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“The Era of Pax Americana is Over”

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“It would be a grave mistake to think that the United States of America will return to the old normal after the four years of Donald Trump’s presidency are over”, said **Brian Hanson, Vice President, Studies, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Chicago, United States** at the 10th stars Switzerland symposium in Stein am Rhein. “Trump is not an aberration”, said Hanson, “he’s the symptom of a much deeper, multi-year development in the American society.”

According to Hanson, a significant part of the American population has been feeling left behind during the course of the past years. During the period from 2000 to 2016, the U.S. economy has grown by more than 20 percent in aggregate, but the median household income has actually declined by more than 4 percent. “Not only has the average American not participated in the economic growth and globalization since the turn of the century, he is actually worse off today than in 2000”, said Hanson.

This, in his view, is the reason Donald Trump hit a particular nerve with his presidential claim to “Make America great again”.

The core beliefs of Donald Trump

“Another misconception about Trump is that many people tend to see him as incompetent, as completely reactive and guided by instincts”, Brian Hanson warned. Some of that might be true, but according to Hanson, Donald Trump is guided by a set of fundamental core beliefs that he made known already in 1987, when he - when he was a little-known New York real estate developer - bought a full page ad in the New York Times to berate the Reagan Administration.

Those three fundamental principles of Trump are: One, he sees multilateralism as a foolish endeavour, with the United States providing expensive security for rich, developed nations in Western Europe and Japan. Two, he already in 1987 made a strong argument that bilateral trade deals are not to the benefit of America; the clearest example of that being seen in the fact that the U.S. is running trade deficits with many countries. Three, Trump lambasted Michail Gorbachev as being a weak leader of the Soviet Union, and that America should take advantage of that fact. “Already in 1987, Trump showed admiration for strong-handed leadership and disrespect for seemingly weak leaders”, said Hanson.

In addition to revealing Trumps core beliefs that are still in place today, the 1987 ad showed another thing to Hanson: That Trump has a very big ego.

Three important generals

How does Hanson assess the first eight months of the Trump presidency? “It is clear that Trump is not a quick learner on strategy”, he said, “he’s very transactional, very short-term”. The first few months in office were, according to Hanson, an unmitigated disaster, with men like Stephen Bannon, Trump’s chief strategist, Jared Kushner, his son in law,

and Reince Priebus, his chief of staff, all acting as gatekeepers to the president while fighting for influence among themselves.

“The arrival of General John Kelly to the White House this summer was very important”, said Hanson. As the new chief of staff, Kelly introduced order around Trump and has been a very effective gatekeeper to the president. “No call goes through to the president without going through Kelly”, said Hanson.

The three generals around Trump - Kelly, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Defense James Mattis - are very important to the functioning of this administration, said Hanson.

As for the diplomatic field and geopolitics, Hanson had few good words on Donald Trump. “I find it very troubling that Trump has entered into a schoolyard shouting match with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, threatening things like fire and fury if Kim continued to develop his nuclear arsenal. Trump keeps drawing red lines which he will not be able to enforce”, Hanson warned. “This is a very dangerous situation, ripe for miscalculations and misunderstandings on both sides.”

A present to China

The scrapping of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement on Trump’s first day in office was a huge geostrategic mistake in the eyes of Brian Hanson. “Many countries in Asia realize that the United States are not a reliable partner anymore and gyrate towards China”, he said. “President Xi Jinping of China can play Trump in any way he wants - and he is. It will be very important to see how Xi behaves after the 19th Party Congress which will take place in Beijing in October.”

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is, in the words of Hanson, “well on his way to being the worst Secretary of State in U.S. history. He has no relationship with Trump, he’s not well respected by Trump, and he’s destroying the culture of the State Department”, said Hanson, who during the 1980s served as a foreign policy advisor to Senator Alan J. Dixon of Illinois.

Don’t bet on an impeachment

What about impeachment? “As much as many people would wish for that, I think it’s very unlikely”, Hanson warned. “Impeachment is a political process; the Republican Party would have to act on it - and I don’t see that happening.” According to Hanson, the Republican Party has made a “deal with the devil” to get things done they care about deeply: Tax and healthcare reform.

Hanson even said that he sees Trump being re-elected to a second term in 2020. “The core trends in the American society that led to the Trump presidency are still in place. The Republicans are not going to challenge him, and the Democrats are too busy bashing Trump instead of coming up with a real alternative.”

The consequences of all this are clear to Hanson: The era of Pax Americana, the western world order introduced after World War II and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, is over. “America will not play the international role it did in the past anymore.”

He sees the need for good, strong political leadership elsewhere, particularly in Europe. “I hope the Franco-German duet of Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron will play a more significant role in world leadership in the coming years”, Brian Hanson said.

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