

Trump and Xi: paradoxes in global governance in the 21st century

Kamila Aben Athar

Since the end of World War II, the United States has played an important role in world politics. The current multilateral order was coined and shaped according to US terms and values, such as democracy and liberalism. As a result, its hegemony has been one of the most prevalent aspects of international relations, especially after the Cold War. International Relations (IR) studies acknowledge such ascendancy, and main IR theories approach the country's leading role in global governance, such as John Gerard Ruggie's "Embedded liberalism. However, the rise of China has put some governance paradigms into question, especially regarding US hegemony and power, as well as the order it sustains. This world trend has only grown, especially with Donald Trump's foreign policy, based on protectionism, isolationism, and unilateralism. Thus, it is undeniable that the US 2020 elections and Joe Biden's victory indicate the beginning of a new phase – or an attempt to return to a previous establishment in US foreign policy. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this rearrangement will lead to the extinction of an entire global movement which points to a systemic change in world dynamics. China has no plans to abdicate its emerging position; on the contrary, the main trends forecast its expansion. Therefore, this analysis aims to identify some paradoxes of global governance regarding US's and China's roles in this complex and intriguing international system.

US Foreign Policy and the Trump Administration

The United States was responsible for creating the post-World War II system of global governance. According to Ruggie (1982), the United States had a pivotal role in the institutionalization process of a multilateral system compatible with the requirements of its domestic stability after the war. Whereas Franklin D. Roosevelt's challenge was to overcome the isolationist legacy of the 1930s and to ensure the US engagement in crafting

and maintaining a stable international order, the post-Cold War period was marked by the need to go beyond the interactions shaped by traditional balance-of-power politics to set an international transformational agenda (RUGGIE, 2005). For that purpose, multinational corporations and non-governmental and international organizations had a distinctive role defending the consolidation of global governance, since the former relied on a free market economy to function, while the latter conducted operations worldwide related to security, human rights, climate, global health, and other agendas (MILES, 2018).

In the 1990s, the Bill Clinton administration faced a domestic stalemate to internalize international treaties due to the allegation of jeopardizing national interests. For example, the US Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and robust international inspections of chemical and biological weapons production, as well as the Kyoto protocol^[1] (RUGGIE, 2005). Although the George W. Bush administration's coalition to invade Iraq was quite extensive, the Bush Doctrine for foreign policy was marked by four major tenets: preemption, military supremacy, the exporting of democracy and unilateralism^[2] (CASTRO SANTOS; TAVARES TEIXEIRA, 2013). Notably, the Barack Obama administration shed light once again in multilateralism and global governance by raising expectations about international cooperation and diplomacy and emphasizing global interdependence (CHIN, 2021).

For instance, the Donald Trump administration has demonstrated a preference for operating both unilaterally and bilaterally, especially with the “America First” foreign policy approach. The episodes of President Trump's interaction with the multilateral order have been usually associated with the aspiration to promote the US influence worldwide, intending to “protect American sovereignty and advance American interests and values”, as stated by him (WHITE HOUSE, 2017). Likewise, the interplay with international organizations would have the simple purpose to condemn those institutions; to demand “better/fairer treatment” to the United States; to challenge other states that threaten US interests; or to repel China's influence. The US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Change Agreement – the linchpins of Obama's foreign

[1] The Kyoto Protocol “operationalizes the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change by committing industrialized countries and economies in transition to limit and reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions in accordance with agreed individual targets” (UNITED NATIONS, [20-], pp. 2).

[2] See more in Ruggie (2006), Dumbrell (2002) and Talbott (2007).

policy —, as well as the recurrent criticisms targeting the World Trade Organization, the United Nations and the World Health Organization demonstrate the US growing isolationism and, thus, the opportunity for other emerging nations to assume such role, like China (CHIN, 2021).

Xi Jinping and the Chinese role in global governance

In 2003, the Chinese Communist Party proposed the Chinese “peaceful rise” strategy in order to bespeak its peaceful intentions while pursuing greater development and prosperity, avoiding the emergence of frictions with great powers. The strategy could be considered a response to the “China threat” theory of the 1990s but also “a rational policy choice based on domestic economic needs and international conditions” (HE; LIU, 2020, p. 1). However, the policy adjustments resulted in an assertive turn in diplomacy, especially after 2008, and the world perceptions on China has changed drastically ever since, with a growing perception of China’s indispensable role in world dynamics. Therefore, China’s success in integrating with the world while pursuing global leadership may result in crucial implications for the world, especially for the United States (TOBIN, 2018).

It is important to highlight that, amid Trump’s distrust and disdain for multilateralism, Xi Jinping managed to fill the void left by US disengagement by expanding its presence and assertiveness in major multilateral forums. In January 2017, when the newly ensconced Trump administration pulled the United States out of the TPP, Xi attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, where the Chinese President affirmed China’s role as the defender of free trade, global economic openness, and integration. Whereas Trump spoke of the ills of globalization, Xi’s defense of globalization went down well with its audience (CHIN, 2021). While some authors believe that, rather than accepting the current status quo, Chinese policymakers could be actively trying to develop a new international order, others defend that China seeks to play a larger part in international forums and create

multilateral initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. This shift in policy could indicate Beijing's dissatisfaction with the existing order, but, concurrently, it could mean that such projects might play an important role in China's increasingly ambitious foreign policy agenda (BEESON; LI, 2016).

Therefore, whereas there is a debate about nature and the possibility of a new and reformulated global governance, one thing is clear: a global or even regional governance is no longer possible without the participation and cooperation of China. Even the more hawkish realist scholars in the US recognize that China's growing material importance is a manifestation of a long-term redistribution of power in the international system that is likely to have ideational and policy making consequences (BEESON; LI, 2016). However, despite the increase of Chinese leadership, some authors identify possible constraints which could jeopardize China's ability to exercise the format of leadership deployed by previous hegemonies. The debate surrounding the Beijing Consensus and China's lack of attempt to formulate its own model as a set of universal principles raise further questions whether it is possible to consolidate a "hegemony with Chinese characteristics". Another example is China's entry into the World Trade Organization, which could also suggest that, rather than proposing an alternative to the US-centred Washington Consensus, China may conversely be in the process of internalizing the rules of the West (GRAY; MURPHY, 2013).

Conclusion

Global governance in the 21st century is being stitched together by a multiplicity of actors and interests. The intertwine of US and Chinese foreign policies in international chess is essential to understand the current volatility and future trends in world dynamics. While Donald Trump succeeded in undermining the multilateral order and promoting unilateralism, the future of global governance turns out to be an open question now that Joe Biden was elected the next President of the United States. There is no question that tensions,

conflict, and competition between the US and China are likely to remain, especially in the areas of advanced technology, digitalization, artificial intelligence, intellectual property, 5G, and the trade and financial imbalance. However, there may be some openings for improvement in the bilateral relationship, and ground for new consensus and cooperation, especially in the areas of climate change mitigation, environmental protection, and global health pandemics, including COVID-19. Regardless, China's role in the international system is undoubtedly remarkable and, even with the "US pivot to multilateralism" under the Biden administration, it is unlikely that China will lose its importance worldwide, including on global governance matters.

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