The End of American World Order (Ch1)

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A Multiplex World

Pundits and policymakers have described the emerging world in a variety of ways: "multipolar," "polycentric," "non-polar," "neo-polar," "apolar," "post-American," "G-zero," and "no one's world."[1] At the heart of these phrases are differing and often uncertain beliefs about America's position and role in world affairs. Some of them address the issue of America's "decline," which remains a matter of intense and inconclusive debate. Many Americans and some outsiders vigorously contest the "decline thesis." Among those who accept it, sometimes with a dose of reluctance, are those who optimistically argue that the order established by the United States has been so widely accepted, deeply rooted and legitimate that it will continue to define the twenty-first-century world and might even co-opt its potential challengers. They also warn of the dangers that await the collapse of that order, including multipolar rivalry, regional fragmentation, and other evils.

This is not a book about the decline of the US, but the decline of the American World Order. The issue of America's decline, which I discuss briefly in chapter 2, and the fate of the American World Order are not one and the

same, although they are often conflated in public debates. The American World Order is coming to an end whether or not America itself is declining.

A word about the term "American World Order" here. I use this term almost interchangeably with "American-led liberal hegemonic order,"[2] a claim about the sweeping and as-yet-unfinished US hegemony in world politics. American World Order (which I shall also use in its abbreviated form AWO) is perhaps more faithful to what is presented as a product not so much of American *hegemony* as of *American* hegemony,[3] and whose scope and impact is supposed to have a universal quality. Moreover, my understanding of the term is partly based on John King Fairbank's notion of the "Chinese World Order." For Fairbank, the Chinese World Order was a benign hegemony centered on and dominated by China until destroyed by the Western powers.[4] It was built around "a sense of superiority and hierarchy without the concepts of sovereignty, territorially-bounded nation states, or a balance of power. Rather, it was given order and unity by the universal presence of the Son of Heaven."[5] But there are important differences between the old Chinese order and the American World Order of the post-World War II period. The Chinese World Order was a suzerain system; hence Fairbank used the term "world order," rather than "international order." The AWO is built around a world of territorially bounded nation-states, although its respect for state sovereignty can be overstated.[6] And despite differences, the "abiding sense of superiority and hierarchy" is a shared feature of both, as is the idea that the system was "given order and unity by the universal presence" of the leading power. More important, just as the concept of a Chinese World Order is built around a narrative of peacefulness and benevolence about the benefits of trade and protection accruing to its followers (the emperor gave more gifts than he received from those bearing tribute), the AWO narrative also relies heavily on hegemonic benevolence providing global public goods such as trade, security, and multilateral cooperation

and the hegemon's sacrifices from incurring trade imbalances to shedding blood for foreigners.[7] And just as the Chinese World Order was not really a global order, but comprised a group of states around China mainly in East Asia, the American World Order was for the most part not really a global order. Rather, it was a relationship among a group of like-minded states, mostly Western, led by the US. A sense of conflation between the liberal hegemonic order and world order more generally is one of the problems with the claims of the former, as argued in chapter 3. And neither order was as benevolent as its supporters have presented it to be.[8]

It is the end of this sort of a conception of American World Order that I examine in this essay. What comes in its place is as yet uncertain. Few can deny that America will continue to play a central role in world affairs for the foreseeable future. But the idea that the hitherto "American-led liberal-hegemonic order" or American World Order will persist, even in a "reconstituted" form, is questionable. This is because a key problem in debating the persistence of the American World Order or the American-led liberal-hegemonic order is that we can genuinely disagree about *what might persist*, and *what its form might be*. Myths about the old order abound. Was there really an American-led liberal hegemonic order in the way it has been presented to us? If it ever existed, what were its membership, scope, and benefits? Some of the claims about what that order actually represented, how far it extended, and the benefits it produced, while not unfounded, are selective and exaggerated. The scope of that order has been more limited, and its contribution less consistently benign to those outside of it than its proponents suggest. This is an issue I take up in chapter 3.

