

Clement Guitton

Unlikely Allies

How Group Leadership Shapes
International Affairs in the 21st Century



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1 A Leadership Crisis?

The world is facing a leadership crisis, if we are to believe many news commentators. As soon as entering office, Donald Trump, the US President, withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade deal that would have involved 12 countries and that took at least seven years to negotiate. He quickly followed up by withdrawing from the 2015 Paris Agreement, a climate change agreement held by many to be a historical feat that had brought 196 countries together to agree on a topic, about which, six years earlier in Copenhagen, no consensus could be found. The US, previously seen as the 'leader of the world', was now exhorting leaders to 'always put your countries' [interest] first' – as Trump worded it in a September 2017 address to the United Nations.¹ Even if the impact of Trump's words has tremendously decreased since his inauguration, when a realisation kicked in that his bark is far worse than his bite, perception still matters in politics. And the perception was clearly not one of a bright, shiny, attractive, smooth leader in action.

Other alternatives to a US leadership would appear at first sight to be disappointing. Angela Merkel, Germany's long-standing chancellor, ruling from the centre at home without following an obvious distinct ideology, has repeatedly rejected the media's willingness to call her 'leader of the free world'. She has similarly largely rejected plans to go after big ideas. Amidst this change of discourse, Xi Jinping, China's president, tried to position himself as championing free trade, not least in a speech at the well-mediatised World Economic Forum in Davos, the year of Trump's inauguration. A few months later, during the once-every-five-years national congress of the Communist Party, Xi reiterated that 'it is time for us to take centre stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind'. In other words, China would like

1 The British economist Barbara Ward probably coined the phrase 'leader of the world' for the first time in an essay in *The New York Times* in November 1948.

to bring more influence to bear in geopolitics and to export its model, which has so far been a domain almost exclusively dominated by the US. That China will seek to protect their newly made \$1 trillion investments abroad (through a graphically, albeit clumsily, scheme called the 'Belt and Road Initiative') is understandable. But when the head of a still very authoritarian and policed state, with a planned economy, restricted currency flow, and high barriers of entry for foreign firms wishing to enter its domestic market, manages to pull off a bluff in presenting its country as liberal, it is a sign that something really radical might be going on.

So, if the US leadership is declining, it is a legitimate question to ask: who is replacing it? Two answers quite opposite to one another have made their way into the realm of the probable: either other countries will rise and take up the role of the leaders – take your pick from China, India, Russia, the EU, or a combination thereof – or alternatively, no one else will. Gordon Brown, the former UK Prime Minister, told *The Guardian* in an interview in September 2018 about dangers of a new financial crisis that 'there is going to have to be a severe awakening to the escalation of risks, but we are in a leaderless world'. There will be no one leading the world, in other words. For both of these options – another single leading state rising, or a leaderless world –, many op-eds, news articles, and think tank publications have come out all detailing their own supporting arguments.² Yet, this manuscript would like to offer a third alternative. That the US is leaving its seat as a leader does not mean that no other form of leadership can emerge. What about countries coming together in groups, and leading as a group, collectively? By focusing on cooperation rather than power struggles, such a theory has a definite undertone that will appeal to those more inclined towards liberalism than to realism, a school of thought slightly blunter, which ascribes a very big weight to military and economic might in order to explain how states shape their influ-

2 Listing them all would be pointless. The two very last one that came to my attention in July 2018 were an article from the respected Chatham House entitled 'America's Crisis of Leadership at Home and Abroad' (Leslie Vinjamuri) and James Dobbin, a former US Ambassador to the European Union as well as former assistant secretary of state for Europe, declaring: 'The real alternative to an American-led rules-based international order isn't successful bilateralism. It's a Chinese-led order'.

ence. A focus on these factors is not necessarily wrong when seeking to explain the dominant position of a single-country-ruling-at-the-top – hegemony, in other words. It is merely answering the wrong question. In an op-ed in the *Financial Times* in October 2018, prominent figures including Jean-Claude Trichet, a former President of the European Central Bank, wrote that ‘we need a new, more co-operative international order’. The op-ed contended that ‘the central challenge is to create a new, co-operative international order for a world that has changed irreversibly: one that is more multipolar, more decentralised in decision-making, and yet more interconnected’. This book argues that current state of world affairs has actually already begun moving in that direction.

