



INSTITUTE
FOR POLITICS
AND SOCIETY

Thirty years later: what changed since the US “unipolar moment”?

POLICY BRIEF / OCTOBER 2020

AMEDEO GASPARINI

WWW.POLITIKASPOLECNOST.CZ

OFFICE@POLITICSANDSOCIETY.CZ

Thirty years later: what changed since the US “unipolar moment”?

Policy Brief – Amedeo Gasparini, October 2020

The new unipolar world

Thirty years ago, the Cold War was over: Europe was reunited after almost half a century of artificial and political motivated division; the exhausted USSR was about to collapse; and the US, along with its Western allies, was triumphant. Francis Fukuyama (1989) argued that the victory of Western liberal democracies represented not just the passage towards a post-war history, but also «the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government»; and furthermore, the «total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism» helped the West to prevail over the socialist model. A particular variant of Western liberal democracy that was emphasized at the time: the American one.

The US was not just celebrating a geopolitical victory over a three generations enemy – Socialism – but it strongly emerged from the Cold War as the only geopolitical superpower left; as a model of political regime – liberal democracy appeared to be the winning governing scheme –; as an “economic leader” – capitalism and free market defeated planned economy; as a cultural model – from East Berlin to Minsk, from Prague to Budapest, former Warsaw Pact’s countries were attracted by the consumerist wave triggered by America. In the post-Cold War world, the US was the model: unchallengeable, unmatched, uncontrollable. No country, not even in coalition with others, could consider competing on the military level with the great stars and stripes’ “post-modern” empire.

Thirty years ago, in 1990, the syndicated columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner Charles Krauthammer published a famous article on this regard: the title was “The Unipolar Moment”. The author argued that the world resulting at the Cold War’s end not only imposed a new role for the US, but was characterized by unipolarity, automatically making Washington the supreme planet’s hegemon, though not a threatening one (Layne 2006). The US was the centre of the world’s power (Krauthammer 1990) and becoming exceptionally dominant in the world allowed it to act in an unprecedented manner of “unipolarism”.

Since the US was left *alone* after a Cold War, the world’s balance was broken. Critics (Haass 2008) explained that «interconnectedness of the contemporary globalized world does not allow and never did allow a unipolar international system to last more than a decade» (Oezel 2015). How did American foreign policy change in the last thirty years regarding the “unipolar moment”? What changed from the interesting provocation that Krauthammer posed thirty years ago? Is it possible to repeat the US golden and hegemonic “unipolar moment” today?

What changed in three decades

Thirty years ago, the US was hegemonic and dominating in the world; today its role has been reduced by reality and the natural course of history, not least the fast growth of new geopolitical actors (Layne 2006). Whether empires are formal and relying on hard power (like the Roman, French or British) or informal (like the US with its ability to influence others indirectly through treaties, organizations, culture etc.), they do not last forever. And nor does the US, which ended its unipolar moment in the early/middle 2000s, when Islamic terrorism became a domestic/global issue for every country and a “nationalist-communist-capitalist” China started challenging Washington with double digit annual growth. It is interesting to note that

in the 1990s' unipolar world – where America was the unchallenged dominant *deus ex machina* – the US was paradoxically more open than today and still seriously committed to its allies and its liberal democratic principles. But as with empires, unipolar moments cannot be forever (Thandi 2014); they are just singular exceptions of history.

Thirty years ago, there was a general enthusiasm and optimism for freedom and democracy. Today it seems that pessimism is the geopolitics' conductor; after all, Zakaria (2003) warned: democracy is flourishing; liberty is not. In the 1990s, a wave of freedom seemed to conquer the world: illiberal regimes were toppling and liberal democracies – as well as capitalism – were rising everywhere, mainly driven by the US. In the Reaganian philosophy for example, the US was the brilliant land of opportunities and hopes; today it seems there is no room for optimism or trust in the US. American middle class has been greatly impoverished by the 2008–9 global financial crisis (Sears 2016) and the inequalities have notably increased domestically. Racial and ethnic tensions are draining away time and resources to American potential foreign policy's grand strategy, weakening the faltering hegemon from within.

