

## GLOBAL POWER REVISITED THE UNITED STATES IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER

### Organizing for the world

*Fyodor Lukyanov\**

At the end of the 1990s, when the United States was at the peak of its power and influence in the world, a new term, "indispensable power", came into use. America started to believe that in the era following the "end of history", its global leadership was predetermined. But the limits of American power revealed themselves very soon. Even the United States could not achieve its goals through force-based domination. Meanwhile, its reliance on force undermined another traditional source of US influence - its moral and ideological authority. Many states began to view the "indispensable power" concept as a symbol of Washington's arrogance. In addition, it was not backed by a real ability to perform the key functions of the main global regulator and provider of global governance. The Obama administration will have to make great efforts to repair the damage caused by its predecessors. However, in the new world situation, the United States may indeed become an indispensable power - not because America has declared itself as such, but because it occupies a unique position in global politics.

#### **A new multi-polar world: the emergence of regional powers**

The current global economic crisis has come as a catalyst for processes that had begun earlier. Many analysts say that the crisis will result in the regionalisation and consolidation of separate centres of gravity, around which zones of economic growth will be formed. Guy Verhofstadt, former prime minister of Belgium, writes about the emergence of political and economic entities "potentially made up of many states and peoples, united by common structures and modern institutions, often nourished by diverse traditions and values and rooted in old and new civilisations... What matters is the political stability and economic growth that they can create at a regional level, not for one or other of them to rule the whole world." Such centres certainly include China, which is consolidating east and southeast Asia around itself, and the European Union, which itself is a large "sphere of influence" with expansionist tendencies. Russia, also, has potential for attraction. It is not accidental that even countries representing different geopolitical orientations have asked for its help during the crisis. Active efforts at regional integration are also being made in the Gulf region and Latin America.

The world in the new multi-polar era will differ from what it was at the time of American domination; but neither will it resemble the well-known eras of great power rivalry of the past.

---

\* Fyodor Lukyanov is the editor of Russia in Global Affairs

First, unlike the Great Game of the 19th century, the present aggravation of competition is taking place in a situation of universal interdependence, which makes linear patterns of interaction impossible. The result of a zero-sum game is not equal to zero, although the parties seem to be playing according to the classical rules. Second, there cannot be a balance of forces in today's multi-polar world. Power indicators include not only military force and economic parameters, but also many other factors - demographic potential, the quality of human capital, the attractiveness of a country in terms of life quality, and its ability to rely on its own sustainable identity. Identity is particularly important now that traditional national self-identification is being eroded under the impact of globalisation. If a large country is lagging behind others in some indicators, it can compensate with advantages in other areas. On the whole, the outcome of all these factors is very complex, and it is not clear how to reach a balance.

### **The unique role of the US**

Even considering the relative weakening of US capabilities compared with the situation of 10 years ago, the United States will remain the most powerful country in the world and will surpass all the other states in virtually all parameters of influence. One specific advantage is that the problem of how to "melt" different identities into a new one is familiar to the United States since the time of its founding, while European powers are just starting to learn this process.

More importantly, the United States is the only great power that will not be content with the status of a regional centre with its own sphere of influence in the coming decades. Europe, China, India, Russia, Brazil, Iran, South Africa, Japan and others would be quite satisfied with such a status. (This does not mean that all of them will be able to play such a role.) American hegemony is no longer possible. But the US position as the only global force among many various-sized regional forces may prove to be advantageous, although utilising this position will require sophisticated tactics.

In his keynote article published in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 2007, Barack Obama called on Americans to rethink and renovate US leadership. He proposed repairing the traditional set of US foreign policy instruments mutilated by George W Bush, strengthening the moral attractiveness of the US, restoring relations with allies, and relying on multilateral institutions. But even if Obama succeeds, he will not be able to return his country to the situation of ten years ago - because the conditions have changed.

At the beginning of the George W Bush presidency, America began to speak of an empire - for the first time ever in a positive manner. Thanks to neo-cons, the United States tried on Roman armour - much to the horror of the bulk of the country's intellectuals. The "empire's" decline began faster than anyone could expect: Iraq showed the illusiveness of the hopes for hegemony.

