

2.7 • As Relações Internacionais em contexto de pandemia

AMERICAN LEADERSHIP AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AFTER COVID-19

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SINCE THE ONSET OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, America has been in the throes of internal political conflict which goes beyond the usual confusion that accompanies an election year in the United States. Indeed, “[t]he pandemic has fed a raging case of partisan polarization for which there is as yet no treatment or vaccine” and “has revealed that the United States is reaching a systemic breaking point”.¹

Among the consequences of this American domestic political crisis are the impacts on American leadership in the world, and pointedly, on the perception of America as a world leader.

These developments have taken a toll on American leadership in the world, which was already challenged by the Trump Doctrine² with its focus on isolationism, causing America to withdraw from its usual position of leading the way for the rest of the world and maintaining a liberal rules-based international order. America’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and other multilateral and international commitments exemplifies this dynamic.

America is not alone, since for America and the rest of the world, the “pandemic has been a global political stress test.”³ Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is the “global political pandemic”, namely a “global democracy blight causing political life in many countries to become more polarized and less democratic”⁴ or what has been termed “democratic decline syndrome”⁵.

What has made America such a potent force in world affairs is its commitment to democracy. This is a strength when combined with other nations’ similar commitment.

However, with the decline of confidence in domestic political institutions, America’s leadership potential has been undermined and its capacity to serve as what President Ronald Reagan described as a “shining city on a hill”⁶ (or as an example or standard bearer) to the rest of the world has been significantly reduced.

America, as of this writing, is facing a national Presidential election with a President who tested positive for the Coronavirus, a blistering dispute between the political parties about basic political tenets and institutions, as well as domestic political upheaval.

Has all of this been caused by COVID-19? Not necessarily but the pandemic has exacerbated trends already in place. In all candor, “with the legitimacy of many institutions resting on their ability to solve problems quickly and effectively, COVID-19 challenges political leaders and institutions in ways that they cannot easily manage.”⁷

Turning to the international arena, the world is facing a huge challenge from China – and the question is whether the US will be able to meet that challenge, which many have termed a threat to world stability.

Crisis and confusion on the American home front caused in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened America’s resolve to be in the forefront of the international community as it has traditionally and historically been.

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At the United Nations, China has taken steps to control the institution and reduce the influence of the United States and its allies (and the rules-based American-led international order). For example, when China “curtailed political freedoms in Hong Kong...two rival declarations circulated at the United Nations Human Rights Council. One, drafted by Cuba and commending Beijing’s move, won the backing of 53 nations. Another, issued by the U.K. and expressing concern, secured 27 supporters”⁸. As the US pulls back from international and multilateral commitments, China is happy to fill that void. As China pushes to place its civil servants at the “helm of international institutions”, it is able to “stifle international scrutiny of its behavior at home and abroad”⁹. An egregious example of this was Beijing’s securing a seat on the five-member panel that selects UN rapporteurs on human rights abuses “officials who used to target Beijing for imprisoning more than a million Uighurs at so-called re-education camps in Xinjiang”¹⁰. In the words of Hans Blix, a former Swedish diplomat who chaired the UN’s weapon-inspection program in Iraq, “[t]he US is withdrawing from multilateralism to our great regret, and the Chinese are moving in”¹¹. President’s Trump’s withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) did not help to secure American oversight over such an important international institution especially during the pandemic (and after accusations of Chinese control of the WHO). It would have been better for the US to remain in the WHO where it could at least have taken note of what the organization was doing and to counter Chinese influence.

China continues to seek to control international institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization.¹²

The control of international institutions is essential to the success of China’s other initiatives and activities, including its Belt and Road Initiative (including the militarization of ports¹³ such as the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia), its aggressive posture towards Hong Kong and Taiwan and its expansion into the South China Sea, and beyond into the Strait of Malacca to counter India. The recent 25-year deal between China and Iran¹⁴ further illustrates China’s strategic approach to regional and world-wide influence and expansion. In a “May 2019 study ‘People’s Republic of the United Nations’, by the Center of New Security, a bipartisan research group”, it was suggested that “China’s UN actions were part of its effort to redefine how such institutions are run, shifting away from Western concepts of democracy and human rights”.¹⁵

Here is where the global political pandemic comes into play. The weakening of international institutions and the rise of autocratic world leaders is a cause for concern especially when the United States has eschewed influence in the world and multilateral engagement.

