

Evaluating the Current Global Order: A Canadian Perspective

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Descending America?

The financial crisis currently gripping the United States, and reverberating around the world, has strengthened the claims of a growing number of observers and political scientists that the American unipolar moment is passing.² On September 25 in a speech to the Bundestag, German Finance Minister Peer Steinbrueck deemed that the crisis will cost the United States its role as a superpower of the world financial system. A month earlier, commentators argued that the impunity with which a newly assertive Russia intervened in Georgia served as yet another example of America's diminishing influence on the international stage and illustrated the precariousness of the emerging international system.

However, the erosion of American power in general, and the consequences it spells for the contemporary global order, were key issues in international relations theory and practice long before panic descended on Wall Street and the Russian army rolled into Georgia. Emerging countries and regional blocs headed by Russia, China and the European Union are catching up to the United States economically. Internal challenges notwithstanding, Russia and China are renewing their military capabilities and adopting assertive foreign policies that are sometimes at odds with American objectives. The establishment of new multilateral institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), may signal the birth of an alternative security regime in the East. The Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, as well as his *Banco del Sur*, both represent nascent attempts to extricate Latin America from the long standing hegemony of the United States.

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² It was Charles Krauthammer, a prominent neoconservative commentator who introduced the idea of American unipolarity in 1990. For an updated piece, please see "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *The National Interest*, Winter 2002/2003.

At the same time America's *go it alone* approach nurtured by the previous neoconservative administration has irked allies, made enemies, and further contributed to growing anti-American sentiment in the broader Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere. Some observers claim that America's soft power has also suffered as a result of President Bush's policies and is now being challenged by alternative cultural narratives, including those generated in Bollywood and interpreted by Al Jazeera.

Some theoreticians and practitioners, although a minority, are not convinced about the inevitable demise of American hegemony. Prominent among them is Charles Krauthammer, who argues that the future of the unipolar era hinges on American leadership alone. In a sustained defence of neoconservative foreign policy, Krauthammer charges neoliberal internationalists, like former President Bill Clinton, with sacrificing American hegemony at the altar of multilateralism. He is similarly frustrated with the realists, including Henry Kissinger, whom he blames for allowing American power to decay as they "retreat to Fortress America." He concludes: "The challenge to unipolarity is not from the outside but from the inside. The choice is ours. To impiously paraphrase Benjamin Franklin: History has given you an empire, if you will keep it."³ Nor has the American political class accepted the thesis of America's decline. Much of Senator John McCain's appeal rested on the perception of his ability to return the United States to global predominance. At the same time, many Democrats, Madeleine Albright prominently among them, are asserting that under the leadership of Barack Obama, the United States could once again become a beacon to follow and emulate – a development, they say, the rest of the world is anticipating with impatience.

Thus a lively debate has been taking place among academics and practitioners alike in reaction to these "tectonic shifts."⁴ For instance, the influential magazine *Foreign Affairs* asked in May 2008 whether America was in decline. During the same year, Robert Kagan, a prominent neoconservative and a foreign policy advisor to Senator John McCain, published a book on the emerging world order titled *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*.⁵ In the meantime, Fareed Zakaria's contribution, *The Post-American World*, followed shortly after, providing readers with an alternative perspective on the consequences of America's decline squarely rooted in the liberal perspective.⁶ And in his contribution to the debate, Mark Leonard offered an inspiring thesis to the question of "*Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century*."⁷

³ Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," 17.

⁴ It was Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations and former director of policy planning at the State Department, who referred to the current shifts in the international system as "tectonic" in his article "The Age of Nonpolarity, What Will Follow U.S. Dominance," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, 44.

⁵ Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (Knopf, 2008).