"We will never be the Roman empire," said Edward Luttwak, author of the forthcoming "Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire". "Bush, the genius, if he's lucky, will create a situation as in Byzantium, where the different enemies fight each other." To a certain extent, this statement could reflect the transformation of the US approach to world politics in the coming years. "Out for America the triumphant imperial (materialistic) Rome of the sons of Mars, in the Christian, sophisticated, cultivated, smart Byzantium," Italian researcher Alessandro Politi commented. A "sophisticated" and "smart" approach will be required, considering the situation of asymmetric multi-polarity.

Global interdependence, regional integration and competition between poles are creating a very complicated system of relationships between all the parties. An indispensable power might be needed in this scenario- not as the global hegemon, without which no one has the right to decide anything, but as an essential element for establishing a balance in each specific case. As the only state with a global horizon, which sees its interests around the globe, the United States could serve as a stabiliser in hypothetical conflicts between regional centres - be it China and India, China and Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, or some other countries. This role might be compared with the role

the United States played in Europe after World War II - the American presence there guaranteed the non-resumption of hostilities between European powers. (It is a separate question whether the US has fulfilled this particular role and whether its withdrawal from Europe may cause the continent to return to its conflict-prone traditions.)

Of course, in the 21st century one cannot speak of the deployment of US troops around the world. No one will allow that. In addition, US military capabilities turned out to be overstretched even at the beginning of this decade, although the country, far from having a global reach, was only involved in two regional conflicts. But we can speak of a politico-diplomatic role of America as a force that can operate everywhere and fairly quickly, guided by concrete circumstances.

### **Beyond ideology: international community organiser**

At the same time, we will hardly see any ideology in US actions, although this has always played an important role in US foreign policy. The era of great ideologies that shaped world politics remained in the 20th century. Totalitarian ideas (fascism and communism) were the first to go, and the end of the century saw a failed attempt to build a global system based on liberal principles. The policy of promoting democracy, pursued by the George W Bush administration, was the culmination of the latter approach and, simultaneously, a caricature of it. It was an alloy of the messianic pathos of global reconstruction and the unswerving pursuit of U.S. mercantilist interests. It became impossible to separate these two things, leading to a situation which damaged them both. Ideology prevented cold-headed geopolitical calculations, while mercantilism discredited US ideals. The Hamas victory in "democratic elections" in Palestine, Mikheil Saakashvili portrayed as a "torch of democracy", "nation-building" in Iraq and Afghanistan - statements like these have made senseless the principles which US policy has always sought to uphold.

The United States is a country built on ideological principles, so one cannot expect a transition to complete realism. But, as Charles Kupchan and Adam Mount wrote in a recent article, the Americans will need "a more progressive understanding of America's liberal tradition. Just as it does at home, the United States should welcome diversity abroad, accepting that liberal democracy must compete respectfully in the marketplace of ideas with other types of regimes".

Today, the international environment is again largely dominated by states, their national interests and sovereign rights, which has never been undermined despite the feeling in the 90's that sovereignty was bound to dissolve in a global milieu. In this scenario, the US has a great opportunity.

The American President, Barack Obama, has emphasised his experiences as a community organiser in Chicago, which he considers as the crucial period for building his political identity. Community organising is a genuinely American notion linked to the classical grassroots based civil society. The role of organiser is not to force people to take certain actions or to place oneself at the head of a movement, but to bring people living in proximity to each other together in an organisation to act in their common self-interest. The key principle is inclusiveness, which means that all involved should be taken on board and their interests should be regarded as a part of common solution.

This role projected on the international community may bring us back to the notion of an indispensable power. In the diversified world where many models and interests fiercely compete, but all states are facing similar global challenges, neither hegemony, nor traditional ways to harmonise interests through the balance of power will work. Community organising in a civil society style seems to be the only way to forge solutions to acute international problems. Due to its traditions, the US is best suited to fulfill this function, but this will require a profound rethink of its foreign policy approach.