

stars insights: 11 September 2018

As U.S. Turns Inward, China Can Help Lead Multipolar World

*In an ever more complex world, the time for a single world power is over. However the new multipolar world order is configured, one thing is clear: Nothing will work without the powerful and decisive engagement of the soon-to-be No. 1 economic power, the People's Republic of China, argues **Urs SCHOETTLI**, Consultant on Asian Affairs, Former East Asia Correspondent of Neue Zuercher Zeitung and Member of the stars International Board, Tokyo/Zurich.*

The world is currently going through its most disturbed phase since the end of the Cold War. This is mainly due to the United States abrogating its global leadership role. The current U.S. administration under the erratic leadership of President Donald Trump has certainly been the main promoter of an end to the order of Pax Americana, but whoever will take over in the future will be forced to follow a largely similar course of isolationism and mercantilism. This is due both to objective changes in economic power and due to the general mood within the American electorate. Washington may change the tone but not the general course of an American withdrawal from the world.

It was always foreseeable that, like other global empires, the United States, too, will one day start to decline. What was hard to imagine was how fast this process would turn out to be. It reflects the coming together of a number of developments, some accidental, others unavoidable. President Trump blames the decline of America's manufacturing power on the unfair trade practices of other major economies, most notably China. However, in reality the Americans have to face the hard economic truth that they have been living beyond their means for far too long. You cannot forever be the world's undisputed leader and its most indebted nation at the same time.

During the Cold War, American leadership and the accumulation of wealth in the U.S. profited from the acute security needs of its Western allies. The military and ideological menace of the Soviet Union scared the West enough to stick together. This fear has gone; however, much populist forces both in the West and in Russia would like to restart a new Cold War. One could have thought that the institutions that coalesced the West during its rivalry with the Soviet Union would gradually fade away in a more-distant future. Instead, President Trump is accelerating the process by doing everything to undermine the political, trade and security alliances the U.S. has built up around the globe. NATO is in an existential crisis, South Korea and Japan seriously doubt the security assurances provided by their treaties with the U.S., and NAFTA is rattled if not seriously damaged by Trump's aggressiveness toward the leaders of Mexico and Canada.

Those who claim that today's precarious U.S. foreign policy is the result of Trump's character and leadership deficits are only partially right. Washington simply seems to have lost the ability and the willingness to exercise competent global leadership. The questions arise who will replace the United States and whether it is at all necessary or desirable to have one country exercising global leadership.

We believe that in an ever more complex world, the time for a single world power is over and that a new multipolar world order must be aimed for. However the world order of the 21st century is configured, one thing is clear: Nothing will work without the powerful and

decisive engagement of the People's Republic of China. The soon-to-be No. 1 economic power cannot avoid taking over responsibilities in the world at large. This will differ from the supremacy of the United States and from the bipolar order of the Cold War.

As a Swiss, I have met many Japanese who wished their own country would follow the Swiss path of neutrality. I always had to tell them that their country is far too big to imitate Switzerland. Equally, there may be voices in China that want their country to have a low profile in the world and instead focus on internal development. Attractive as this may sound, China is indeed far too big and too powerful to avoid playing a major role in world politics. It was indeed useful and sensible to abstain from strategic grandstanding, while the rise to a modern economy with a global reach was a national priority. Today, the situation has changed. The size of the Chinese economy, and its dependence on markets and resource locations that span the globe, put great demands on Beijing's diplomacy and security policy. What happens, for example, in the Persian Gulf is of crucial importance for China that depends on a trouble-free access to the Middle East.

The major contributions China can make to the emerging global order are to support and enhance the functioning of international institutions, be they global such as the United Nations institutions or be they regional like the European Union or ASEAN. After the experiences of the last three decades, it is obvious that the policies of sanctions and of nation-building are misguided and dangerous tools of international power politics. Beijing is right in opposing them. Positive incentives are much more effective in bringing about remedial change than collective punishments. Equally, regime change has proved to be extremely dangerous as it has again and again worked against the wishes and the interests of the people concerned. In general, they have come out worse, and large-scale suffering and violence has been caused unnecessarily.

It is understandable that the rise of China and the growth of its economic and geopolitical power cause concern in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Every power shift creates new uncertainties and major geopolitical changes tend to arouse fears of conflict. Bearing in mind the giant existential challenges mankind faces on many fronts, we need more than ever a stable global order that encourages peace and cooperation. When we are confronted with ecological disasters that threaten the future of human civilization, it is highly irresponsible to indulge in military conflicts and civil wars. Mankind needs to mobilize all its forces and creative energies to fight the effects of climate change, to combat dangerous populism, and to overcome retrograde mentalities such as nationalism and protectionism. If China, with its remarkable track record of socio-economic and technological modernization, can take the lead in stimulating global cooperation on these crucial issues, the 21st century can turn into an epoch of lasting peace and prosperity.

This article was originally published in August 2018 on [Caixin Global](#). [Caixin](#) is a media partner of stars.

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