⁶ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

⁷ Mark Leonard, *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

The majority of those engaged in the debate rarely dispute that American power is eroding. However, they do not agree on the causes of this slide, the nature of the emerging international order or the tools we have at our disposal to shape its contours. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the most recent thinking on the subject. Although by no means homogeneous, the debate is dominated by two groups. The first perceives the ascending multipolar order as increasingly fragmented and confrontational. The second group suggests that the world system built by the United States after the Second World War has the potential to withstand the transition to multipolarity under certain conditions. The paper will now take up these two perspectives in turn.

The Coming Fragmentation

Scholars who warn of coming systemic fragmentation and possible confrontations hail from diverse theoretical perspectives. Therefore, they focus on different variables, understand causal linkages in divergent ways, and often promote contrasting coping strategies. The category includes realists who warn of a 19th century *redux*, neoconservatives who see a coming clash between established liberal democracies and rising autocratic regimes, scholars who see the emergence of alternative orders or regimes to our Western centred world as a *fait accompli*, and those who argue that culture and identity will constitute the fault-lines of the 21st century. What follows is a brief sketch of what these essentially pessimistic authors have in mind.

Realist and Neoconservative Perspectives

The majority of realists argue that we are currently witnessing a systemic transformation from a unipolar to a multipolar world. Focusing on states and power, realists posit that the ascending multipolarity will inevitably bring tension and conflict as rising states, including Russia and China, clamour to usurp the privileged position occupied by the United States. Once its hegemonic position is weakened, the United States will lose its role as a systemic stabiliser. According to the realists, the toppling of the United States from the pinnacle of the state-based hierarchy will give way to a competitive world premised on the survival of the fittest and reminiscent of the 19th century Great Power rivalry that led to two consecutive World Wars.

In this perpetually anarchic world, the toolbox we possess is limited to what many critics of realism perceive as an amoral diplomacy. A prominent realist, John Mearsheimer, for example, recommends that the United States foil any attempts by China to rise and integrate into the existing structures to stave off

Chinese hegemony.⁸ However, many practitioners of the realist persuasion would disagree with this course of action. Among them, the outgoing U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, argued recently in *Foreign Affairs* that investing in strong and rising powers as stakeholders in the international order should be a key goal of American foreign policy. Indeed, evoking a “uniquely American realism,” she stated that international institutions must reflect the changing configuration of power to ensure that Russia, China, India and Brazil have clear stakes in a democratic, secure and open international order.⁹

The pessimists include prominent neoconservatives. Among them, Robert Kagan argues that the contemporary world can be characterised by the existence of one superpower and several great powers at the backdrop of pooled and diminished national sovereignty. He claims that a rising China and Russia spearhead the emergence of an age characterised by a pragmatic, as opposed to ideological, divergence. Kagan points out that both countries have governments committed to autocracy and contest the current International Liberal Order established by the United States at the close of the Second World War.

Kagan observes that while liberal democracies broadly agree that the international community has the right to interfere under certain circumstances in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, autocracies like Russia and China staunchly oppose the principle and accuse its proponents of liberal imperialism. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that both Russia and China are resisting the contemporary international order while promoting an alternative that places high value on national sovereignty. Kagan predicts that these efforts will lead to global competition between democratic governments and autocracies and that this competition will become a dominant feature of the 21st century. In this context, the best predictor of a country’s geopolitical alignment will not be its civilisation¹⁰ or geography, but the nature of its government. He concludes that the challenge today is for the world’s democracies “to begin thinking about how to protect their interests and advance their principles in a world in which these are, once again, powerfully contested.”¹¹ Taking this advice to heart, during his campaign, Senator McCain referred on several occasions to the

⁸ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 401.

⁹ Condoleezza Rice, “Rethinking the National Interest,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008.

¹⁰ Although not new, an enduring contribution to the debate about the contemporary world order was made by Samuel Huntington, who argued in the 1990’s that “culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world.” See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1996), 20.