Consider the following quotes, all by much respected and influential pundits in international relations, all of whom come from the US:

- (1) A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs.
- (2) It is imperative that no Eurasian challenger emerges, capable of dominating Eurasia and thus also of challenging America.
- (3) If this is bad news for US foreign policy, it is worse news for many other countries, because America has acted for decades as the primary provider of global public goods. [...] History has shown that it’s never a good idea to bet against the United States.
- (4) Because the current leading state is by far the world’s most formidable military power, the chances of leadership conflict are more remote than at any time over the last two centuries.

The first quote is by Samuel P. Huntington, the second by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the third by Ian Bremmer and the fourth by William Wohlforth. They all exhibit a common two-pronged theme: that the US is ‘at the top’ and that *everybody* is better off by keeping it this way. For anyone not American – although possibly for a few Americans as well – the tone that comes across is strikingly arrogant, leading to some people dismissing the argument altogether. This perpetuates the myth that the US hegemony has been built with consent, and it has completely disregarded how the US has coerced (economically, politi-

cally, or military) a few states, especially developing countries.³ Such a stance also plays down US indifference, or even its opposition to decolonisation, as much as its questionable military interventions (for instance, in Iran, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua). And as a few make the leap to argue that unipolarity with US hegemony makes the world peaceful, the idea further disregards the poor record of unipolarity in preventing conflict in the Third World. Other than arrogance, the authors should be given the benefit of the doubt that they suffer rather from a strong geographical bias. It is a natural attribution bias that one is more inclined to see wrongs in others than in ourselves; by extension, humans are less prone to accept counter-arguments either that US leadership is declining or that this may even be positive. And when discussing arguments of US leadership, it is rather astonishing to notice how much authors coalesce and piggyback on each other's work. Consider the following review from *The Economist* in 2008 about a rather influential book, *The Post-American World* by Fareed Zakaria, an oft-quoted journalist on world order:

Of the roughly three dozen or so contemporary thinkers whose ideas the author praises in the text and uses to make sense of it all, most are not just in America, but based in the north-east corridor that links Boston, New York and Washington, DC. The few exceptions have nearly all spent extensive time in these cities.

Besides the US bias, the discussion of who is 'at the top' can often feel to come from an all-boys, insecure elitist club, comparing sizes and exploits to decide who of them all should get the reward for being superior. On the other hand, those embracing liberal views are often dismissed as being fairly naïve when not weak. To be fair to the US, other countries do it too. The then Prime Minister of France, Alain Juppé, declared in 1995 that 'France can and must assert its vocation as a world power'. The underlying assumption is that confrontation and competition in a fight over control resulting in a single winner brings more benefits than other more cooperative means. Psychological trauma left by a harsh upbringing may explain such a view, or an otherwise

3 See John Ikenberry on why the US pursued multilateralism, especially that the US extracts 'loyalty and compliance from the weaker states by promising not to threaten them or exercise its power arbitrarily'.

very macho approach. (Also to be fair, statements about masculinity are often to be found within the realm of security affairs, best exemplified by, but by no means exclusively confined to, a Tweet by Donald Trump about his nuclear button being bigger than the one of the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un.⁴) But there is an element that is constantly underplayed, in the hegemony as much as in the security literature: the one of inclusion, resulting in feelings of unfairness.

