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SPECIAL ISSUE INTRODUCTION

Trump's Grand Strategy and the Post-American World Order

Edoardo Baldaro

University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Matteo Dian

University of Bologna

ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States paved the way to a period of uncertainty about whether the US continue to play the role of main supporter and operator of the current rule-based international order. On the one hand, the 2016 elections signalled a fundamental erosion of the bipartisan consensus on the American post-war grand strategy, based on free trade, advancement of democracy and military primacy. On the other hand, Trump's victory represents a moment of sudden and largely unexpected eclipse for liberal internationalism and a rejection of Wilsonian ideas. Writing a year and a half after Trump's inauguration, this special issue analyses the main elements, discourses and values that are characterising the American foreign policy after 2016, proposing a preliminary evaluation of the potential effects of the Trump administration on the international order, looking at different regional theatres.

KEYWORDS: Donald Trump; International Order; Grand Strategy; Jacksonianism; Amoral Transactionalism.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Edoardo Baldaro (ebaldaro@unior.it)

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1. International order and American grand strategy before Trump

The election of Donald J. Trump to the Presidency of the United States unleashed a new period of uncertainty about the role of the United States in the contemporary international order. Writing a year and a half after Trump's inauguration it is not completely clear if the United States are willing and able to continue to play a leadership role in upholding and consolidating the current international order, its rules and norms as well as the international institutions associated to it.

Domestically, the 2016 elections demonstrated the erosion of the bipartisan consensus on the key cornerstones that underpinned the American grand strategy in the post war era: (1) the maintenance of military primacy rooted both into quantitative and qualitative military superiority and a strategy of deep engagement, characterized by a global offshore presence and a global system of alliances; (2) the consolidation of a "global open door policy", embodied by the promotion of a multilateral rule based economic order; (3) and finally policies aimed at advancing democracy and human rights. Previous partisan debates on grand strategy mainly concerned the means through which these objectives should be achieved rather than questioning the overreaching objectives of the US grand strategy. Before Trump, no other administration put in doubt the idea that the current liberal international order should be considered both beneficial for the United States, its interests and its security as well as for the global stability and prosperity (Ikenberry 2012; Brands 2016).

Up to the Obama era, each administration promoted a vision of the American role in the world firmly rooted in those three principles, even if each administration put them into practice in different ways (Brands 2014; Campbell 2016; Drezner 2011; Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2012). In the security side each administration continued to pursue the consolidation and the expansion of the qualitative and quantitative advantage over its potential adversaries coupled with the need to maintain and deepen its network of alliances and security partnership through the globe which allow a global forward deployed military presence (Posen 2003; Thornberry, Krepinevich 2016).

On the economic front the global “open door policy” was never put in doubt, even if different Presidents put in place substantially different strategies to promote it. The Clinton administration worked to consolidate and enlarge global international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Moreover, it promoted new forms of multilateral agreements such as NAFTA. The Bush Administration concentrated more explicitly on bilateral trade agreements such as those with South Korea, Australia, Singapore and Chile. The Obama administration put more emphasis on multilateral regional free trade agreements such as the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investments Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans Pacific Partnership (Drezner 2014; Kirshner 2014; Norloff 2010).

From the point of view of norms and values, the US led international order has been associated with a liberal project aiming at spreading democracy, human rights and rule of law. Especially in the post-Cold War era the US international action has been inspired by ideas that put the centrality of the individual and his rights above the rights of the state. In the security realm the promotion of the practice of humanitarian intervention in the 1990s and the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect in the early 2010s is indicative of this trend (Weiss 2016). More broadly the Wilsonian ideas and the beliefs that the American role in the world should remain inspired by promotion of democracy, freedom and rule of law remained, at least until recently, a core element of the US national narrative (Ikenberry 2009, Ninkovitch 2001; Cox and Inoguchi 2000).

After the Cold War era, the bipartisan agreement over these three basic foundations of the US foreign policy as well as a wide bipartisan consensus on liberal internationalist principles marginalized those who promoted different interpretations of the US interests, and particularly those who did not consider the maintenance of the current international order as highly beneficial for the United States.

