GLOBALIZATION AND ORDER VI: Towards A New World Order?

By

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In 1966 I was working as a consultant to the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East in Bangkok. I got to know a number of US diplomats, who asked me out one evening to a poetry reading at the embassy. Expecting to hear Walt Whitman et al, I was astonished that the whole evening was spent declaiming poems by Rudyard Kipling, including the one extolling the “white man’s burden”. Clearly, the generation inspired by President Kennedy’s call to arms in his inaugural speech looked upon itself as the Guardians of an incipient US imperial mission. But this was to change with the debacle in Vietnam. This was a war- as General Giap noted in his memoirs -which the Americans did not lose on the battlefield but on the streets of San Francisco, Chicago and Washington DC. It is this revolt of the ‘baby boomers’ which converted the US into a reluctant hegemon, willing to expend materiel but, with the disasters in Lebanon and Somalia in the 1980’s and 1990’s, not its men in maintaining its half-hearted Pax. So much so that the fatality rate in the US post office came to be higher than in the US armed forces in the 1990’s. The US military actions in Iraq, Kosovo and most recently in Afghanistan with minimum loss of US lives have provided a growing sense that the US can maintain its Pax through high-tech warfare with virtually no loss of US lives. Also, as in the Iraq war, the costs were shared with many other industrial nations- in particular, pacifist Japan- so that the financial costs were also minimized. Do these recent actions imply that the US has now found a way to maintain its Pax which minimizes the costs, and which domestic politics will find acceptable? Equally important, what will be the role of India and China in this ‘new world order’? And, finally, will the ‘war on terror’ launched after the events of Sept. 11th mean that the liberation movements spawned by the Age of Nations are now doomed? These are the questions I want to briefly consider in this concluding piece of this series.

In answering all three questions there is one fundamental geo-strategic fact which should be borne in mind. It was clearly revealed in the first major military expedition organized by the US after Vietnam- the war with Iraq. It was the threat Saddam posed to the oilfields of the Gulf and in particular Saudi Arabia which not only galvanized US public opinion but also the Arab members of the Gulf war coalition. The importance of the oil reserves of the region for the continuing economic well being of the industrial world as well as of those seeking industrialization cannot be gainsaid. As I have argued in previous columns, this mineral energy reserve is the real source of modern economic growth, and though many starry eyed environmentalists see alternative clean energy sources on the horizon, these are unlikely to be competitive with oil for some time to come. Similarly, the low marginal costs of producing Saudi oil will always make energy
independence from prospecting for much higher marginal cost oil in the US a chimera. Given this central geo-strategic feature, the control of the Saudi oilfields in particular becomes of great importance. Till now the uneasy political relationship between the Wahabbi House of Saud and the post modern US has held. But Sept. 11 might have set in train events that neither can control.

For the House of Saud is the keeper of the extremely rigid and fundamentalist Wahabbi faith, and the holy sites of Islam. Given its oil riches, the House of Saud has been engaged in a precarious balancing act. By maintaining a strict Islamic regime in its homeland, and using its oil wealth to export its fundamentalist Wahabbi faith by setting up and financing madrassas and mosques not only in the Muslim world as in Pakistan, but also the US and Europe, which bred the Taliban and provided the recruits for Al’ Qaeda as well as the Islamic terrorists attacking Kashmir and India, it has tried to keep on the side of the faithful. While by offering bases on its territory to the US it has sought to keep its political lines to Washington intact. But this game might be up after the events of Sept. 11th. There are many in the West who are now questioning the Saudi complicity in financing the terror on which President Bush has launched his own war. Will the Saudis have to rein back their support for the spread of Wahabbism? If they do, how will they meet the obvious retort of their own Islamicists that they have sold out to the West? One of the major demands of Osama bin Laden has always been that the House of Saud be overthrown because of its impiety in allowing US troops on its soil and being in bed with the infidels.

Which brings up the second factor worth noting. It is the Saudi fear of the secularist Saddam Hussain which led them to fund and help in the Gulf war coalition, and to allow US bases to continue on its soil after it ended. They were probably also the major Gulf War coalition partner who probably argued (along with Colin Powell in his earlier incarnation -as has been speculated in the US press) for the US not to march on Baghdad and depose Saddam. If the US decides to carry its ‘war on terror’ to Iraq as one group in the Administration are urging, what will be the consequences for the House of Saud? To an outsider the situation seems to have some similarities with the problems faced by the other great friend of the West in the region- the Shah of Iran. But, whereas the loss of Iran has not effected the West’s economic health, the replacement of the House of Saud by some Talibanised regime would, I imagine, not be allowed to stand- as it would put the US’s enemies in direct control of its all important oil supplies.

It is in this context that the recent reports in the Indian press of the US having offered India a defense pact in which in return for various Indian bases India would receive all sorts of diplomatic and economic goodies becomes of wider interest. For after all the major benefit of India to the British Raj was the Indian army (paid for by Indian taxes) which could be used to maintain its Pax from Africa to S.E.Asia- including the Gulf. Could it fulfill the same role in the new Imperium? If one looks at a map of the world’s areas of disorder, outside Africa , it consists of the swathe of Eurasia where Islamic fundamentalists of various hue threaten disorder. Ultimately, as I argued in a previous column (27 April 2000) Islam has to come to terms with modernity. For it to do so, the virus of Islamic fundamentalism has to be destroyed. The fragile regimes in the region which have tried to either placate it or contain it through strong arm tactics have not been successful. To prevent its spread will require international vigilance and the threat of the vengeance the Taliban has reaped if it seeks to create ‘terror states’.
task, apart from the US as the global hegemon and ultimate protector of the world’s oil life line, there are three major powers and one regional one, whose own domestic interests coincide with those of the US. They are of course, India, Russia, China and Israel.

As the US is unable and unwilling because of the contradictions in its domestic politics outlined in the earlier columns of this series to act as an old fashioned imperial power, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is a concert of great powers (which would include the EU and Japan) on the lines of the Concert of Europe which maintained the peace in Europe for nearly a century after the Congress of Vienna. But unlike the Wilsonian ideal of creating a multiplicity of states based on presumed ethnic nationalism this Concert would have to eschew the breaking up of existing states- much as its predecessor sought to do in the 19th century. For after all most terrorists have always claimed they are national liberation fighters.

This leaves Africa. Unfortunately at the moment, its own internal disorder—however horrible for its inhabitants- does not threaten global disorder. So I suspect that despite some rhetorical flourishes and the occasional ‘idealistic’ intervention— as by the UK in Sierra Leone— Africa is likely to remain not only the Heart of Darkness but also the Forgotten Continent. Its best hope lies in South Africa becoming a prosperous and viable state which can then maintain order in at least its backyard. But, given the serious economic and social problems it faces, this hope may never be realized.

But this is all in the realm of speculation. The Wilsonian shade has by no means disappeared in the US even after Sept. 11, as witness the controversy about the treatment and status of captured Taliban and Al’Qaeda prisoners. Thus, while a possible solution to the problem of global order maybe in the offing it is by no means certain that it will be adopted, and even then the world will continue to be- as it has always been- a dangerous place., in which politics could once again destroy the current era of globalization.