Hegemony is unstable

Until the 18th century, having one all-powerful ruler over the country, the king, was common. But it couldn't last, as feelings of unfairness meant growing discontent. Similarly, within the walls of one's own homes, the man was the leader of the family until well into the 1980s in many Western countries, and he could decide arbitrarily what was best for the household and its members.⁵ Again, this could not last: women demanded and obtained equal treatment. The overall point here is simple: non-inclusive set-ups are not built to last; they break down sooner or later. Of course, comparison between the US as hegemon in the world order and tyrants in 18th century Europe will draw criticism of being way too extreme. The US does not usually impose its will as a tyrant from the Middle Ages would have done. It is more subtle, in terms of agenda setting and negotiation leverage. It is very much noteworthy that tyranny has also become subtle nowadays. As the two authors Erica Frantz and Andrea Kendall-Taylor noted in a 2017 article of the Cold War era journal *Survival*, looking at the evolution of autocracy, 'from 1940–59, almost half of all dictatorships emerged through a *coup d'état*', but that today, the process of 'authoritarianisa-

4 The exact Tweet, on Jan 2, 2018, was: 'North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.' Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!'

5 Although the term 'the West' reads awfully for many, it refers roughly to the US, Canada, Japan, Korea, the European Union, Switzerland, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore. Alternatives are not much better between 'the Atlantic World' and the 'free world'. So, even if the Cold War has now been over for almost 30 years, I hope that my readers will forgive my use of the term.

tion' is rather through 'the gradual erosion of democratic norms and practices.' Examples in Turkey, Hungary and Poland spring to mind.

Taking the point about fairness one step further, one argument has also had a surprisingly long life within international relations, despite contravening much to common sense when applied elsewhere: the single leader argument. The analogy of one very powerful entity at the supreme echelon of a pyramidal structure fuelling a sense of unfairness and resentment should provide a challenge to common thinking. The term 'hegemon' carries much of this idea denoting single political dominance even if this has strayed further from its original meaning. Revived by the Englishman George Grote in a voluminous study of ancient Greece published in the mid-19th century, it denoted for the Greeks the leadership of a coalition of so-called city-states that voluntarily lent legitimacy to a designated leader for their protection against a clear enemy. The somewhat extended and stronger version of a state imposing its will on others with hegemony that is close to tyranny is hence more recent. Ironically, the original terminology of a 'hegemon' is much closer to the thesis of leadership that this manuscript posits and will be detailed shortly.

The notion of an all-powerful single leader at the top of an institution is a commonly accepted idea in other domains than politics. The single leader argument is also found in business – the very area where the term 'leadership' flourished in the 1970s, possibly as it had an undeniably greater marketing appeal over its competitor term 'hegemon'. In business, CEOs are also often revered. And also similarly to international relations, there are doubts about how well grounded this reverence for a CEO is. 'The myth of the miracle-working CEO', was the title of a *Financial Times* column in August 2017, explaining that 'boards [shouldn't] cling to the cult of the indispensable leader'. Basically, the impact of the CEO and his legacy can be somewhat limited. Circumstances (and luck) can account for a substantial factor when explaining whether a company thrived or died. While terrible decisions may have precipitated bankruptcy, even a 'neutral' CEO could have benefited from a positive developing environment, noted the *Financial Times*. Instead, diversity is a key element to reach goals, meaning having a board with different backgrounds, lines of specialisation, silos, and clearly-defined tasks. Michael Porter, usually called a 'management gu-

ru', also goes strongly against this myth of the super manager with its famous five force framework: he explains that industry's profit margins are constrained by five forces (threats of new entrants, threats of substitutes, power of suppliers, power of buyers, and rivalry amongst existing firms) and regardless of how good the manager is, they will not be able to realise profits much beyond the industry's average because of these forces.

Other than in international relations and business, domestic politics in liberal democracies offer a rebuttal of this myth of a single leader at the top with too much power. Sure, despots can 'get things done', especially as they don't have to spend too much time arguing with others. But the overall negative effects largely over-shadow the positive ones. Repression ensues as people grow frustrated at not being able to express their opinions and see them implemented. Divisions grow between those close to the reigning despot and those further away, rippling into instability. In the long-term, prospects are never rosy. Many Western citizens nowadays would largely value, on the other hand, diversity of opinions and the plurality of parties, even if that means passing watered-down reforms and time-consuming debates. Making compromises to reach consensus and being inclusive is now more important for stability than other factors of celerity or effectiveness.