2. Breaking with the past? In search of a Trumpian grand strategy

Trump's election led to question all the main assumptions associated with the post-war US foreign policy, starting from the necessity to consolidate the current international order, the need to maintain the current network of security alliances, the necessity to preserve a multilateral and open economic order, and the normative imperative to promote freedom and democracy abroad.

In the year following Trump's election several commentators described his approach to foreign relations as a dangerous mix of oversimplification of complex issues and isolationist impulses, lacking any strategic coherence or design (Zenko and Friedman 2017; Leffler 2017). Trump uses to describe himself and his presidency as a moment of total rupture vis-à-vis precedent administrations and more generally, regarding American foreign policy's traditions. Nevertheless, during the first half of the Presidency some coherent elements have emerged both in ideational and in strategic terms. His rhetoric, based on a sort of nostalgia for a presumed American golden age, tends to break with the ideational consensus regarding the nature and the role of the US in the international system. According to the president, the United States are neither the "city upon a hill" to be protected, nor a benign force for international peace and prosperity; they are rather an exhausted Titan that needs to become "great again". Through the empirical analysis of different foreign policy domains and areas of intervention, one of the purposes of this special issue is to decode the normative and ideational pillars of Trump's international action, wondering if it is effectively creating a new American approach to international affairs.

2.1. Reviving the Jacksonian tradition

In a first attempt to define Trumpian foreign policy, we start by noticing that under the ideational point of view the mainstream Wilsonian narrative appears to be substituted by a selective appropriation of ideas belonging to what Walter Russell Mead called Jacksonian tradition. This tradition, referring to Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States between 1829 and 1837, is generally con-

sidered to be the ideological antithesis of Wilsonianism and liberal internationalism. Nevertheless, it must be remarked that in the post-Cold War context an unexpected “alliance” between elements of the Jacksonian and the Wilsonian traditions was established (Mead 1999); in this sense, the “freedom agenda” (Abrams, 2017) pursued by George W. Bush as part of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) efforts, seemed to represent the most significant example of this unusual marriage.

Trump’s rise however seems to have signed the demise of alliance between Jacksonianism and Wilsonianism. On the one hand neo-conservatives opposed the rise of Trump within the Republican Party, and harshly criticized his “America First” (Cohen 2017; Kristol, 2017). On the other hand, Trump has considered neo-conservatism as driven by the same flawed logic that led the US to embark into unnecessary conflicts, causing the loss of blood and taxpayers’ money. Neo-conservatives are eventually another manifestation of those elites, who underestimated the needs of the US citizens.

The intellectual inspiration of “Trumpism” appears to be directly linked to Jacksonianism. In particular Steve Bannon, the main ideologue of the Trump campaign and former White House Chief Strategist, constantly drew parallels between the figures of the two Presidents, promoted Jacksonian ideas and even suggested Trump to read about Jackson (Tharoor, 2017; Jones and Khoo 2017).

As Mead argued Jacksonianism appears “the least impressive in American politics, the most deplored abroad and the most deplored at home” (Mead 1999, p.6), despite this tradition constituted a significant element for the American political thought, especially for conservative Republicans. The key feature of the Jacksonian tradition is as Albertazzi and McDonnell have argued, pitting “a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous others” (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007, p. 7). The transformation of the Republican Party during the last two decades as well as the financial crisis favoured the re-emergence of Jacksonian populism, up to the point that it became an essential ideological tool during the 2016 Presidential campaign. Trump’s election can be interpreted also as a revolt against the liberal establishment of the North East, embodied by Hillary Clinton.

Trump, despite being himself a member of the North Eastern financial elite, managed to mobilize the resentment generated by the financial crisis, especially among white Christian conservative inhabitants of rural areas. Partly moving away from this interpretation of Trump as a Jacksonian president, in his contribution for this special issue Cozzolino (2018) explores the existing tension between the figure, the message and the actions of president Trump. Analysing the domestic and international political economy of the administration, the author suggests that Trumpism can be conceived “as a combination of longstanding patterns of supply-side and pro-business oriented macroeconomic policy and welfare state retrenchment, with a neo-mercantilist trade policy and belligerent militarism” (Cozzolino 2018, p.68).