And while these questions about the past of the American World Order remain unsettled, we have further problems in discussing the future of that order. What might its reconstituted form be if it persists into the future? Ideas about the nature and extent of its reconstitution are not

specific enough to serve as a credible point of reference. This is no easy task, but demands serious reflection and debate.

This, then, begs the question: how much change is involved in this reconstruction, without that order losing its essential characteristics, the most important being that it was *American*-led or dominated? The challenge here is our lack of a clear picture of an altered or reconstituted American liberal hegemony. How much change and accommodation does it need to make to ensure its survival? Too much might lead to the loss of its essential features and modus operandi. Too little means a reduction in the kind of legitimacy that would both reinvigorate and enable its effective functioning within the new realities of world politics. At the same time, the potential of the American World Order to shape multilateralism after its own image and interests and to co-opt the emerging powers is overrated. Any reconstituted American hegemony has to change a lot, and accommodate, rather than co-opt, other forces and drivers, including the emerging powers and regional groups. It has to adapt to a new multilateralism that is less beholden to American power and purpose.

By "the end of American World Order" then, I refer not just to the end of the "unipolar moment," as discussed in chapter 2, but also of the more long-term physical and normative force of American hegemony that might drown out other approaches, either globally or regionally. Such a notion of liberal hegemony was somewhat mythical to start with, and is unlikely to define our future. The age of global dominance by any single power as the world has previously experienced under Britain, then America, is over.

This does not mean that the "emerging powers" can singly or collectively step into the breach as the American World Order ends. To be sure, their role is critical to defining the future of world order. But if the idea of a liberal hegemonic order is based on an exaggerated projection of the "shadow of the West," a good deal of discussion of

the role of the emerging powers is based on what might be called the "hype of the rest." To a large extent, their role lies in preventing or frustrating the continuation of American World Order rather than providing an alternative form of global governance on their own initiative. The lack of unity, vision, and resources makes an alternative construction of global order by the emerging powers unlikely. Hence, cooperation between the established and the emerging powers is critical to the future of global governance. The emerging powers by themselves neither represent nor exhaust the possibility of an alternative, or post-hegemonic, global governance structure. Moreover, while the liberal hegemonic order narrative tends to downplay regional forces or present them as a threat, the emerging power hype ignores the fact that securing regional legitimacy is a major prerequisite for their global ambitions. The central theme of chapter 4 concerns the limits of the role of emerging powers in global governance.

The narrative underpinning the American World Order paints an unduly alarmist picture of the consequences of its decline. Most American commentators do not think its decline would be a good thing for anyone. Even those who do not dispute the signs of decline and accept it as a fact of life hope that the consequences would not be catastrophic for America itself and the world. In this view, the end of the American World Order could result in acute multipolar rivalry and fragmentation of the world into competing regional blocs, as happened in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I dispute this alarmist view. While no one can predict the future, there are reasons to believe that the decline of the American World Order might even be good – both for America itself and for the rest of the world.

The liberal hegemony narrative not only assumes that the emerging powers could be co-opted into the American World Order. It also regards some other foundations of global peace and stability, such as regionalism, in a

negative light. Many liberal internationalists have generally been distrustful of regional orders. The United States has been quite selective or indifferent in its support for regionalism around the world. These fears may be exaggerated because the nature and role of regions and regionalism have changed considerably since World War II. As discussed in chapter 5, regionalism is less polarizing, and more open today than ever before. Thanks to interregionalism, the rise of alternative non-European forms of regionalism, and the proliferation of transnational issues that regional groups must contend with, regionalism has become more open, inclusive, and multidimensional. While regionalism alone is not a sufficient basis for constructing global order, it cannot be ignored in any meaningful discussion of the future of world politics and deserves serious attention in any discussion of what might take the place of the American World Order.