What is also worrisome is the way in which China and Russia have combined and cooperated to thwart the power and influence of the United States, which will prevent “US efforts to maintain and shape the international order”¹⁶. Indeed, China and Russia “now directly contest liberal aspects of the international order from within that order’s institutions and forums; at the same time, they are building an alternative order through new institutions and venues in which they wield greater influence and can de-emphasize human rights and civil liberties... In the UN General Assembly, between 2006 and 2018, China and Russia voted the same way 86 percent of the time...”¹⁷ In addition, “China and Russia have been at the forefront of creating new international institutions and regional forums that exclude the United States and the West more broadly” such as the “BRICS” (Brazil, Russia, China, India and South Africa), and “a plethora of new regional security organizations” such as the The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹⁸

There have been dire predictions expressed that America has already lost and that, in the words of one commentator, “[t]he deference to Western societies, which was the norm in the 19th and 20th centuries, will be replaced by a growing respect and admiration for East Asian ones. The pandemic could thus be the start of the Asian century...The world after the crisis may see a hobbled West and a bolder China. We can expect

that China will use its power. Paradoxically, a China-led order could turn out to be a more 'democratic' order".¹⁹

I believe, however, that there is room for optimism. China's clash with India in the Galwan Valley²⁰ and its persistent efforts to push back India and extend China's influence over the Strait of Malacca, as well as China's aggressive militarization of islands in the South China Sea and its disputes with regional powers such as the Philippines and Vietnam, hold out the possibility and hope that China can be pushed back and contained. In the case of the Philippines, while Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte did reduce tensions with China in the South China Sea (SCS) following the Philippines' decisive victory in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (which debunked China's claims in the SCS), Duterte is now "becoming less conciliatory toward China".²¹ Vietnam has welcomed America's much stronger and assertive stance against China's claims in the SCS, which have been very problematic for Vietnam.²² Indeed, "[e]very step that a newly assertive Beijing takes to advance its claims to regional hegemony in Asia drives neighbors like India, Australia, Japan and Vietnam closer to the US".²³

The "Quad" consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the United States have vital interests in common in terms of pushing back and containing Chinese expansion. The goals of the Quad include forming a "coalition of the willing and capable that seeks to ensure a favorable balance of power, deter Chinese aggression and other negative behavior, and maintain a rules-based order that they see a rising China challenging through its actions".²⁴

The concern still is that an America weakened by the pandemic and domestic unrest may not be strong enough to be able to take the necessary steps to reverse the forces arrayed against the US and its allies and assert American leadership in the world.

The very first step is for America "to get its own house in order". In many respects the upcoming November 3, 2020 election is the "most important election in history" and that the "fate of the American republic – and the world – could depend on what happens on Nov. 3".²⁵ Hopefully, the results of the election will settle outstanding issues.

Thereafter, America must forcefully work with its allies to push back and contain China and assure that there will be, going forward, an American-led rule-based international order, and not a Chinese-led world order. In light of the "widening ... values chasm that divides [China] from the West" as a result of the "shocking policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong", Europe will be driven "back to America's embrace". As a result of the aggressive posture of China in the South China Sea, the regional powers will seek America's help and support. Throughout the world, the antidote to China's overreach will be an alliance with the United States, which will candidly not be able to pursue an isolationist policy, if China is to be effectively contained.

First, Americans need to resolve domestic differences. Then, America must work with its allies to revive and strengthen the American-led rules based international order. Of course, we desperately need an end to the COVID-19 pandemic preferably through a proven vaccine – that will definitely calm down the fractures in American society and foster American efforts to build effective alliances throughout the world.

If all goes well, America will be perceived again as the world leader, working to achieve democracy, peace and stability for all of mankind. ■

Notes

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- ¹¹ Ibid.
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