Nonetheless, it is clear that Trump’s populism embraces Jacksonian ideas in a number of ways. Firstly, the liberal international order, the institutions and the policies associated to it are the political expression of the liberal North Eastern elite. As a consequence, they reflect its values, its ideas as well as its distance from the “people”. Ultimately, from this point of view, to “Make America Great Again” it is necessary to reverse policies inspired by the Wilsonian and liberal elite: among them cosmopolitanism, multilateralism, free trade, globalization, and liberal internationalism.

Secondly, coherently with the Jacksonian approach, Trump tends to oversimplify problems. This tendency is another typical feature of the Jacksonian tradition, what Mead has defined “sharp distinction in popular feeling between the inside of the folk community and the dark world without” (Mead 2001, p. 236). This Manichean division produces an image of a hostile world in which cooperation is very difficult, interaction with other states is transactional and international institutions are simply a limit to each state’s sovereignty and pursue of self-interest. In such a world the objective of the US leadership should be to promote the national interest, narrowly identified with security and economic growth. On the contrary the current international order and its institutions have led to a form of exploitation of the US economy and the American people.

These themes clearly emerged in the National Security Strategy published in December 2017:

“When I came into office, rogue regimes were developing nuclear weapons and missiles to threaten the entire planet. Radical Islamist terror groups were flourishing. Terrorists had taken control of vast swaths of the Middle East. Rival powers were aggressively undermining American interests around the globe. At home, porous borders and unenforced immigration laws had created a host of vulnerabilities. Criminal cartels were bringing drugs and danger into our communities. Unfair trade practices had weakened our economy and exported our jobs overseas. Unfair burden-sharing with our allies and inadequate investment in our own defense had invited danger from those who wish us harm” (The White House 2017b, p. 1).

This quasi-Hobbesian vision of the world leads to a square rejection of the moralism associated with liberal internationalism, including the idea that the US should actively promote human rights and democracy abroad. In the famous speech he delivered at the UN general assembly on September 2017, Trump advocated the centrality of sovereignty as an answer to most of the current international problems, reversing the Wilsonian idea that the US should be aimed at transforming the international order to make “the world safe for democracies”. At a moment he asserted that

“we do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. [...] In foreign affairs, we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty. As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries will always, and should always, put your countries first” (The White House 2017a).

Many of Trump’s proposals represent the expression of the resentment of his supporters with the socio-economic transformations that affected the United States in the last decades, from the emergence of a multicultural society, the delocalization of economic activities, the transition to a post-Fordist economy. For these reasons his mix of Jacksonian populism, protectionism and isolationism appears particularly appealing for the “losers of globalization”. Those who suffer the conse-

quences of the rapid transformation of the social economic structure of the American society are most likely to reject the main tenets of the liberal internationalist consensus, such as democracy promotion, and “open door” trade policies. Trump’s continuous emphasis on the necessity to abandon “bad deals” is a consequence of those feelings. As he stated in the same speech to the UN General Assembly:

“the American people were told that mammoth multinational trade deals, unaccountable international tribunals, and powerful global bureaucracies were the best way to promote their success. But as those promises flowed, millions of jobs vanished and thousands of factories disappeared. Others gamed the system and broke the rules. And our great middle class, once the bedrock of American prosperity, was forgotten and left behind, but they are forgotten no more and they will never be forgotten again” (The White House 2017a).

2.2 “Amoral transactionalism” and the new American priorities in international affairs

Jacksonianism as an intellectual tradition helps identifying priorities but does not necessarily provide a clear guidance for foreign policy and grand strategy. Nevertheless, the Jacksonian inspiration contributed to set a list of priorities that have been influencing how the Trump administration understands the American role in the world and especially what the main priorities and threats are.

The first threat is considered to be the presence of unfair trade pact and other international agreements that allegedly contribute to erode the American productive base. As a consequence, the Trump administration has actively worked to block trade agreements under negotiation, stalling the TTIP and retiring the US from the TPP, and calling for a renegotiation of existing pacts already in force, as the KORUS and the NAFTA.

