

Reflections on the post-pandemic world



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Richard Haass recently published in *Foreign Affairs* an article entitled, “The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It.” Haass is President of the Council on Foreign Relations; the article shows the limited understanding of the U.S. political establishment.

Haass declares himself to be not in agreement with most analysts, who maintain that the post-COVID-19 world will be fundamentally different. He writes, “the world following the pandemic is unlikely to be radically different from the one that preceded it. COVID-19 will not so much change the basic direction of world history as accelerate it. The pandemic and the response to it have revealed and reinforced the fundamental characteristics of geopolitics today. The crisis promises to be less of a turning point than a way station along the road that the world has been traveling for the past few decades.”

One of the tendencies that the pandemic accelerates, for Haass, is declining U.S. leadership. He writes that the lack of U.S. leadership, evident during the pandemic, is not new; “it has been apparent for at least

a decade.” The lack of U.S. leadership has been indicated by the decline of the U.S. relative advantage over other nations, particularly China. The U.S. decline in leadership, he writes, is not a result of declining American capacity but of “faltering American will.”

Here Haass demonstrates a lack of understanding of the U.S. relative decline, which in reality is rooted in the fact that the factors that drove the U.S. spectacular ascent from 1787 to 1965 have reached their limits. These factors include: the lucrative trading relation with the slave regions of the West Indies and the U.S. South; the conquest of the West; imperialist penetration of Latin America and the Caribbean; and war profits of the two world wars and the Cold War. Such possibilities for economic expansion are no longer available, inasmuch as the world-system has reached and overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth, a situation compounded by the organized political resistance of the neocolonized peoples of the earth. No amount of will can overcome this global economic and political reality.

In addition, the rise and fall of hegemonic powers is a normal tendency in the modern world-system, and in not accepting this fact, Haass falls into the fundamental error of the U.S. political establishment. It is trying to figure out how to restore U.S. dominance, rather than asking what ought to be done, now that the United States can no longer be the dominant power, and now that the neocolonial world-system itself has reached its limits.

The second tendency, previously present but reinforced by the pandemic, is what Haass calls the “poor state of global governance” and “the failure of global organizations to keep up with [emerging global] challenges.” Here he does not see that the major organizations of global governance were put into place during the era of U.S. neocolonial hegemony, and they therefore are designed to attend to global issues in a form that supports U.S. imperialist interests. The structures of these organizations are rendered out of date to the extent that the United States declines. Global organizations will function much better when they are reformed, so that they are designed to provide support for a network of mutually respectful relations among equal and sovereign nations. Such a democratic reform of the United Nations has been a constant demand of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The third tendency that Haass identifies is conflict among the great powers. Here Haass does not see that the world-system is characterized by a fundamental conflict between the colonizers and the colonized. And China, having never been a colonial power and having important characteristics in common with the colonized nations and peoples, is on the side of the neocolonized nations. Accordingly, the rise of China provokes a conflict with the global powers, because China does not intend merely to ascend, but to change the norms of the system, so that they respond more to the needs of the colonized. In addition, there has emerged a conflict among the global powers concerning what to do about the rise of China. In effect, the conflicts among the global powers result from the fact that their colonialist and imperialist project has reached and overextended the geographical and ecological limits of the earth, and accordingly, it has arrived to its historic moment of unsustainability; and in response to this reality, an alternative, more just world-system is struggling to be born.

There is, on the other hand, consensus among China and those nations of the Third World that have been able to escape from the colonialist grip in the conduct of their foreign policy. The extreme right-wing of the political establishment seeks to destroy those states that are seeking an alternative road, but this approach turns its back on cooperation, which is the only way that humanity can respond to the present global challenges. The right-wing approach, whose architects have been in power since 1980, has been deepening the multi-dimensional crisis of the world-system, thus increasing the probability for the emergence of one of three very different global realities: a world order based on fascism; an alternative world-order based on the vision of the Third World plus China; or the disintegration of the world-system.

The approaching of the limits of American power was intertwined with the rise of the voice of the Third World. Because that voice emerged from the colonial situation, it was in an advantaged position to

understand the colonial foundation of the world-system. And it never tired of seeking to explain to the global powers the necessity for the structural change of the world-system. That Third World voice has demonstrated itself to be a moral voice, committed to avoiding the turn of the world-system toward fascism, and hoping to prevent the fall of the world into chaos. Looking at the contradictions and the positive characteristics of the world-system from the vantage point of the colonized, it has been capable of seeing a more just and sustainable world-system as possible, and at the same time necessary. For the U.S. political establishment, listening to that voice from below has been the key to asking the relevant questions of the historic movement, would enable emancipation from the historic omissions and false assumptions that have framed the limited understanding of the U.S. political leadership during the course of the twentieth century, and especially since 1980.

However, the U.S. political establishment has demonstrated that it lacks the moral capacity to listen to the insights of the humble. It is possible that a sector of the U.S. power elite, stimulated by the Covid-19 pandemic or similar global events looming ahead, could experience a moral and intellectual conversion, and on this foundation, seek a structural reform from above in alliance with popular sectors.

In the absence of a reorientation of U.S. foreign policy toward North-South cooperation, the Third World will likely continue to move toward the Chinese project of building alternative international economic relations and reforming structures of global governance, seeking to avoid confrontation with the United States and the European powers. This is the present foreign policy strategy of Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Iran.

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