¹¹ Robert Kagan, “The End of the End of History,” *The New Republic*, 23 April 2008.

importance of strengthening a “League of Democracies,” an idea also promoted by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsey.¹²

Perspectives from Russia and South East Asia

To include voices beyond the American shores, Sergei Karaganov, a well-known Russian political scientist, predicts that indeed, the coming century is shaping up as a “new epoch of confrontation.” Reacting to Western rumblings about the rise of an overly assertive and confrontational Russia, he points out that former President Putin opted for resistance to the liberal international order because the West was offering Russia integration without voting rights. Along with other commentators, Karaganov argues that Russian authoritarianism is in effect a reaction to the chaos brought about by the introduction of democratic capitalism following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unwillingness of the West to consider Russia’s interests in a meaningful manner. He argues that the world is becoming more unpredictable and thus the new epoch will likely be characterised by continued remilitarisation of international relations and even an arms race. However, assigning blame for this development uniquely to the Russian government alone would be a mistake.¹³

In a similar vein, Kishore Mahbubani, a dean at the National University of Singapore, charges that the West itself is undermining the international liberal order and thus inadvertently contributing to the emergence of an alternative Asian centred order. He argues that this trend is a reaction to mounting evidence showing that, given a choice between promoting Western values and defending Western interests, interests inevitably trump values. Mahbubani points to several examples where this has been the case: 1) the contradiction between the desire of the West to eliminate global poverty on one hand and the unwillingness of the United States and Europe to reduce agricultural subsidies on the other, 2) the hypocrisy of shifting the responsibility for global warming to the developing world, 3) the lack of moral courage on the part of Western intellectuals to stand up to Israel, and finally, 4) the duplicity of criticizing China for buying oil from authoritarian regimes against the backdrop of the track record Western governments have on this issue.

Mahbubani suggests that while many in the West believe that they are open and listening to the voices of the rest of the world, “the 5.6 billion people living outside the West see an incestuous, self-referential and self-congratulatory dialogue which often ignores the views and sentiments in the rest of the world.” He concludes by insisting that if the West continues to mishandle this “very plastic moment of history,” it could destroy the liberal international order altogether.

¹² Ivo Daalder and James Lindsey, “An Alliance of Democracies: Our Way or the Highway,” http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2004/1106globalgovernance_daalder.aspx

¹³ Sergei Karaganov, “A New Epoch of Confrontation,” 23 October 2007, <http://eng.karaganov.ru/articles/188.html>

According to him, there is a real divide between the West and rest, and “the Western refusal to cede and share power with the rest as well as a growing geopolitical incompetence pose the biggest threats to our stability.”¹⁴

The World Without the West?

Developing this thesis further, some observers believe that a ‘world without the West’ is emerging. According to Naazneen Barma (et al), rising powers are increasingly routing around the West. Since the liberal international order requires domestic politics to be open and democratic, rising authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states like China and Russia prefer doing business with each other and other like-minded countries – deepening their autonomy from the West, dominated by the United States. This new parallel international system has already begun erecting its own institutional architecture through the SCO for instance, and adopting a distinct model of governance. Its emergence can be attributed to the limited benefits that globalisation sowed around the world and the fact that Western liberal ideas did not penetrate large swaths of the planet. According to the authors, renewed commitment to multilateralism will not be sufficient. They present us with three options: 1) block the growth of the “world without the West,” 2) reduce its attractiveness by serving actually and visibly countries that have *de facto* chosen sides, or 3) live and let live.¹⁵

Ordered Post-American World?

The second group of observers is much more optimistic. In large part liberal, its proponents argue that since the contemporary world is economically interdependent conflict is unlikely. Indeed, state and non-state actors that chip away at the American hegemony are unlikely to challenge an international order that has served their economic interests well. As Francis Fukuyama, who abandoned the neoconservative camp following the Iraq War, argues, the dominant reality of today’s world is the emergence of a multipolar system, unified by globalisation of trade, investment and ideas. “It is not nuclear weapons, but trillion-and-a-half U.S. dollars held in Chinese reserves that creates a system of mutually assured destruction between America and China.”¹⁶ Contrary to the pessimists, these thinkers point out that there is a myriad of tools we can use in order to ensure that transition is peaceful but deepening economic interdependence and refash-

¹⁴ Kishore Mahbubani, “When Interests Trump Values,” *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3, September 2008. For more detailed analysis see his recent book titled *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (Public Affairs, 2008).

