



Trump, China and International Order

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Review Essay

Trump, China and International Order

Christopher J. Fettweis

Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment

Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. £34.00/\$42.95. 260 pp.

Hegemonic War and Grand Strategy: Ludwig Dehio, World History, and the American Future

Aaron M. Zack. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. £52.95/\$80.00. 154 pp.

The liberal international order is under assault, we are told, from within and without. US President Donald Trump often appears actively hostile to the interlocking and mutually reinforcing web of institutions, alliances, treaties, norms and laws that has held the world together since the Second World War – testing the strength of its bonds and forcing its supporters to rally to its defence.¹ Meanwhile, rising illiberal powers – China in particular – threaten to alter fundamentally the rules by which the world is run. These two forces have sparked a good deal of discussion about the future of the international order.² But, if the liberal order survives the Trump years, it is hard to imagine what could bring it down.

From the moment he took his escalator ride into politics some three years ago, Trump has made it his mission to expose and destroy sacrosanct conventional wisdom. Perhaps vaguely aware of how his predecessors behaved

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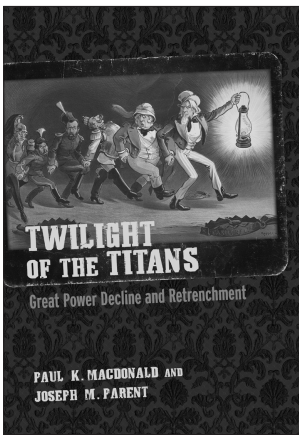
(or perhaps not), Trump was determined to run his campaign his own way. He was unimpressed with stodgy, Coolidge-esque dignity, and uninterested in acting 'presidential'. Every day Trump forced long-time watchers of the presidency to rethink what they had previously accepted as true and inevitable, to question the rules and to wonder just what had to be. Before then, most believed that presidential candidates needed to release tax returns, for example. Those seeking the highest office in the land did not mock the handicapped, demean POWs or discuss their genitals during debates. They did not dismiss accusations of molestation and assault by suggesting that

the women making them were simply too ugly to molest and assault. They did not leer at their daughters. They read.

In office, Trump has continued to rewrite the rules. Whereas most observers believed that demonstrable mendacity could sink an administration, this president has proved that reality is malleable and open to reconstruction. Trump's supporters know he is a consummate bullshitter, but are unbothered, apparently preferring to live in their leader's fantasy world.³ By overturning many of the norms and traditions previously associated with the presidency, Trump has

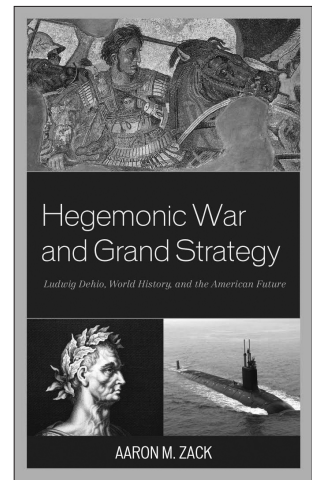
demanded that observers look at the office with new eyes. What is actually important, and what has been accepted merely because of precedent and habit? What does it mean to be presidential?

This all comes at a time when many observers fear that the system is experiencing a power transition, moving the focus of international politics from West to East. Power-transition concerns have been an omnipresent feature of international-relations scholarship since the end of the Cold War, but they have returned with renewed vigour in the past few years. Graham Allison has been in the vanguard, employing the phrase 'Thucydides Trap' to describe the dynamics unfolding in the Pacific.⁴ The basic logic is that rising powers demand the recognition and respect that their growing capabilities deserve; this puts them on a collision course with the dominant power, which values the status quo. Friction, mistrust and crises ensue, raising the risk of conflict.⁵



Allison, like most who have written about it, notes Thucydides' observation that the growth of Athens and the unease it created in Sparta made the Peloponnesian War inevitable. Similar forces may be pushing the challenger and champion towards a showdown in East Asia. 'To put it bluntly', argued John Mearsheimer some two and a half millennia later, 'China cannot rise peacefully.'⁶ The Trump administration may be accelerating the dynamics of transition, bringing confrontation even closer.