Thirty years ago, walls were being torn down and instincts towards human rights and freedoms were indulged and considered to be of the highest priority by the US. Today in the world, there are more than seventy walls (Hjelmgaard 2019). Were walls effective tools in the twentieth century? As symbols of oppression, they are never a long-term solution (as the tragedy of the Berlin Wall tells), as they do not help in solving complicated social realities. Today, America's military interventionism is not triggered by humanitarian concerns. It was a republican president – with a Rooseveltian democratic past – that committed himself to disintegrate the Berlin Wall in Central Europe; today it is a republican president – with not theoretical political preparation – that finds walls to be the best solution for immigration controversies and other complicated socio-political issues.

Thirty years ago, the Atlantic alliance was strong and allies in Europe helped the US under many profiles. Today the alliance has been weakened and the interrelations seem quite unstable. The US and Western Europe conjunctly won the Cold War: of course, the former was the dominant partner, but without a compact Europe, USSR's collapse would not have been possible. After the Cold War the US was respected by many and despised by some others. Today, many who respected the US have been left disappointed, while the adversaries remain with their opinion. The same discourse can be seen with American-oriented capitalism, which thirty years ago was glorified, while today it is still the way of conducting economics but ostracized by many actors.

Thirty years ago, liberalism and liberal democracies seemed triumphant; today the most admired and apparently successful policy conduction model is populism, always coupled with demagogy and sometimes mixed with authoritarianism. In this regard, past US presidents' personal relations with other leaders were cordial and relevant in global political achievements; today capricious attempts of US (trade and political) unilateralism undermine crucial relations with historical geopolitical friends. Ronald Reagan pleasantly met with Margaret Thatcher, George H. W. Bush was amicable with Mikhail Gorbachev, Bill Clinton got along with Helmut Kohl, George Bush respected Tony Blair, Barack Obama appreciated Angela Merkel. Donald Trump, on the other hand, is friendly with Vladimir Putin and Mohammed Bin Salman, while having “tense” relations with mild Germany's and Canada's leaders.

Desirable outcomes and realities

What remained (almost) the same in the last thirty years is still 1) the US's reluctance in enforcing and conforming to the regulations of the international organizations they contributed to create, as a tendency towards isolationism is still present in the US and US politics; and 2) a general scarce interest of many civil society's strata in foreign policy, International Relations, economics and politics that seem to interest just a few experts. Furthermore, 3) US dollar remained strong during these thirty years and today it is still the first reserve and most used currency. Lastly, 4) traditional friends and enemies in the Middle East – Israel and Iran respectively – are still the same.

In general, as Krauthammer pointed out in 1990 and which still holds true today, «American pre-eminence is based on the fact that it is the only country to be a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself» (1990, 24). Unipolarity is not a usual feature of politics; and certainly, it is not the condition of today's US. Both Republicans and Democrats governed during the 1990s “unipolar moment” and if anything, the former preferred unilateralism and the latter multilateralism. However, today unipolarity is simply unthinkable, since geopolitics shifted and new prominent actors emerged and are impossible to control and unlikely to be controlled.

The best realistic and desirable outcome for the US is probably multilateral bipolarity with China, as it is now more powerful and richer than the former USSR. However, President Trump's rejection of Wilsonian principles of multilateralism, liberal institutionalism and internationalism does not reveal a global strategy based on IR theory; rather, it reveals a desperate, unrealistic and out-of-time attempt «to renew America's unipolar moment and its global pre-eminence» (Israeli 2019) without realizing that, fortunately or unfortunately, the world has become more interconnected than during the Cold War.