¹⁵ Naazneen Barma, Ely Ratner and Steven Weber, “A World Without the West,” *The National Interest*, July/August 2007.

¹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, “The Return of History and the End of Dreams by Robert Kagan,” *Sunday Times*, 25 May 2008.

ioning multilateral institutions to fit the multipolar reality of the 21st century are perhaps the most important. It will be among the main challenges of the new American president to ensure that the international liberal order continues to thrive and unite global actors.

The American Integrationists

This point of view is eloquently presented by Richard Haass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations and former director of policy planning at the State Department. According to Haass, we are entering an age of nonpolarity – a world dominated not by one or two or even several states, but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of meaningful power. In this world, power is more diffused among states and non-state actors such as, for instance: rising powers, regional and global organisations, militias, NGOs, corporations and the media. Haass confirms that as a result, the United States is experiencing a relative decline in power overall which translates into an absolute decline in influence and independence. The challenges to the United States come in economics, military effectiveness, diplomacy and culture. He attributes the passing of the American unipolar moment to three main reasons: 1) the inevitable march of history; 2) American policies on energy, economics and Iraq; and 3) globalisation related flows that occur outside of government control and knowledge and strengthened the capacity of non-state actors at the same time.

Contrary to many of the more pessimistic scholars, he is mindful of the internal challenges rising powers are facing, including: demographic shifts, poverty, corruption, lack of infrastructure, and cracks in social cohesion. These internal challenges constitute some real constraints to the Great Power rivalry frequently evoked by the realists. Moreover, Haass reminds us of the dependence the rising powers have developed on the international system for economic welfare and political stability. He is doubtful that they would want to disrupt the order that serves their national interests. Interdependence brought about by cross-border flows of goods, services, people, energy, investment, and technology is in effect diffusing the potential for conflict in the new nonpolar world.

Nonetheless, Haass predicts that it will become increasingly difficult for Washington to lead, build collective responses and make institutions work. Despite this predicament, Haass urges the American government to attempt shaping the nonpolar world. This is because he believes that America retains the capacity to improve the quality of the international system. In these efforts, multilateralism is essential and must be recast to reflect the emerging reality. It will likely have to be less formal, less comprehensive, seek to achieve narrower goals and involve selective accord making. In other words, multilateralism will become *à la carte*. Diplomacy will also be challenged in the age of nonpolarity because it will involve more actors, lack predictable structures and

relationships, and undermine the strength of alliances. Finally, the nonpolar world will put the premium on coalition building, stripping the U.S. of the luxury of the “you are either with us or against us” approach characteristic of the Bush Administration. Therefore, the overarching goal of the American government should be to encourage further integration and build a “concerted nonpolarity” based on cooperative multilateralism.¹⁷

Another prominent commentator, John Ikenberry agrees with Haass that America’s unipolar moment is passing. He argues that China is emerging as a military and economic rival to the United States, ushering in a profound shift in the distribution of global power. While he agrees that such “tectonic” transitions are often destabilizing, he insists that conflict is not inevitable, especially if China continues to enmesh itself in the Western centered international order. Similarly to Haass and Fukuyama, Ikenberry disagrees with the realist vision that perceives the rise of China and the decline of the United States as a zero sum game. This is because China is rising against the backdrop of a Western centered order that is open, integrated and rule-based. Moreover, the existence of nuclear weapons makes a war between Great Powers unlikely. Due to the farsightedness of the American post-Second World War leadership, a rising China can join and thrive within the existing system rather than challenging it. In other words, according to Ikenberry, the road to global power runs through the Western centered order and its multilateral economic institutions.