It follows that despotism and authoritarianism are not usually terms that we associate positively with ruling types. And yet, in international relations, there is a certain reverence when discussing the all-mighty leadership of a single state, the US. Without the US leadership, the thinking seems to be going, the world is doomed to be worse off. Alternatives that come to mind don't appear as satisfying: with a world led by China or Russia, liberties would be curtailed; and no-one genuinely believes the EU could step up to that role of leader of a unipolar world. We have, however, not nearly exhausted all possibilities.

If not the US, who?

The concept of diversity now so ingrained in business practices or domestic politics is, however, not regarded with the same admiration in international relations. Discussions of multipolarity are noticeably

tainted with scepticism: without the clear leadership of the US, we wouldn't be able to be so productive, the story goes. In recent memories, after all, the US leadership has brought us the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) against Iran's nuclear armament (which President Trump exited in 2018); the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which Trump also exited as soon as he took his first step in office); a variety of sanctions through the United Nations Security Council against North Korea; and threats of sanctions against Maduro's regime, veering into full-scale dictatorship (that the US was by far the main buyer of Venezuela's oil, constituting 95% of the government's revenue, certainly also pushed up the expectation of the US acting). The US further put up together a coalition to fight (and as of writing, about to defeat) ISIS. It is undeniable hence that their role as a leader has substance and that they have enough firepower at the moment 'to get things done'. And yet, that the US keeps the lead here and there is not the full picture; other states have also acted with a global leadership role, as the manuscript will present in the coming chapters.

That not everyone, let alone every state, supports the action of the US is at the core of politics; it is divisive. But alternatives to one single state at the top of the world order ship do not have to make us worse off. A crew governing the ship can also do it very well; the notion of a single state leader is not set in stone.

So far, many have rather seen the move away from a unipolar, hegemon-led world with regret and nostalgia. Ian Bremmer, an oft-quoted pundit on international relations who heads the political risk consultancy firm Eurasia, published in 2009 a book with the quite explicit title *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*. Bremmer's book makes it clear that the author sees the end of the US reign at the top as sad and undesired. But more importantly, Bremmer overlooks that states will come together if it is in their interest. The end of US leadership doesn't mean that we'll have no other forms of leadership (non-competitive apolarity, no state having the status of hyperpower, isn't the only option, in other words). There will not be only one hegemon, but leading states; and they will not only belong to one group but to several, reflecting their sphere of interests, and in each of these groups, there may not be a designated leader, but the group as a whole can act as one.

This is the alternative that this manuscript posits: that an alternative to this thinking of a hegemonic, unipolar world is to approach leadership in international relations as group leadership. Not all is rosy with such a system either. As vibrant democracy and businesses have shown, much energy must be spent negotiating, leveraging, and finding compromises. Different interests, different characteristics – strong and weak – in what countries can deliver, and different cultural perceptions of governance, mean that states will experience different sets of challenges, as when following a strong leader. But the consequence of accepting that equal shared leadership role at the top is possible leads to a much different conclusion than Bremmer's one. The end of US leadership leaves place not to a less stable world with top contenders fighting to fill the top job's vacuum (mostly Russia, China, the EU, and possibly India), but rather to one that is more stable.

A debated question

The idea that multipolarity leads to more stability is not new and can be rather contentious in international relations circles. A big debate has notably surrounded a theory called 'balance of power'. According to the balance of power theory, no equilibrium is achieved with hegemony; hegemons cannot stay for a very long time at the top as other states challenge it and eventually weaken it, leading to multipolarity. For some, especially neo-realists, the US is evidence that the theory doesn't hold: since 1990, it has led by far in military, technology, geopolitical, and economic power. They argue that the situation is nothing exceptional and that in the past 2,000 years of world history the periods where a hegemon has ruled have lasted for as long as when power has been balanced out with other 'states' or empires – a fifty-fifty split in other words. To their credit, the neo-realists' balance-of-power theory has been put forward with European history in mind, and that any application outside this geographic area should contain a caveat. Today's world is very different from the time when Spain was the dominant power in the 16th and 17th century, and to the time when Britain – and Napoleon after that – came to replace it. By today's standards, these powers would be rather regional, confined to Europe only. The

level of interactions on such a global and regular scale, from any country to any country, makes it hard to draw meaningful comparisons.

