state; its subsequent role and activities remain closely tied to and monitored by the CCP (Tsai 2005). Indeed, membership of the CCP seems to be a prerequisite of wealth acquisition (McGregor 2010). More troublingly in the longer term, it is far from clear that the rise of social media and new forms of communication have enhanced the influence or autonomy of civil society. China's leaders have proved especially adept at using new technologies to create a truly Orwellian surveillance state that threatens to restrict rather than expand individual freedoms (Ramzy and Buckley 2019).

The capacity of states to “securitize” the public sphere and employ technology to control rather than empower citizenry is not exclusive to China, Asia or anywhere else. Many

Western governments have enhanced their surveillance capacities in the name of national security (Kampfner 2009). What sets apart China, and some other rising authoritarian powers, is that China has “increasingly converged with other non-democratic regimes in developing a new relationship with civil society — one that allows autonomous civil society more participation in the policy process while creating new tools of state control” (Teets 2014). In a world of increasingly inter-connected economic and political spaces, “socialization” is no longer a one-way process in which the rest of the world dutifully learns from the West. Instead, Greg Chin observes that the diminished hegemonic influence of the US “creates the opening for a shift toward a two-way socialization, wherein China not only continues to selectively internalize global norms but also begins to impart some of its norms to the global institutions and to the Global South” (Chin 2012).

As the Trump regime’s obsession with the CCP as a possible threat to Western values demonstrates (Santora 2020), China’s sheer material presence on the global stage is shaping the behavior of other states. Unfortunately, this is not a promising development for the sort of pluralistic values associated with the West. Perhaps the Trump administration will prove to be an aberration and the US will go back to its accustomed role as the proverbial “light on the hill”, and champion of democratic values, freedom of expression and individual liberty. Or perhaps it will not. Many commentators inside and outside the US are increasingly concerned about Trump’s impact on the US’s famous system of institutionalized checks and balances, as well as its more general civic and political culture (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Some fear democracy itself, or at least the population’s confidence in it, may be in the balance and that the US may risk becoming non-democratic (Sunstein 2018). In this regard, the growth of inequality — a feature of both the US *and* CCP-led China — highlights surprising commonalities between the world’s two biggest economies in which, according to Robert Kuttner, “China is not becoming more like us; we are becoming more like them” (Kuttner 2018). Kuttner goes on to argue that

Today, it is not communists but capitalists who are seeking to impose a single economic model on the globe. On balance, the institutions of global governance tend to reflect and reinforce rather than challenge that dominance. Globalism has been great at advancing the interests of capital, and feeble at defending or enlarging the domain of human rights. The home of democracy or anti-democracy — continues to be the national polity (Kuttner 2018).

Capitalism may have been largely a Western invention, but its spread has been uneven, and shaped by contingent historical and cultural factors. It may have some universal elements, but there are many nationally based variations (Hall and Soskice 2001). It is not necessary for a country to be a democracy for capitalism to thrive. Authoritarian, meritocratic rule may have distinct advantages as far as capitalist accumulation is concerned, as seen in the widely admired case of Singapore (Rodan 2006).¹¹ If effective forms of global governance

¹¹ Many Chinese policymakers have looked to Singapore’s form of governance for inspiration. See Ortmann, Stephan. 2012. “The ‘Beijing Consensus’ and the ‘Singapore Model’: Unmasking the Myth of an

are to develop or continue, it is unclear that they will reflect either “Western” liberal political or economic principles. In that regard, at least, China as a role model for successful economic and political development may win more admirers in the future. A once unthinkable idea has gained increased plausibility as governments around the world struggle to come to grips with a new “security” threat that has directly threatened the lives and livelihoods of people everywhere.

At the time of writing (April 2020), it is impossible to know the long-term impact of an ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. But the response of nations’ leadership to the crisis has been revealing. In China, after an initial attempt to conceal the gravity of the problem, the authoritarian regime moved swiftly to impose social controls that appear to have been effective, albeit of the kind that populations in the West find difficult to accept (Beeson 2020). In the US, the Trump administration’s rather chaotic response, compounded by an inequitable and highly inefficient domestic health system, made an unflattering contrast (Sly et al 2020). Even those with little sympathy for the PRC’s often heavy-handed approach to social control recognized that in some circumstances this could be brutally effective.

The almost complete absence of international leadership from the US has been a noteworthy aspect of the crisis, and has allowed China to practice what has been dubbed “facemask diplomacy” as it tries to repair its reputation on being known as the initial source of the pandemic (Wen and Hinshaw 2020). In short, the crisis has the potential to accelerate the shift in balance of the global standings of the US and China in the latter’s favor.