Conclusion

A “unipolar moment” is not forever. And indeed, the American one ended years ago: empires are perpetual, and the US has lost (the monopoly on) its “unipolar moment”, since the world have become multipolar and multilateral. The emergence of new geopolitical concerns – no less the famous post-Cold War «clash of civilizations» (Huntington 1993) – has been made possible by the rise of new actors (Thandi 2014). If the American (post-)empire wants to survive, it must adapt to the changing geopolitical circumstances. Embracing unilateralism cannot be the way of the US current or future foreign policy.

«The rise of the multipolar world with multilateral consensus-based decision-making does not indicate the decline of the US [...] A multipolar order means the rise of more power centres that check the self-interested decisions a unipolar power can take without being questioned» (Thandi 2014). As Krauthammer (1990) said, «if America wants stability, it will have to create it». If the “unipolar moment” is truly desirable for the US (and there is no reason to see it in the near future), internal domestic political fractures should be cured; ideological cleavages and political aggressivity both at home and abroad have to be overcome. Most of all, political and economic isolationism should be avoided.

It is too late for a US “unipolar moment”; plus, pursuing illusions of unilaterality is deleterious and could make the US derail out of history, since liberal democracy does not include or handle unilateralism in the long run. Bipolarity is not in discussion today. China rose as a powerful and determined challenger: unilateral bipolarity is not possible; multilateral bipolarity is. You “make America great” if you understand the time you live in and embrace a “hegemonic

multilateral” and responsible foreign policy, characterized by an alternation of liberalism and realism. Today, “unipolarism” is an unrealistic dream, while isolationism is commercially and politically suicidal, since it will harm the whole international community. It will harm the allies. It will harm America. And it may create a new hegemonic unipolarity: China’s.



AMEDEO GASPARINI Intern

Class 1997, born and raised in Lugano, Switzerland.

He has a Bachelor in “Science of Communication” at the Swiss-Italian University in Lugano and is attending the second Master year in “International Relations” at Charles University in Prague.

Since 2015, Amedeo has done more than four hundred interviews and is hosted as weekly contributing author on eight media; all his articles are collected on “Blackstar”, www.amedeogasparini.com.

Amedeo is interested in (geo)politics, international relations, current affairs, journalism, history. He is enrolled in 18 organizations and speaks 4 languages.

Bibliography

- Fukuyama, Francis (1989). "The End of History?". *The National Interest*, No. 16, pp. 3-18.
- Haass, Richard N. (2008). "The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3, pp. 44-56.
- Hjelmgaard, Kim (2019). "From 7 to 77: There's been an explosion in building border walls since World War II". Available on: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/05/24/border-walls-berlin-wall-donald-trump-wall/553250002/>, 19.12.2019.
- Huntington, Samuel P. (1993). "The Clash of Civilizations?". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, pp. 22-49.
- Israeli, Ofer (2019). "America's Unipolar Moment of Renewal or Collapse?". Available on: <http://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2019/02/americas-unipolar-moment-of-renewal-or-collapse/>, 02.2019.
- Krauthammer, Charles (1990). "The Unipolar Moment". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1, pp. 23-33.
- Krauthammer, Charles (2002). "The Unipolar Moment Revisited". *The National Interest*, Vol. 70, pp. 5-18.
- Layne, Christopher (2006). "The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States' Unipolar Moment". *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 7-41.
- Oezel, Yasemin (2015). "The Impact of the 'Unipolar Moment' on US Foreign Policies in the Mid-East". Available on: <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/13/the-impact-of-the-unipolar-moment-on-us-foreign-policies-in-the-mid-east/>, 13.09.2015.
- Sears, Nathan A. (2016). "China, Russia, and the Long 'Unipolar Moment'". Available on: <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/china-russia-and-the-unipolar-moment/>, 27.04.2016.
- Thandi, Daaman (2014). "The Onset Of A Multipolar World". Available on: <https://archive.claws.in/1175/the-onset-of-a-multipolar-world-daaman-thandi.html>, 01.04.2014.
- Zakaria, Fareed (2003). *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.