How are we to visualize this decentered, complex, multidimensional world? Joseph Nye likens the current structure of world politics to a "complex three dimensional chess game." The chessboard has three layers. The top layer represents military power, which is largely unipolar and likely to remain so for some time. The middle layer is economic power, which has already become multipolar. The bottom layer consists of transnational or cross-border transactions in which non-state actors, ranging from global social movements to terrorist groups, operate largely outside of government control.[9] In this bottom layer, "power is chaotically dispersed."[10]

But Nye's metaphor, as might be expected from a game of chess, is mostly about power and its mechanics. Ironically, it does not even account for his much-vaunted notion of "soft power." (Do you use persuasion in a game of chess?) A better metaphor for visualizing world order, while looking beyond the language of hegemony or polarity, is that of a multiplex cinema[11] – multiplex being "a complex that houses several movie theaters."[12] There may be one film running in different theaters in the same

complex, but more often there are different films in different theaters in the complex. In a multiplex world, we have different producers and actors staging their own shows concurrently.

In a multiplex, the audience can watch different types of movies. Some might be thrillers and Westerns, with violence, crime, ruggedness, and heroism as prominent themes, like the Hollywood type. Others could have passion, tragedy, song, and dance, like the standard Bollywood fare. We would have Kung-fu films produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Chinese patriotic and propaganda films made in the mainland since the communist revolution. Some would be social dramas, like the increasingly popular Korean exports. There would be plenty of scope for "indy" films alongside those from established houses like the Universal Studios or Columbia Pictures. The multiplex often has one or two theaters that are much larger than the others. It can hold the blockbuster films alongside a variety of independent films. Every now and then, one of those small films might grow in popularity, attract larger audiences, and move to a bigger theater. No single director or producer would monopolize the audience's attention or loyalty. To be sure, some would be mega hits and others spectacular flops. The audience has a choice of shows. They can also watch, enjoy, and compare several or all of them.

Our world is shifting and to some degree has already moved into a version of the multiplex cinema. The liberal hegemony story as presented to us by its leading American proponents is the equivalent of one movie at a time in one theater. After the run of the British, the American movie has been showing for a while. That movie (perhaps a Western, à la John Wayne) was scripted, produced, and directed by the US, with itself as the lead actor. In the multiplex world, the American show is joined by a variety of others with different plots, producers, directors, and actors. In a multiplex world, the making and management of order is more diversified and decentralized, with the

involvement of established and emerging powers, states, global and regional bodies, and transnational non-state actors. The latter include good global civil-society groups and norm entrepreneurs, and villains such as al-Qaeda, drug lords, people smugglers, and greedy corporations (although corporations can go either way).

In a multiplex world, there are hits, but also flops, like some of the emerging powers currently so hyped fading away because of the middle-income trap, domestic instability, or the hangover from regional conflict. (India, China, Brazil, South Africa, and Russia each has such a potential.) Although the American show may continue to dominate the box office for a while, the audience may lose interest when faced with more choices. Leadership is plural and is conducted in different styles and modes, just as a multiplex runs movies of different varieties. Yet being under one complex means sharing a common architecture and being in an interdependent relationship. And the security screening at the entrance to the entire complex implies that collective and common security mechanisms are at play.

American power would be an important part of a multiplex world. But rather than the mythical Leviathan, it is more likely to be the large but vulnerable (and occasionally errant) mammoth of the Ice Age – or even its genetic cousin, the elephant. A multiplex world would be a world of diversity and complexity, a decentered architecture of order management, featuring old and new powers, with a greater role for regional governance.

The future of world order thus lies not in a restored American hegemony. It does not rest on any or all of the emerging powers acting on their own or in concert with the established powers. A regionalized system of security and economic cooperation alone will not fulfill the requirements of world order either. All of these elements, including a constrained but still significant US power, are likely to exist to varying degrees and shape the future world order. Against this backdrop, chapter 6 examines

the possible middle ground between a concert among the established and emerging powers and a network of predominantly regionalized orders. That middle ground may well give definition and shape to a multiplex world.