International trade agreements are considered, albeit against any statistical and empirical account, as detrimental to the US interests. Again, in the December 2017 National Security Strategy it is explained that:

“We stood by while countries exploited the international institutions we helped to build. They subsidized their industries, forced technology transfers, and

distorted markets [...] The United States helped expand the liberal economic trading system to countries that did not share our values, in the hopes that these states would liberalize their economic and political practices and provide commensurate benefits to the United States. Experience shows that these countries distorted and undermined key economic institutions without undertaking significant reform of their economies or politics” (The White House 2017b, p. 17).

Furthermore, the Trump administration has introduced tariffs and trade restrictions both on allied countries and on other major economic partners such as India and China.

The relationship with China has appeared as a second priority for the Trump administration. However, on the relations with Beijing the administration has not been able to produce a coherent approach. At the beginning of the mandate Trump promoted an apparently hard line approach vis-à-vis Beijing, inspired by advisors such as Peter Navarro, the new director of the National Economic Council and author of the book “Death by China”, who underlined in an article published on *Foreign Policy* to return to a Reganesque policy of “peace to strength” – an expression that resounds also in the National Security Strategy - in Asia, with particular reference to Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea (Navarro 2016).

The approach to China has conversably evolved throughout the first year, in particular after the summit with the Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mar A Lago. On the one hand Trump has continued bashing China both for unfair practices and for not contributing to solve the North Korean problem. On the other hand, Trump has consistently underlined the fact that he has nurtured a special relationship with Xi and has praised his successes in governing China.

If international trade agreements and the relation with China lie at the heart of Trump’s “anti-status-quo” rhetoric, the current administration seems to consider Radical Islam as the most dangerous threat to the physical security of American citizens. Radical Islam – or again, Islamism or Islamic Terrorism – is described as “the primary transnational threat Americans face” (The White House 2017b, p. 10). In this sense, Islamic Terrorists do not only represent an existential danger for the

United States, but they also constitute a “civilizational” threat (Brands and Kohl 2017, p. 2). As stated in the National Security Strategy, “America [...] is fighting a long war against these fanatics who advance a totalitarian vision for a global Islamist caliphate that justifies murder and slavery, promotes repression, and seeks to undermine the American way of life” (The White House 2017b, p.10).

This “clash of civilization” discourse proposed by Trump is somehow reviving the radical rhetoric and the strategic approach that characterised the 2002 National Security Strategy – the document that laid the foundation for the Global War on Terror declared by George W. Bush (Feaver 2017). In this domain, the approach pursued by the current administration is clearly pointing at reversing Obama’s legacy, and consequences can be observed in different policy areas.

Firstly, the open and reiterate use of Islamism and its cognates, for identifying terrorist groups and the wider category of the “enemy”, clashes with the refusal of the former president, to employ the expression “Islamist” when discussing about terrorism (Diaz 2016). Moreover, initiatives such as the “Muslim ban”, or an insisted anti-Islam rhetoric employed by president Trump, seem to suggest that the American administration tend to consider Muslims in general, as potential allies or supporters of extremists (Brands and Kohl 2017).

On the other hand, the region where this revolved approach is showing its main impact is the Middle East. In this context, categorizing the Trump approach as based only on a civilizational interpretation of the situation appears somehow troublesome. For example, Trump seems not to make any distinction among Shiites or Sunnis, or to take into consideration other potential dynamics of conflict affecting peace and stability in the region. In the Middle East the US are rather implementing an approach based on a categorization of the actors along an “enemy-foe” distinctive line, characterized by a variable geometry. This can explain the strong rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and its allies, and the American support to the blockade against Qatar, one of the anti-Saudi protagonists of the “new Middle East Cold War” (Hanau Santini 2017). Conversely, the Trump administration has not hesitated to show its open opposition to Iran, one more time considered as a rogue

state supporting Radical Islamism (The White House 2017b). In accordance with one of his most famous promises of the electoral campaign, in May 2018 Trump has unilaterally withdrawn the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal. This decision reaffirmed Trump's will to break with Obama's legacy, and it rejuvenated the traditional antagonistic approach towards Tehran, which had characterized US-Iran relationships after 1979. At the same time, this decision appears as a risky strategic move for different reasons. On the one hand, it raises doubts about the trustworthiness of US diplomatic engagement towards non-allied countries. On the other hand, it threatens to favour a rapprochement between Iran and Russia, consequently strengthening a coalition whose agenda seems to be clearly in contrast with American interest in the area (Mousavian 2018). Once again, oversimplification and delegation to allies – seen as a way to reduce costs and share the burden – characterize Trump's initiatives in foreign policy.