Nevertheless, Ikenberry emphasizes that peaceful transition will only occur if the United States strengthens the existing world order before its influence diminishes. It can do so by engaging in multilateralism, promoting integration, and restraining its tendency to unilateral action so that rising powers like China and India can secure their interests through integration and accommodation rather than war. He concludes that it may be possible for China to overtake the United States, but that it is unlikely it could overtake the Western order. Therefore, while American global position may be weakening, the international system led by Washington can remain the dominant order of the 21st century.¹⁸

In a recent book, Fareed Zakaria, argues that we are entering a post-American world, defined and directed from many places by many people. The distribution of power is shifting away from American dominance. He argues that America does not have a fundamentally weak economy or a decadent society, but has dysfunctional politics. Therefore, its decline is due not so much to America’s failure, but to the growth of the rest. He argues that the United States must come to recognise that it faces a choice: it can stabilize the emerging world order by bringing in the new rising nations, ceding some of its own power and perquis-

¹⁷ Haass, “The Age on Nonpolarity, What Will Follow U.S. Dominance.”

¹⁸ John Ikenberry. The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive? *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008 and “China and the Rest Are Only Joining the American-Built Order,” *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Summer 2008.

ites, and accepting a world with a diversity of voices and viewpoints. Or it can watch as the rise of the rest produces greater nationalism, diffusion and disintegration, which will slowly tear apart the world order that the United States has built over the last 60 years. According to Zakaria, the world is changing, but it is going the United States' way: The rest that are rising are embracing markets, democratic government, and greater openness and transparency. The United States has a window of opportunity to shape and master the changing global landscape, but only if it first recognizes that the post-American world is a reality – and embraces and celebrates the fact.¹⁹

A European Integrationist Perspective

A vocal Europhile, Mark Leonard, agrees with his American counterparts in that the West is not yet on its way to extinction. However, he argues that the road to peace and prosperity in the 21st century leads through Europe rather than the United States. This is because the European Union (EU) possesses a unique transformative power through its ability to reward countries on the path to democracy and open market economy with highly coveted membership. He argues that many of the EU challenges, including demographic decline and internal squabbles, are exaggerated and points to the bloc's collective economic strength, illustrated by the advent of the Euro as the reserve currency of the world. According to Leonard, Europe is reshaping the world through conditionally opening its markets and by deploying a body of law. He points to the remarkable transformation of Eastern European countries and the incentives the accession process is providing countries in waiting, like Turkey, to play the liberal democratic game.

Europe should work with an engaged America and try to transform the nature of the American power in a post-American world. He agrees that it is no longer possible for 90% of the world's population to be governed by a system designed to suit the interests of Europe and America. The centre of gravity in today's world is moving from North West to East South. He urges that we refashion international institutions and bind emerging powers into a system that reflects the values of democracy, human rights and open markets. However, refashioning institutions will mean going beyond simply adding new members. We must meet the challenges of globalisation, including: mobile individuals and groups, climate change, spread of infectious diseases and other issues. Leonard argues that the best way to achieve these goals would be through establishing a community of interdependent regional clubs. In this way, the European way of doing things would become universal.²⁰

¹⁹ Fared Zakaria, "Why the United States Will Survive the Rise of the Rest," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008.

²⁰ Leonard, *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century*.

Quo Vadis?

From this analysis, it would appear that a consensus is emerging that America's unipolar moment is waning, either because of bad policies or because others are rising and catching up to the American behemoth. While some observers argue that this trend spells the end of a systemic stability, others suggest that the tidings of the end of the West are premature. This is especially true if the governments of the United States and other liberal democracies follow the advice of those wise men and women who urge them to renew multilateralism, enhance economic interdependence, and take seriously the interests of rising powers so that their stakes in the liberal international order are increased, making fragmentation unlikely and conflict unthinkable. Whether this advice is put to the test will depend on the incoming American administration. However, it is evident to most observers of the American election campaign that the chances of this happening are much higher now that the Democratic Party candidate, Barack Obama, has won the elections.