Alternative Authoritarian State-Capitalist Model." *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies* 10 (4): 337-59.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The countries generally subsumed under the rubric of “the West” have had a pretty good run. For the past few hundred years, first the European powers, and then the US and its supporters, have dominated international economic, political and strategic affairs. That supremacy may be coming to an end, or at least is being challenged by rising powers, particularly China. The US and such key allies as Japan and Australia may try to contain China’s rise, but that seems to be an unrealizable goal; in the event that such a policy becomes “successful”, it would likely inflict as much economic damage on the rest of the world as it would on China. Although the PRC may have developed a distinctive economic model, it is deeply integrated into the very international order the US has done so much to create. An attempt to isolate China would make the prospect of a new Cold War, some fear, all the more likely.

Expectations about the impact on China of greater economic interdependence and globalization may have been overstated and fueled by a combination of wishful thinking and Eurocentrism (Rowen 2007, Liu and Chen 2012). But these expectations were understandable — and with foundation. True, the degree of convergence has been exaggerated, and domestic institutions, cultural traditions and national perspectives have proved surprisingly durable. But “the West” has profoundly influenced the PRC, just as China had influenced the West at an earlier historical moment (Hobson 2004). It could hardly be otherwise, given the extent of inter-connectedness in the contemporary era. The possibility that national identities, let alone those of the civilizational variety, could remain immune to such forces is implausible. Even a country with as long a record of cultural continuity as China cannot remain unaffected by such forces, no matter how hard the current generation of elites try to selectively utilize Confucian traditions, or how imperial the leadership of Xi Jinping appears (Lampton 2015, Economy 2018b).

The systematic concentration of power in President Xi’s hands is also a reminder of the continuing importance of leadership and the dangers of the “bad emperor syndrome”. One great advantage of the Western system of transparent, democratic rule was thought to be the ability to ensure that bad leaders cannot endure. However, the failed attempts to impeach a US president who is widely considered to be one of the most incompetent, amoral and corrupt individuals in American political history suggests that this may be an illusion, albeit still a comforting one for many in the US (Stewart 2020). Americans are not alone in having to think about bad leadership and a possible decline; across much of the Western world, democracy is either not functioning well or is being challenged by authoritarian populists or is fracturing along class, ideological and identarian lines (Bonikowski 2017, Norris and Inglehart 2019b). Indeed, in this context, if there is a “clash of civilizations” it is playing out within, rather than between, nations (Katzenstein 2009), and is manifesting itself in forms of identity politics that have become such a feature of Western democracies (Fukuyama 2018).

It remains to be seen whether authoritarian states such as China will prove as susceptible to identity politics and the governance challenges they create. Whether the PRC’s leaders will

be able to continue controlling civil society or enlisting its support around projects of national aggrandizement is unclear (Weiss 2014). A failure to maintain economic development or to successfully manage the environmental consequences remain the greatest challenges facing the PRC leadership, and the world's, for that matter (Beeson 2018a). In this context, it is worth noting that Chinese citizens mostly seem supportive of their government's draconian response to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The good news, in as much as there is any, is that the entire human race is in it together when tackling transnational collective-action problems such as pandemics and climate change. China has a major role to play, as does the US. The optimistic reading is that a common threat will encourage a common response. The pessimistic view is that national interests will continue to prevail and a rapidly closing window of opportunity in which to address environmental problems will close forever (McKibben 2019). The evidence thus far is that neither the PRC nor the US is demonstrating a willingness or ability to cooperate effectively in the face of the most urgent and pressing of problems. As Martin Wolf observes, "Any global order rests on cooperation among powerful states. China and the US must not only function. They must function together, recognizing the many interests they share, while tolerating their deep differences."

Will the world's most powerful states cooperate? The stakes could hardly be higher. Significantly, climate change and the environmental degradation that leads to pandemics (Vidal 2020) are problems that transcend cultures. True, "the West" may have done more to contribute to such problems historically, but at least the scientific method developed during the Western Enlightenment helped in an understanding of their nature. Whether any culture, governance system or people has the wisdom or the values to respond to such challenges is the question (Dryzek and Pickering 2019). Much hinges on the answer. In the absence of a world government, some forms of cooperative global governance can be reinforced and made more effective (Cabrera 2010). China and the US will have the greatest say in determining whether that is possible. Given the recent history between the two global powers and their respective senses of historical exceptionalism, the omens are not good. It must be hoped that the assumption, espoused by Enlightenment thinkers, about the inherent rationality of human beings is not unfounded, and that some values really do transcend national borders.

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