

THE POLITICAL CONSOLIDATION OF CHINA, AND THE CONSEQUENCES TO THE WORLD

By Gonzalo Santos, 10/23/22

The Chinese people and civilization have a very old and recurrent attachment to political centralism that goes back at least 4,200 years. (Written civilization goes back continuously to the 7th millennium BCE, 9,000 years ago.)

The original Xia dynasty in the 21st century BCE unified China and established China's emperor system, followed by the Shang and Zhou dynasties, who developed a powerful bureaucratic political system centered on an all-powerful emperor and at the service of hereditary monarchies, or dynasties. The history of China oscillates between prolonged periods of dynastic centralization, stability, long distance trade and empire building, and chaotic periods of contraction, regional fragmentation, decentralization or collapse of political power, and eras of internecine "warlordism." (Similar civilizational oscillations can be observed in the ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Mediterranean, Mesoamerican and Andean worlds).

The latest swing to warlordism, decentralization, and fragmentation was the century book-ended by the British Opium Wars (1836-69) on China and the Chinese Communist Revolution, which triumphed in 1949. It coincided with - and was caused by - the forceful incorporation of China to the modern European-centered capitalist world-system. It was the last major area of peripheral incorporation into the modern capitalist world-system, and the first, most forceful to resist subordination and dismemberment.

In the Communist era, fully liberated from European and Japanese imperialism under Chairman Mao, China experienced a secular trend towards the strong state model and the emperor system - albeit dressed up as a "People's Republic" guided by Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought -, not without experiencing several wild "mini-swings" of sharp economic and political chaos.

All of it happened in a dangerous period of U.S. global hegemony and "Cold War" geopolitical/military rivalry between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. China, crippled by decades of international and chronic civil wars, first sided with the U.S.S.R. to get aid and protection. The U.S. froze China entirely from the world economy and encircled China militarily, provoking two wars bordering it - the Korean War (1950-53) and the Vietnam War (1955-75).

The Cold War was premised on maintaining a bipolar world order. But the Sino-Soviet Split ending the strategic partnership between the USSR and China happened even before Chairman Mao passed away in 1977 - first as an ideological rivalry in the late 1950s and early 1960 over how to best discharge the Cold War and for the leadership of the Communist world, then over border disputes, and finally with the 1972 Nixon visit, signaling a mutual accommodation between the mighty but bruised U.S. superpower and the powerful but world-insulated rising Chinese dragon. For China had survived -

even consolidated - during this period of autarchy, drawing on its vast size and human resources, and its deep cultural reservoir of state-society cooperation, a combination of labor-intensive economics and collective participatory social organization (the "mass line").

After Mao died, the CCP regrouped and launched China on a path of world economic integration and expansion that is still unfolding, becoming in short order "the workshop of the world." But in contrast to the same effort launched by the U.S.S.R. under the new leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev (1985-91), which tossed out the Leninist political system, the CCP opened China for business and joint partnerships with global capital but retained strong control over its single-party rule. The former superpower disintegrated by the weight of its accumulated contradictions, the later flourished.

What has happened in the intervening period is that the Chinese never fell for the "shock treatment" prescriptions of global capital. Instead, under careful state planning and management, they maximized the opportunities afforded by U.S.-China trade and investment in the 1990s, and their ascension to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Foremost, they took full advantage of the economic chaos and costly military disasters brought upon itself by the declining U.S. hegemon - the massive indebtedness (to East Asia, no less) to sustain artificially high consumption levels in the U.S., the dot.com bubble bursts of the 1990s, the 2008 financial meltdown, and especially the post-9/11 "endless wars" in Asia - costly and disastrous for the U.S. but beneficial to China.

Over the past two decades, China moved into the economic vacuum left by the U.S., becoming the main trading/investment partner in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. So, the Chinese economic growth and integration plan worked marvelously, while the U.S. found itself bogged down by crises of its own making and went from being the world's largest creditor nation to the world largest debtor nation – mainly to China!

Geopolitically, China was content to play a low profile on the world's stage and let the U.S. be saddled with the increased un-governability of the world order it supposedly led. Militarily, China began to catch up, too, at first inconspicuously, then more boldly in recent years. Though still far from matching the U.S. formidable war making capabilities, it now projects sufficient deterrent power in the Asia-Pacific region.