This review does not capture the view of those commentators who argue that the greatest challenge to the international order is non-systemic. In other words, it is not China and Russia who threaten the collapse of the international system, but smaller and mid-range countries and regions in flux located in the Middle East and Africa. These countries often lack adequate institutional frameworks, experience crippling poverty, and perhaps most importantly, contain a growing population of unemployed young men who resent global inequalities allegedly made worse by American led globalisation. Krauthammer would add to this group "an archipelago of rogue states wielding weapons of mass destruction."²¹ Admittedly, the review is also state-centric in that it does not closely consider the growing role of transnational factors and non-state actors in shaping the global order. Although questionable to some globalisation enthusiasts and critics, this may be because the leading commentators do not see them as significant enough to alter the contours of the international system as a whole.

Leaving these considerations aside, what is the place of Canada in this changing global landscape? Some would argue that as the dominant role of the United States slowly declines, Canada's clout will diminish proportionately. Those interlocutors who engaged Canada in the past because of its privileged relationship and proximity to the superpower will be less compelled to undertake such an approach in the future. Due to Canada's dependence on the American economy and military, America's decline would undoubtedly affect our prosperity and security. In the meantime, the impact of a diminished American cultural influence on Canada is much less evident and may actually be welcomed by many Canadians who fear that American culture is stifling Canadian identity.

²¹ Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," 8.

The “rise of the rest” will also undoubtedly affect the role of Canada on the global stage. As emerging countries pressure for their inclusion in key international organisations and forums, Canada may find it increasingly difficult to remain relevant and influential on the international scene. Canadian analysts are already expressing concern about a diminishing role Canada is playing in the G-8, for instance. Frustrations about the lack of appreciation on the part of our closest allies, including the United States, for Canada’s contribution to NATO are also expressed on occasion. What can Canada do to ensure it does not slip into irrelevance and obscurity?

While it is not the purpose of this paper to elaborate in detail on Canada’s foreign policy challenges for the 21st century, there seem to be two distinct views about the path Canada should take. The first group argues that Canada should draw on its reputation of a good global citizen it assumed after the Second World War: “honest facilitator in addressing international disputes and frictions, contributor of ideas on better global governance, peacekeeper and an open and generous recipient of immigrants from across the globe.”²² According to this group, Canada continues to carry respect and moral authority around the world and this allows it to make substantial contributions to the global dialogue on a range of important issues and share its best practices. Indeed, Canada may find a receptive audience to sharing its own economic and political model in mid-sized emerging countries. This may be especially relevant in Latin America, where unfettered capitalism is often correlated with inequality and dependence. In short, Canada is well positioned to meet the challenges of a more multipolar world because its approach is inherently open, cooperative, inclusive and multilateral.

Others warn that this view of Canada is outdated and that it will take much more than resting on its laurels to count. Some diplomats are concerned that Canada has abandoned its spirited internationalism and is now coasting on a reputation built two generations ago.²³ They are worried that Canada is relatively isolated and that its real friends are few. Therefore, navigating in the nascent multipolar world may present Canada with some real foreign policy challenges. In order to meet them, Canada may have to strategically focus and strengthen its international engagement. For instance, Canada could engage more in regions and countries of particular importance to its economic and security interests, such as the Caribbean. It may also have to invest in some “signature diplomacy,” especially when its mission in Afghanistan comes to an end in 2011. While these reflections may be premature, they intend to spur some thinking about Canada’s place in what is shaping up to be a post-American century.

²² Donald Johnston, “Canada’s Role in Global Governance,” *Options Politiques*, February 2005.

²³ A view articulated, among others, by Andrew Cohen, *While Canada Slept, How We Lost Our Place in the World* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 2003).