The belief that the current international order, considered the intellectual product of a distant, liberal Wilsonian elite, is harming the interests of the United States, associated with a relatively clear list of threats and Trump's own "business like" understanding of international affairs, has generated what Brand and Kohl (2017) have labelled "amoral transactionalism". This approach is defined by a few key prescriptions. Firstly, the United States should cut deals with any state that have similar interests, regardless of their values and political system. Security commitments as well as established roles in multilateral institutions should not be considered a given and immutable. On the contrary they should be considered a subject to negotiation. As a consequence, the US commitment to defend key international partners such as NATO members, Japan or South Korea should be reciprocated by "due payments". This can entail a more balanced burden sharing in terms of military expenses, a more favourable trade relation in favour of the United States, a renegotiation of an established economic agreement. This leads to degrade both NATO and the alliances with Asian partners from the cornerstone of international stability to a potential bargaining chip to obtain economic or political advantages.

The first consequences of this approach to alliance relations have started to emerge, both in Europe and in Asia. In Asia the abandonment of TPP has opened an unprecedented window of opportunity for China to expand its own economic influence, through the promotion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative (Dian and Menegazzi 2018). On the European side the consequences are probably less visible. So far, the most relevant development is probably the approval of the PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) in the field of defence. According to the European External Action Service's website, PESCO is a "Treaty-based framework and process to deepen defence cooperation amongst EU Member States who are capable and willing to do so". Translated from the European bureaucratic language, it means that PESCO aims to be a decisive step for developing an intra-European institutionalized mechanism of cooperation in the security and defence domains. The potential new capacities that PESCO should allow developing are not presented as in competition with other frameworks such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the possible creation of a common European defence force is not even mentioned or hypothesized. Nevertheless, PESCO still represents a renewed ambition from the EU. It should promote – at least in a medium to long term – EU's self-defence and power-projection capacities and autonomy (De France et al. 2017).

3. US allies and the "crisis" of the American leadership

The international responses generated by the American "amoral transactionalism" could be seen as the first signals of a wider and deeper "crisis" of the American leadership. In fact, one of the defining features of the US-led international order is the high degree of consent and cooperation of allies and partners. In the security realm, the post war American engagement with the international order has been characterized by the development and the maintenance of a vast network of alliances connecting Washington with key players in Europe and Asia. While in Europe, through NATO, the United States promoted collective security and a high

degree of institutionalization, in East Asia it promoted a network of bilateral “hub and spoke” alliances (Cha 2016; Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002; Sloan 2005).

European and Asian allies have played a fundamental role in supporting the creation and the maintenance of the US-led international order. Allies enabled the United States to project power in distant theatres, providing their territory for overseas bases; they shared, even if unevenly, the costs of security provision; they renounced to part of their political independence to align themselves with the United States. Given these premises, there is a first set of questions - concerning the impact and the consequences of the Trump administration in international politics – which structured this special issue. Firstly, we and our authors asked whether the Trump administration is leading to or accelerating the decline of the US global leadership. Consequently, another issue to be tackled concerns the possible rise of a post-American international order. Thirdly, focusing the attention on partners and allies, it should be inquired whether they are trying to fill the vacuum generated by the perceived decline of the US commitment, or again caused by the decline of US legitimacy and perceived reliability as global leading power. In this sense, acknowledging that one year and a half is probably a too short delay for identifying structural and longstanding changes, some signals can be intercepted.