The difference between a multipolar world and the multiplex idea is twofold. The former, at least in its traditional sense, refers primarily to the existence of several great powers in an international system and the distribution of material capabilities among them. It does not necessarily define the quality of their relationship, which therefore becomes a matter of debate (e.g., whether multipolarity is more stable than bipolarity, as will be discussed in chapter 2). Multiplex stresses not the number of powers but the interdependence among them. Second, a multiplex world is more decentered than a multipolar world, with greater scope for local and regional approaches. It limits the possibility of a collective hegemony of the great powers over the rest, which is quite possible in a multipolar world. A multiplex world allows the audience more variety, more choices, and more control over what they wish to see. In this respect, a multiplex world is more of a two-way construction. The producers are more sensitive to the demand-side, or the changing audience tastes while developing their scripts, even as they try to shape and influence the audience with new ideas and trends (albeit offering them in greater variety). Overall, the agency in building world order is more dispersed, and lies more with the audience than with the producers (great powers).

Moreover, the films showing in this multiplex are four-dimensional. The three-dimensional concept measures length, height, and depth. In a multiplex world, these correspond to power, geographic scope, and leadership, but the fourth dimension, time, is also of critical importance. A four-dimensional perspective generates a more accurate picture of our past and future world order than the singular and domineering perspective of the liberal hegemony idea. From this perspective:

Height represents the distribution of power, defined in terms of the traditional notion of hard power, which forms the basis of an international hierarchy and ordering of nations. It is the world of great powers in the classical sense. I do not believe that traditional power politics would disappear from the multiplex world, but shifts in the distribution of power, including the relative decline of the US (chapter 2), the rise of Asian nations such as China, India, and Brazil, would reshape the management of world order. These rising powers will be strong enough to thwart a return to unipolarity under the US, but not powerful enough to dominate the world on their own terms. (chapter 4)

Length is the extent and dispersion of order; it captures regional orders on a global scale. Unlike the liberal order during the cold war, whose purview did not include such big nations as the USSR, China, and India (chapter 3), or the cold war bipolar order which was centered on the "central strategic balance" and Europe, and viewed third world regional conflicts as permissible, and third world regional orders as insignificant, the multiplex conception would be global in scope, multiregional, but with interdependence and institutions within and between regions. (chapter 5)

Depth refers to the quality, robustness, and legitimacy of the order. Quality and robustness depend on conditions such as interdependence, multilateral institutions, norms, soft power, and democratic legitimacy. Legitimacy requires a broader and inclusive set of stakeholders: states, transnational civil society, and corporations, etc. Leadership goes beyond material power and is contingent upon entrepreneurial and intellectual resources, including ideas and innovation. The traditional multilateralism, beholden to American power, Western leadership, inter-governmentalism, and the global level of interaction, gives way to a more inclusive form which is driven by a wider range of actors, issue areas, and levels of interaction. (chapters 3, 4, and 5)

To understand our world in its complexity, we need to add the fourth dimension: time. This dimension speaks to the essential transience of orders, and draws attention to their points of origin and ending. It also reminds us that we cannot replicate past orders, unless someone invents a geopolitical time machine. A good deal of the debate over the post-cold war international order has relied on assumptions and lessons drawn from a Eurocentric historiography (chapter 2). Yet the functioning and outcome of multipolarity or unipolarity in Europe's past offer no definitive clues to the provision of stability for a world which has no historical precedent – that is, the simultaneous rise of a number of states which, while existing in different geographic locations, nonetheless interact on a regular and sustained basis.

Hence, instead of pining for the American-led liberal hegemonic order, we should prepare "to boldly go where no one has gone before."

Notes and References

Chapter 1 A Multiplex World

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7 For an interesting comparison between Chinese and American orders, see Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 6 (2013): 1–47.

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9 Joseph S. Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective, *Foreign Affairs*, 89/6 (November/December 2010): 2–12.

10 Joseph S. Nye, "Is America an Empire?," *Project Syndicate* (January 26, 2004).

11 Back in the 1990s, the Japanese diplomat Yukio Satoh had used the term "multiplex approach" to describe the coexistence of America's bilateral alliances and the emerging regional multilateral groups in the Asia-Pacific region. But Satoh did not view this as a theater or cinema, confining the term to regional institutions and alliances.

12 See *The Miriam Webster Dictionary* available online at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/multiplex>.

Chapter 2 The Rise and Fall of the Unipolar Moment

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