Although war in the Pacific is one major risk of the collapse of the US-led order, other consequences would follow as well. These apparently cannot be exaggerated, although many have tried. Liberal internationalists and their more belligerent cousins, the neoconservatives, are particularly adamant on this point: should the liberal international order whither, abject chaos would ensue. 'In many instances', Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol have argued, 'all that stands between civility and genocide, order and mayhem, is American power.'⁷ Former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski predicted that a post-liberal world would turn 'violent and blood-thirsty', with 'outright chaos' created by new attempts to build regional empires and redress old territorial claims.⁸ British economic historian Niall Ferguson foresees a new Dark Age following an American decline, one that would be 'an altogether more dangerous one than the Dark Age of the ninth century'. Among the many memorable features of his dystopian, post-unipolar vision, these stand out:



The wealthiest ports of the global economy – from New York to Rotterdam to Shanghai – would become the targets of plunderers and pirates. With ease, terrorists could disrupt the freedom of the seas, targeting oil tankers, aircraft carriers, and cruise liners, while Western nations frantically concentrated on making their airports secure. Meanwhile, limited nuclear wars could devastate numerous regions, beginning in the Korean peninsula and Kashmir, perhaps ending catastrophically in the Middle

East. In Latin America, wretchedly poor citizens would seek solace in Evangelical Christianity imported by U.S. religious orders. In Africa, the great plagues of AIDS and malaria would continue their deadly work.⁹

The precise mechanisms behind the spread of malaria, AIDS and Protestantism are left to the reader's imagination, since Ferguson is not a slave to detail. He is hardly alone, however, in predicting that darkness would follow the collapse of the current international order.¹⁰

Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent challenge the inevitability of chaos in *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment*. They examine previous cases of great-power decline in an effort to assess the likelihood of confrontation as China rises. Retrenchment on the part of the declining state is far more common than confrontation, they find, and peace more likely than war. Specific policy responses vary, but when faced with the loss of relative power, states often reduce military spending or missions, re-evaluate their alliances and commitments, or overhaul their domestic institutions. The extent to which retrenchment occurs depends on a number of factors, including the depth of decline, alliance architecture, perceptions about commitment interdependence (a condition as vague as it sounds) and general offence–defence conditions (when it is generally accepted that offence has the advantage over defence, which makes aggression more likely, declining states will be less likely to retrench). While reduction of foreign-policy spending does not always follow decline, it is far more common than the kind of violent responses that power-transition theorists would suggest.

MacDonald and Parent define decline using one measure, overall national GDP. States become subjects for their analysis when they fall in ordinal rank of GDP compared with their great-power peers. When the German GDP surpassed that of the United Kingdom in 1908, for example, the latter experienced decline and became a case in the dataset. Overall, the analysis is unique, convincing and important, even if its relevance for broader hegemonic transitions is not immediately clear. Does behaviour after minor, short-term relative decline provide insight into the likely reactions of hegemons that face permanent replacement? MacDonald and Parent suggest that it is so, and we are left hoping they are correct.

Decline, even when drastic, need not result in national catastrophe. Imperial Spain was the closest thing to a world-spanning empire produced by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for instance, but its collapse, while dealing a serious blow to Spanish pride, was mostly positive for the bulk of its people. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Spain had become less significant in European politics, and its people were relieved of the burden of paying for an empire. The string of bankruptcies that afflicted the Spanish monarchy stopped, and Spain's young men no longer risked death from Dutch bullets or Peruvian yellow fever. It is hard to argue that the people of Spain were worse off in 1850, when Madrid's imperial pretensions had essentially ended, than they were two centuries earlier at the empire's height. By almost any reasonable measure, decline was *good* for the Spanish people.¹¹