Within this collection of works, three different articles tackle the question of how some of the strongest and most reliable allies and supporters of the US-led international order, are dealing and responding to the Trump presidency. On the one hand, Atanassova-Cornelis (2018) describes the strategy of “hedging” currently implemented by Japan in the Asia-Pacific; as she convincingly demonstrates, even if hedging cannot be considered a “new” strategy for Japan, the Asian country has accelerated and furthered this approach, as a consequence of a changed risk assessment linked to the US perceived declining commitment. On the other hand, Fassi and Zotti (2018) and Pareschi (2018) analyze the European and the British response to Trump. With regards to the European Union, Fassi and Zotti (2018) underline that Trump’s presidency represents a potential threat within the “Transatlantic Space”, as it is expanding the ideational and normative divide separating the two

shores of the Atlantic Ocean; in turn, this could lead to unexpected consequences on a European polity, which was already in crisis before Trump. Concerning the United Kingdom, Pareschi (2018) highlights the unprecedented and challenging situation created by the Brexit-Trump double shock. May's government is struggling to define a new strategy and finding a new role for a would-be "Global Britain" both in the trade and in the security domains. Given this context, a reinforced UK-US axis would represent only one – and not necessarily the more feasible – solution for a power in quest of a new identity and a new position within the international system.

On the whole, what emerges from our case studies is that the Trump's presidency is already influencing the behaviour of some of the most important US allies. Japan, the EU, and even the post-Brexit UK have started to consider the idea that US engagement and leadership in international affairs could not endure as a taken-for-granted fact in the future. This is pushing those powers to react, by developing and reinforcing internal capacities, or by looking for new international partners. At the same time, these consequences are posing new and unexpected challenges, which could undermine US allies' internal cohesion or threat regional security in key areas – particularly in the Asia-Pacific.

The major diplomatic initiative of the first half of Trump's presidency, the Singapore summit with North Korea, clearly made these tendencies emerge. While the *détente* with Pyongyang represents a positive development for the entire region, the way in which it has been negotiated might endanger the long-term solidity of the US-led alliances in the region. Trump mentioned that the summit with Kim Jong-un was functional to a future withdrawal of the US forces based in Korea, and conceded a freeze of joint military exercises in the peninsula without consulting the allies on the matter. These statements alimented South Korea's and Japan's fear of abandonment and created new doubts on the durability of the US led international order (The White House, 2018).

4. How Trump can affect the international order?

With regard to the academic debate, the uncertainty generated by Trump's approach to foreign relations represents a crucial test for different theoretical positions on the nature of the international order and its capacity to resist radical changes of strategy promoted by the leading state.

Advocates of a strategy of deep engagement such as John Ikenberry, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (Brooks et al. 2012) have argued that the US role remains indispensable for the security and the stability of key areas of the globe, such as Europe, the Middle East and East Asia. A decline of the US presence and commitment would lead to instability and possibly to conflict. Moreover, a retrenchment of the United States could favour Russia and China, that as a consequence of the decline of the US influence would expand their economic and political influence.

This interpretation is coherent with the main tenet of the theory of hegemonic stability, which argues that for the international order to be stable and open, the presence of one actor able to unilaterally provide public goods is indispensable. Consequently, the decay or the voluntary retreat of the hegemon would unleash a period of competition between great powers, instability and even generalized conflict (Kindleberger 1973; Gilpin 1981; Wohlforth 2009).

This idea is shared also by liberal theorists such as John Ikenberry, who has repeatedly underlined the indispensability of the American role, as stabilizer. Differently from the point of view of realists and supporters of the hegemonic stability theory, they underline also other key features of the current international order that would be put in jeopardy as a consequence of US retreat. The post war international order did not simply provide stability, it created an open rule economic system as well as several multilateral arrangements for dispute resolution. Moreover, the liberal order favoured the diffusion of democracy and the protection of human rights.

From his point of view Trump is then considered a frontal attack on the liberal order. Ultimately US retrenchment, promoted according to Trump's ideas,

would not only make the world less stable but also more inhospitable for the Western values of freedom, rule of law and free trade (Ikenberry 2017).

In the academic debate this position has been criticized both by realists and by liberal institutionalist and constructivists. Among realists the most significant criticism of the strategy of deep engagement comes from supporters of off shore balancing, such as Posen, Mearsheimer and Walt. They argue that the costs of the US post-Cold War strategies vastly exceed the benefits they have generated (Posen 2013, 2014; Walt and Mearsheimer 2016). On the contrary a strategy of off shore balancing would help reducing the costs of the US strategy while preserving the Nation's vital security interests. From this point of view military interventions should be limited to achieve clearly defined political objectives, and carefully consider the possible costs. Consequently, the US should never resort to war either to protect non-vital interests in areas of the world that are not strategically crucial, nor pursue idealistic objectives, such as promotion of democracy or protection of human rights. Realists also highlight that a more restrained strategy would diminish the possibility of the rise of an anti-hegemonic coalition aimed at balancing the US "unipole" (Layne 1997; Posen 2014).

