The End of American World Order and China's Rise: What it Means to Asian Security

By
Nurul Izzati Kamrulbahri
Researcher, ISIS Malaysia

From left: Elina Noor, Amitav Acharya and Steven Wong

Many are predicting the collapse of US dominance in the future. However controversial it sounds, to some, the end of the American world order is no longer a far-fetched notion. The United States has long defended its status as a world hegemon and provided public goods, which consist of two broad categories — military and financial. But what happens if a hegemon is challenged? How do we identify the characteristics or signs of a hegemon being challenged?

Multiplex cinema vs multiplex world order

The unique multiplex world order mechanism is an analogy to explain how the world is now perceiving and accepting the concept of power. By using the basic concept of a multiplex cinema, the world is now provided with more options in terms of ideology and political preferences.

When one walks into a multiplex cinema, one is presented with a variety of movie choices — different genres, different casts, different cinematographies and such. In today's world, people are no longer being forced to choose only a single idea that is already in front of them. Information constraints may limit one's choice. Nevertheless, with the emergence of technology and social media platforms, the public is now considered as an important actor with a role in shaping worldviews. Many are sharing information at a rate one could never have imagined 20 years ago.

A multiplex world consists of multiple actors, multiple variations of scripts (in this case, the ideas and ideologies), complex linkages, and a decentralised world; a non-hegemonic atmosphere of shared leadership. After the many episodes of global financial crisis, the world saw nations come together for a common solution. The Group of Twenty (G20) is one fine example of how interdependence benefits the system of a multiplex world order. Under the G20, nations of different political ideologies, such as China, the United States, or its allies, are able to see eye to eye while serving their own interests.

> *… with the emergence of technology and social media platforms, the public is now considered as an important actor with a role in shaping worldviews.*

China as a successful hegemon?

Four basic elements are needed in order for a state to establish a successful hegemony: (i) power projection; (ii) public goods; (iii) regional legitimacy; and (iv) an attractive ideology. In calibrating China's ability to project itself as the next successful world hegemon, some have argued that China is lacking regional context in their discourse of power projection. In an era of interconnectedness, eliminating one's regional role as an important power-shaping catalyst would be unwise to any aspiring hegemon like China.

In definition, global public goods are goods with benefits that extend beyond borders and generations. Because of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and bad record in addressing the worsening air pollution level in most of its big cities, China's ability to provide trustworthy global public goods is very much questionable. The same could be said concerning China's efforts to provide the global community with an attractive ideology. Undeniably, there is doubt on how the global community would react and be open to embrace the concept of communism or even Confucius-ism. Yet, there was only a brief moment during the Cold War when China was eager to export its ideology beyond its borders. Dating back to the time of the Great Cheng Ho, China has always been open to import other ideologies and has not been very persuasive in influencing others to follow its model.

China may never be self-sufficient or aspire to self-sufficiency for all sorts of reasons, but mainly because of the extensive trade and security relationships that lie across the web of interconnectedness between states today.

Irrelevancy of the Westphalian model

However, some scholars are arguing about the vulnerability of interdependence by referring to Germany prior to World War II. Although European countries were dependent on each other politically and economically, World War II still occurred. The Westphalian model and the Concert of Europe may no longer work in the 21st century.

Furthermore, massacres and atrocities were committed during World War II due to the absence of concerned institutions like the United Nations, or other international organisations and non-governmental organisations, which could serve to maintain peace and security during the time. Indeed power play in contemporary international relations can no longer be compared to Europe's experience or even Asia's history. The interests of various actors differ as borders become more invisible — thanks to the advancement of technology that enables greater and faster connectivity.

ASEAN in a multiplex world order

Should the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) attempt to find ways to deal with the US rebalancing in the region and China's continuing interference in the South China Sea, the Association must focus on managing its members' pressing domestic issues beforehand. Great power rivalry is not the main problem for ASEAN. ASEAN should fully utilise the sub-institutions it has created — unity is the main key for ASEAN to move forward. Rivalry between the two major powers in the region should never force ASEAN to take sides. Nonetheless, ASEAN should be wary of the equal consequences of too much rebalancing versus little rebalancing.

… power play in contemporary international relations can no longer be compared to Europe's experience or even Asia's history.

> *... states are seeking to maintain legitimacy through cooperation and friendships and to create networks that will make any hard-power based decisions a tough one to make.*

Participants of the forum

In the 21st century where people's voices echo louder among politicians and policymakers, governments could never afford to risk their level of dependability to their citizens by eliminating cooperation with other nations. With better dynamics, paradigm shift, independence of institutions, democratic politics and a state of equilibrium in today's society and system, states are seeking to maintain legitimacy through cooperation and friendship and to create networks that will make any hard-power based decision a tough one to make.

We had the privilege of hosting Professor Amitav Acharya, professor at the School of International Service in American University, Washington, DC, and UNESCO Chair in Transnational Challenges and Governance, at our ISIS International Affairs Forum on 12 August 2015. The issues highlighted in the above article were gathered from Professor Amitav's talk.