In hindsight, the whole "amicable" bifurcation between the declining hegemon and the rising dragon was unsustainable. For one thing, the U.S. would soon lose its cool as it inexorably lost ground pursuing its post-Cold War strategy of "engagement" with China. For another, the Chinese leadership would eventually find no further use of playing coy and second fiddle in a U.S.-ordered world order, especially after China's economy became the world's largest economy by GDP by purchasing power parity (the second-largest economy by nominal GDP), and the second-wealthiest country. And it now held by far the largest share of U.S. sovereign debt, after two decades of massive trade imbalances in its favor. Besides, China had over four times the population of the U.S. (1.4 billion people vs. 327 million), the world's largest standing army, and had acquired a sizeable nuclear arsenal.

One can interpret the Obama administration, on the U.S. side, and the Hu Jintao regime, on the China side, to have been the last leaderships committed to the strategic U.S.-China partnership, and the Trump and Xi Jinping administrations the first who abandoned it and replaced it with trade wars and overt geopolitical/military tensions – something which both the Biden administration and the consolidated Xi regime are now clearly doubling-down on.

The Chinese are back to their customary emperor system and pursuing their customary regional economic hegemonic roles of past eras and dynasties, only the scales have increased. The U.S., it is now clear, has no answer to it other than menacing economic and military warfare - a self-defeating strategy for many reasons. The American policy makers cannot bring themselves to give up their dominant place in history and accommodate to the new multipolar world.

Elsewhere outside Europe, the U.S. is also losing influence: in the Middle East, the Saudis have just delivered a humiliating snub to Biden (and Europe) by reasserting “OPEC+” cartel regulation of oil production to maximize *its monopoly profits* at the expense of the West at a times of high global inflation and its ineffective oil sanctions to Russia (which China is happy to buy).

In South America, the initial “Pink Tide” (2000-2015) of non-U.S.-aligned, pro-continental integration, progressive regimes, which went into remission after 2015, is back again – this time reaching all the way to Mexico on the U.S.’s southern border.

In Africa the dynamics also point to non-aligned continental integration and heightened trade and investment with China under the ambitious “Belt & Road Initiative.”

The U.S. reflex response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – another desperate gambit by a diminished former superpower doomed to fail, but not before generating immense chaos and suffering in Europe - has been to reassert its geopolitical dominance of Europe, refuse all entreaties to negotiate an end to the conflict, and seek a complete military victory of Ukraine, at the risk of setting off a NATO-Russia nuclear conflagration. The goal is to not just repel Russian aggression, but to cripple and reduce Russian military power capabilities as much as possible. All of this, of course, has pushed Russia to the arms of China, which is more than happy to assist Russia *on its terms*.

This is no way to run the world! It's tough losing global hegemony and being cut down to size by civilizational and modern world-system secular trends in world history - just ask the British!

But so far, the U.S. just cannot bring itself to adjust to the new realities, the main one being that the Chinese – as well as India and many mid-sized powers in the Global South, where a full three-quarters of humanity live and toil – are playing a more assertive role on the world stage, aiming to rein in *both* former superpowers running

amok. Both the U.S. and Russia, with a combined population of just 6.12% of humanity but armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, remain full of imperial hubris and delusions of grandeur; and each, in their own way, are recklessly menacing the world.

A necessary parenthesis: nuclear weapons, born in the era of U.S. global hegemony, *were used* to sustain – albeit via terror – the Cold War world order. Now that that order has crumbled, they need to be entirely abolished. But it won't do to threaten the likes of Iran for seeking them, while those that possess them refuse to give them up. If they continue to exist, nuclear weapons will remain in the "wrong hands." That applies to, in descending order of arsenals, Russia and the United States, China, the U.K., France, India, Pakistan, Israel, and yes, North Korea. It is the last, most urgent unresolved legacy of World War II, which if not addressed soon, may lead to World War III and planetary Armageddon.

One last word about the potent Chinese economic model in full view today, which preceded the period of European capitalist ascendancy five centuries ago (and which for the Chinese was, in retrospect, a mere "bump in the road"). Two great western analysts of the modern world-system - Giovanni Arrighi ("Adam Smith in Beijing") and André Gunder Frank ("Reorient") - predicted in the 1990s the return of China to the center of the world-economy and its decisive civilizational weight in the construction of any post-capitalist, post-European world order.