It is important to underline that none of the proponents of off-shore balancing are Trump supporters, nor they appear to appreciate Trump's style in foreign policy (Walt 2017a). However, many of them underline that some of Trump's ideas on foreign policy make strategically sense from a realist perspective. Examples are advocating a fairer burden sharing, abandoning state building efforts (Walt 2017b).

Other significant alternatives to predictions based on the necessity of a deep engagement strategy are promoted both by liberal institutionalist as well as constructivists scholars. These interpretations move from one crucial consideration, namely that the United States and its global role are not indispensable for the stability of the current international order. From this perspective, institutions can play a post hegemonic function, creating incentives to international cooperation even if in presence of a reduction of the role and the influence of the global hegemon (Snin-dal 1985; Keohane 1984; Milner 1998).

Constructivist scholars substantially agreed on this conclusion, expanding the debate on the possible consequences of a decline of the American leadership. The diffusion of institutions and shared norms, from a constructivist point of view might prevent conflict and instability, creating incentives for the edification of a post hegemonic global order (Reus-Smith 1997; Barnett and Finnamore 2004).

Another significant contribution to this debate comes from critical IR scholars. Their argument is rooted in a Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony. From their point of view the idea of the US as “Indispensable Nation” for the world’s stability and prosperity has become part of the common sense. This is not because it is an indisputable and objective truth. It is rather a product of the hegemonic power of the United States. The hegemonic power can lead other actors to believe that their interests are aligned with those of the hegemon, even if in reality they are not. At the state level, according to Gramsci, hegemonic power prevented the working class from rebelling against the capitalist classes. For Gramscian IR scholars, the US hegemony has produced the idea that the American interest and the interest of the other stakeholders of the global order are identical (Cox 1983; Cox 1987; Naber 2010; Hopf 2013).

The most influential analysis associated with the idea of the non-indispensability of the US has been proposed by Amitav Acharya (Acharya 2014). According to Acharya the United States lost part of their capacity to produce order. Despite this a “post-American order” is not necessarily more conflictual and less stable. On the contrary a “multiplex” order is likely to emerge. In a multiplex world different powers can provide public goods, lead several different types of global and regional international institutions, rooted in a plurality of ideas and governing principles (Acharya 2014). The multiplex role envisaged by Acharya entails two different layers of international cooperation. On the one hand global institutions will continue to provide a necessary venue to tackle global issues, even if the US and Western power would see their influence decline. On the other hand, other regional institutions will express the ideas and the power of rising actors, in particularly in Asia

and in the developing world. The Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank is for instance considered a first manifestation of this “multiplex system” (Acharya 2015).

Acharya’s idea of multiplex connects the debate on the US role in the international order and the debate on the future of regions in a possible post-American world. From his perspective, new forms of regional order are key component of a future decentred and normatively plural order (Acharya 2014).

This position appears to be a theoretical compromise between two key arguments present in the debate on regional orders and regionalism: regions as stumbling blocks or building blocks for the global order.

Generally speaking, the debate around and about the role of regions and regional orders within the wider international system has been a ubiquitous, but nevertheless underexplored topic. On the one hand, the focus on the processes of regionalization – mainly bottom-up processes of economic interdependence within a given regional space (Fawn 2009) – has confined the regional studies to a “low politics” dimension. On the other hand, the adoption of the European Community (then Union) as the main object of analysis and inquiry has imposed a middle-range research agenda to the field, unable to produce general theories about the international order (Söderbaum 2016) – even if some exceptions existed, as demonstrated by Karl Deutsch’s work on security communities (1957). After the end of the Cold War a renewed ambition has characterized the study of regions in International Relations. In particular, new analytical frameworks and lines of inquiry have emerged, leading to the so-called “New Regionalism” approach (Bøås et al. 2003; Hettne and Söderbaum, 1998; Söderbaum and Shaw, 2003). Starting from the assumption that the new wave of regionalism emerging from the mid-1980s should be connected to the wider structural changes affecting the global system (Söderbaum 2016), several scholars began to explore the question, whether regional orders were a further expression of economic globalization and hegemonic influences (Gamble and Payne, 1996), or rather a positive shaper of global order (Hettne et al. 1999). This issue is still at the center of the debate, strongly influencing research agendas on regions and regional orders.