The British experience offers much the same lesson. While British pride suffered during its long, slow era of imperial decline, the material, tangible interests of the people were largely unaffected. The cost of lost glory was most acutely paid by elites. Historian Bernard Porter has pointed out that the working classes in England – the masses that constitute their own 'silent majority' – were generally indifferent to the loss of the dominions.¹² As it turns out, the British people were able to adjust rather quickly to the notion of being a normal state rather than an empire. Disaster need not accompany decline.¹³

Aaron Zack consults the wisdom of the past in order to address similar issues, by resuscitating the writing of Ludwig Dehio, a German historian from the first half of the twentieth century. In his major work, *Gleichgewicht oder Hegemonie* ('Balance or Hegemony', which is usually and inexplicably translated as 'The Precarious Balance'), Dehio sketched out an explanation for the success and failure of aspirants to European dominance. International systems inevitably progress toward hegemony, according to Dehio, if not brought into balance by 'flanking' or peripheral powers that can draw upon extra-systemic resources. Balance does not occur naturally, in other words, but is the product of concerted effort by actors on the margins of the system. In Europe's case, Great Britain provided the main force for preventing hegemony, aided at some points by Russia and the United States, which were able to marshal capabilities from outside the continent.

Zack tries to transform this specific historical explanation into a broader theory and apply it to other regions and eras. The explanation itself does not travel particularly well. The experience of ancient Greek city-states and the pre-unification Italian system match the theory in some ways, but not all. Efforts to gain insight into the Cold War and current international politics are much less convincing. We are told, for example, that somehow ‘hegemony within the western hemisphere supported plurality within Eurasia, and plurality within Eurasia reinforced hegemony within the western hemisphere’ (p. 84). As with many sweeping, grand theories, all of international history seems explicable with reference to Dehio’s work – as long as one reads it correctly. Zack concludes persuasively that history proves Dehio incorrect about the inevitability of hegemony, and instead suggests that systems can remain divided, balanced and (somewhat) stable, even over long periods of time (pp. 86–8).

Dehio’s contributions, though indirect, to current American grand strategy interest Zack the most. He argues that the rising power of China need not result in a clash of superpowers in the Pacific, and that a balance is not only likely but the only logical outcome. Conflict would benefit no one, and would be opposed, rather than instigated, by the various regional sub-systems of the region. Zack argues that a proper reading of Dehio suggests that any bids for regional hegemony would be not only unsuccessful but profoundly counterproductive to both Chinese and American interests. Instead of opposing an (unlikely) Chinese attempt to challenge US power in the Pacific, the top goal for the United States should be to prevent the emergence of a pan-Eurasian hegemon, essentially adopting Great Britain’s primary ‘permanent interest’ in continental Europe throughout the modern era.¹⁴

These two books take different paths to the same essential conclusions and policy recommendations. Neither is terribly pessimistic about the durability of stability as power transitions eastward throughout the course of the century, although decisions made in Washington will clearly matter. No matter who is in the White House, however, the most likely (and wisest) outcomes involve some degree of retrenchment by the United States and accommodation of rising Chinese influence. Grand strategies that favour restraint over expansion, and prudence over glory, lead to happier endings.

* * *

Few things Trump has done thus far are completely irreversible. One suspects that major US allies would be happy to return NATO to its former self; protectionist trade policies established by the stroke of executive pen can be abolished with future pen strokes; and embassies can be moved back to their original locations, even if doing so might prove politically difficult. Even agreements left in tatters, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (that is, the Iran nuclear deal) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, can be quickly reassembled as long as partners abroad are willing.