Arrighi theorized the superiority of the East Asia political-economic system centered on China this way: prior to the capital-intensive, geographically & militarily expansionist but politically decentralizing British *Industrial Revolution*, the Chinese had established a labor-intensive, geographically limited, and politically centralizing Chinese *Industrious Revolution*. Any future post-capitalist world-system, if there is to be one, will probably be a superior "hybrid" fusion between these two previous, world-altering modes of political economy. The trick is how to get from here to there.

Today the world is witnessing the chaos in the United States and Europe, on the one hand, and the strong order and robust prosperity in China, on the other, as perhaps full confirmation of Arrighi's and Gunder Frank's Asia-centric thesis of the inevitable return of East Asia to the epicenters of world power and wealth.

But the future is not inevitable, nor is it written. What will be required to build the future, or destroy it, is humanity's collective agency - three distinct regional agencies in particular:

1. That East Asia steps up to the plate, answers the call to lead and credibly provide humanity systemwide solutions to the festering, unresolved, and menacing problems facing humanity - climate change and environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, world inequality, a lack of a global social contract and governance system based on universal, enhanced and inclusive, standards of democracy, freedom, justice, and equity.

2. That the U.S./E.U. global North adjust and accommodate to the capacity and leadership of East Asia to help usher in a new, post-capitalist, post-Eurocentric world-system with a minimum of resistance, chaos, and destruction.
3. That the global South in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, embark on their own paths of non-aligned continental integration and development, and contribute more actively to enrich the design of any future world-system.

So far, the Chinese have shown no signs of abandoning their oppressive, undemocratic, and ultimately unsustainable model of state rule they inherited from their history – quite the contrary, as seen by the consolidation of the Xi authoritarian regime. Clearly, the Chinese elites and society will have to offer the world a much more democratic model of politics if they have any hope of legitimately leading it ideologically one day – not just one much better than the authoritarian one they have today, but much better than the chaotic, corrupt, and discredited ones on display today in the U.S. and U.K.. The civil rights and class struggles in China will be pivotal to see if China regresses or progresses on this front.

On the U.S. side, neither does it seem that the hobbled superpower is anywhere close to be prepared to abandon its stubborn, futile efforts to resurrect its gone global hegemony, today in tatters, or to abandon its tempting option to pursue imperial dominion again, as it tried – and failed - during the Bush II regime. Ominously and more immediate a threat to world peace, there's elite consensus now to confront China economically and, if need be, militarily. Again, the role American civil society will play in going along or resisting this turn to the worse in U.S. strategic posture is pivotal.

On another theater of major power overt confrontation today, the reckless, neoimperialist, authoritarian Putin regime has just given the Biden administration, in invading Ukraine, a golden opportunity to reassert U.S.-led NATO supremacy in Europe, cut Russia down to size in the bargain, and rein in the E.U. geopolitically from straying too far on its own. How far and for how long can this confrontation continue without sparking a major conflagration is anybody's guess, but so far, all voices urgently counseling negotiations are being ignored by *both* sides. The Russian people should step in and put a stop to this reckless, misbegotten adventure at all costs.

We can see that everyone has some responsibility for stopping the world from careening into another cataclysmic global conflagration and change direction before it's too late. We are far from entering a renewed period of East-West/North-South cooperation to collectively solve systemwide problems. Worse, we are today entering another era of big power confrontations with unforeseen consequences and uncontrolled timetables.

Meanwhile, the unattended global problems fester unsolved and exacerbated. This means the world is now entering, at the terminal crisis of U.S. global hegemony, its most dangerous period of turmoil and systemic chaos since the rise of fascism at the end of the era of British global hegemony, with little evidence that this time it will all work out before humanity experiences another cataclysm. And that puts the burden of

responsibility on all of humanity - especially the American, Chinese, and Russian people, but also everybody else in the global North and global South - to redouble our efforts to pull back from the abyss, and jointly envision, then construct, a better world-system, before it's too late.

#AnotherWorldIsPossible #AnotherNorthAmericalsRequired
#AnotherChinaMustEmerge #AnotherVisionMustArise

ARTICLE: China's leader Xi Jinping secures third term and stacks inner circle with loyalists

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/23/xi-jinping-to-rule-china-for-precedent-breaking-third-term>