Critiques of the balance-of-power theory also like to point out that during the period of unipolarity, the theory predicts peace. So, in both cases, whether balance-of-power theory holds or whether it can be refuted with perpetuating unipolarity, they argue that the US military lead makes the likelihood of inter-state conflicts involving superpowers (aka market-relevant conflicts) remote anyway. Yet, even two vocal critiques of the theory, William Wohlforth (already quoted above) and Stephen Brooks concede that the US unipolarity is unlikely to remain for another ten to fifteen years, which is actually a very short time (they wrote in 1999 that it would last probably as long as the bipolarity during the Cold War). This concession – and their research through 2,000 years of world history – means that polarity is cyclical and hence not eternal.

The US decline as a power is to differentiate from its decline in leadership – and even from a world order moving away from the ‘rules-based (liberal) international order’, a much-loved wording these days. Power and leadership are not the same thing at all. Power is a highly contested concept in politics, but one useful framework is to look at it in terms of military, technology, geopolitics, and economics. Wohlforth, leading the clique concerning US-maintained hegemony, defined it as ‘decisive preponderance’ in each of these components of power, and it has become increasingly clear that this preponderance is no longer so decisive. For technology and economics, leadership and power (leverage) are more difficult to distinguish from one another; it is less so for military and geopolitics.

The sheer size of the US military ensures that they will not be dethroned any time soon from their number one position: in 2017, the US military budget was higher than the *combined* budget of the eight countries ranked right behind it, meaning China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, France, the UK, Japan, and Germany. But military capabilities do not mean that the US would be ready to use it, either. President Trump calling the Nato alliance ‘obsolete’ and its reluctant acknowledgment of Nato’s still-to-play role has sown much doubt about the US readiness to help another member state should it face a military con-

flict. Also, military power does not automatically translate into geopolitical power, as the 2003 Iraq war has shown.

The US also has a top place as an innovator concerning the second aspect of power, technology. Apple, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon top the ranks of companies by market capitalisation (with a global worth of just under \$3 trillion at the end of 2017). They are all technology companies, while new disrupting technologies, from self-driving electrical cars to blockchains, are still likely to come from the US. In this area of technology, the US is hence in a power position, and it is a leader; it has demonstrated in the past fifty years or more that it has the culture and required infrastructure to support innovation. And yet, the pace of technological change means that reverses of fortune can be very quick. Facebook didn't exist 12 years ago; accessing the internet from one's phone was not popular before 2007, the year Apple launched the iPhone. Maintaining the status of technological leader, although quite likely, also has its share of uncertainty, just because of sheer numbers: already since 2007, China has notably been training three times more engineers than the US. China has also openly planned to 'dominate' artificial intelligence by 2030. That a reversal of fortunes can happen quickly is, however, nothing new. As Robert O. Paxton put it in *The New Yorker Review of Books*:

Germany dominated the world of science before 1933. Germans won fifteen Nobel Prizes in physics, chemistry, and physiology or medicine between 1918 and 1933, more than any other nation. Far from capitalizing on this major soft power asset, Hitler destroyed it by imposing ideological conformity and expelling Jewish scientists such as the talented nuclear physicist Lise Meitner. The soft power of science is fragile, as Americans may yet find out.

The two remaining areas of power are clearly, however, ones showing decline in both raw terms and leadership terms. If we distinguish geopolitics from its military component, which has already been briefly treated above, to focus on ideology, the ones championed by the US have been more in retreat than evolving: with a surge of populist movements – including in the US – questioning the well-founded benefits of globalisation, the US is failing in leading the charge to convince that liberal economics does in fact benefit everyone. Its all-powerful central bank is also failing at explaining why the traditional