Other countries seem to appreciate this. As of this writing, the Iranians had not restarted their uranium-enrichment programme, presumably at least partly on the basis of European assurances that a post-Trump America will return to its senses. The Chinese have taken a rather patient approach to Trump's protectionism and occasional outbursts, responding to tariffs in kind, choosing to match but not escalate. Perhaps they take some solace in the fact that many of the most virulent anti-China hardliners of the early days of the administration have been replaced, largely by anti-Iran hardliners. Neither National Security Advisor John Bolton nor Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have the same animus toward China as, say, former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, who once told a radio interviewer that 'we're going to war in the South China Sea in five to 10 years, there's no doubt about that'.¹⁵ Although Washington shows no signs of retrenching, neither does it appear eager to oppose the rise of China.

The Trump years will test the strength of the alliances and institutional bonds that, liberal internationalists assure us, currently hold the world together. Perhaps these relationships and regimes will prove stronger than any doubt and discord Trump can sow; perhaps he will force people around the world to re-examine the importance of these ties, and they will never be the same. Either way, we should know much more about the power of the international liberal order, and perhaps about its importance to stability and cooperation, when Trump exits Washington for the friendly confines of his various towers and golf courses.

A rising China presents a far more enduring challenge to international order. Structural change, unlike the follies of a mercurial president, cannot be undone. Trump's example might remind those confident in a peaceful power transition that, while the system may be rational, individuals can be narcissistic and short-sighted, and make decisions that are not in the national interest.

The dual rise of Trump and China are systemic shocks that will test international order in the short and long terms. After a few years of ceaseless America-first rhetoric, perceptions of US unilateralism may harden and the system may crumble. Perception, after a while, becomes reality. On the other hand, if the liberal international order so painstakingly constructed under US leadership survives the Trump years, then its strength and longevity will be confirmed to all but the most sceptical. Should systemic chaos not arrive under Trump, maybe it won't be coming any time soon.

Notes

- ¹ Stewart M. Patrick, 'Trump and World Order: The Return of Self-Help', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 2, March/April 2017, pp. 52–7; Richard Haass, 'Liberal World Order: R.I.P.', Council on Foreign Relations, 21 March 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/article/liberal-world-order-rip>; and, presumably, Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (New York: Knopf, 2018, forthcoming).
- ² Some observers have more faith in the liberal world order's staying power; see Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'Liberal World: The Resilient Order', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 4, July/August 2018, pp. 16–24. Others doubt its existence. Patrick Porter, 'A World Imagined: Nostalgia and the Liberal Order', Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 843, 5 June 2018; and Graham Allison, 'The Myth of the Liberal Order: From Historical Accident to Conventional Wisdom', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 4, July/August 2018, pp. 124–33.
- ³ The term in this case is a philosophical one, meaning rhetoric that creates its own reality, irrespective of its relationship to the truth. See Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- ⁴ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).
- ⁵ For more, the curious can consult A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); and Ronald L. Tammen et al., *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House, 2000).
- ⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to U.S.

- Power in East Asia', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 3, no. 4, December 2010, p. 382.
- 7 Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003), p. 118.
 - 8 Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'After America', *Foreign Policy*, no. 191, January/February 2012, pp. 1–4.
 - 9 All these and more can be found in Niall Ferguson, 'A World Without Power', *Foreign Policy*, no. 143, July/August 2004, pp. 32–9. The most frightening page is 39.
 - 10 James Kirchick, *The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).
 - 11 William S. Maltby, *The Rise and Decline of the Spanish Empire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 191–2.
 - 12 Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism 1850–1995* (New York: Longman, 1996), pp. 290–2 and 346–7. See also George L. Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline: The Rise of Britain Since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2004), pp. 9–10.
 - 13 For more on this, see Christopher J. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), esp. pp. 164–74.
 - 14 Lord Palmerston famously stated in 1848 that 'we have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.' Primary among those interests was balanced power in Europe. For an application of this as a US grand strategy for Eurasia, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
 - 15 Quoted by Max Fisher, 'Trump's Military Ambition: Raw Power as a Means to an End', *New York Times*, 3 March 2017.