The idea of regions as building blocks of the global order is advanced by authors as Peter Katzenstein. He considered East Asia and Europe the two pillars of the American Imperium. The partnership between the US and the former enemies of World War Two Germany and Japan, have constituted a fundamental element of stability of the global order (Katzenstein 2005). Another relevant analysis pointing in this direction is the theory of pluralistic security communities, which identified in the Trans-Atlantic alliance, built on shared norms and values one of the key pillars of the contemporary international order (Adler and Barnett 1998).

Other theories consider regional orders as stumbling blocks for the global order. From this point of view, if a region promotes institutional arrangement rooted in exclusively local norms and interests and they manage to isolate themselves from external influences, this can create severe damages to the resilience of the global order (Buzan and Waever 2003; Varynen 2003; Acharya 2009)

This dialectic between building and stumbling blocks represents another relevant observation point for the contributors of this special issue, since it enables to analyse how the US hegemony is supported, mediated or resisted in different regions. Moreover, it allows connecting regional dynamics with the evolution of the international order. More specifically, we asked our contributors to discuss two main questions, namely (a) if the perceived decline of the US leadership is leading to disorder or to the rise of different types of political order, based on forms of regional or global cooperation, alternative to the US hegemony, and (b) if the perceived retrenchment of the US is causing instability or exacerbating existing security dilemmas within the different regions. Fassi and Zotti (2018) and Pareschi (2018) tackle these issues with respect to the European continent, while Atanassova-Cornelis (2018) elaborates on the Asian theatre starting from an analysis of Japan's new strategic posture. In his article Guida (2018) proposes a preliminary evaluation of how Latin America is trying to cope with Trump's aggressive unilateralism towards the continent. In a region shaped by significant – and partly unexpected – political changes as much as by dramatic humanitarian crises, Trump's actions seem to be characterized by a deep incoherence coupled with the tendency to militarize

those issues, such as migration and narco-trafficking, raising some interest within his electorate.

To conclude this introduction, we focus on two preliminary considerations. On the one hand, with regards to the foreign policy implemented by the new administration, it is probably necessary to distinguish between a contingent disorder and a middle-term “normalization”. The rhetoric employed by president Trump aims to show his will to break with the past and with previous strategies planned and implemented by the “establishment”. Moreover, the fast and chaotic turnover of many important members of the administration during this first years is contributing to augmenting this feeling of chaos and disorientation, both among allies and potential challengers of the American leadership. Nevertheless, as our authors convincingly demonstrate, it is still possible to identify strategic and behavioural patterns that are reproducing previous approaches and apply specific ideational basis. In this sense, when distinguishing rhetoric from action, the Trump administration does not appear as a revolutionary moment, which is redefining norms and power relations in the international system.

On the other hand, it is possible to identify some of the early consequences of Trump’s policies. Firstly, in the realm of security, several key allies, in Europe and in East Asia perceive the Trump administration as unreliable and prone to sudden changes of policy. As a consequence, most of them have started to contemplate strategic scenarios in which they have to adapt to a decline of the US commitment and influence. In the realm of trade and economic governance, Trump has reversed the effort led by the Obama administration to reaffirm the “network centrality” of the United States, making Washington a new hub for several new generation trade agreements such as TTP and TTIP (Slaughter 2012).

Finally, the new emphasis on sovereignty and the abandonment of the Wilsonian consensus has taken a toll on the effort to promote democracy and rule of law in the developing world (Carothers 2018).

Non-democratic powers such as China and Russia seem to be the actors that are benefiting more from Trump’s policies. Beijing and Moscow are ready to

fill the vacuum the United States is opening, not just in terms of short term influence, but also in terms of competition to determine which key normative principles will govern the international order in the next decades.

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