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By Zaki Laidi

Why Obama does not want a multipolar world order

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As recently as five years ago, it was not possible to talk seriously about the international system without the premise of an American superpower wielding the power of life and death over the planet.

Today, the simplification works the other way round. It has become common currency that the US is in decline and President Barack Obama represents an America that gladly accepts we live in a multipolar world.

Yet, at the very least, this hypothesis is debatable. If the world is multipolar, it is very imperfectly so, and American diplomacy aims to keep things this way.

Power is currently expressed in terms of three assets: material wealth, without which nothing is technically possible (the collapse of the Soviet Union is a case in point); strategic power, which implies the capacity to project force to one's periphery and beyond; and, finally, what might be called the power instinct - that is, the will to weigh in on world affairs. This last can be through one's ideas, capabilities or attractiveness.

The evolution in power relations is most palpable on the material front, even if, contrary to general wisdom, the shift in power from the west to Asia has been a relatively slow process. There are now four great economic centres of power: the US, Europe, China and Japan. They are very distantly followed by India, Brazil and Russia. However, it is important to note that Russia's gross domestic product, for instance, accounts for only 1 per cent of global GDP, compared to a 22 per cent share for the US. This is a long way

from economic multipolarity, which would require that the power of various centres should be roughly equivalent.

On the strategic front, the imbalance is even more striking: there is one military superpower that surpasses all the others by far (the US); a rising power (China); a power that lives on its past and can only maintain its rank by dint of its energy resources (Russia); and a plethora of middle-sized actors whose projection capacity remains very weak.

There is no evidence whatsoever of movement towards strategic multipolarity; aside from China, which has the will and the means, and Russia, which has the will but not necessarily the means, no credible aspiring global power has emerged. Brazil and India are certainly becoming stronger militarily. Their strategic ambitions will, nonetheless, remain regional for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, China's ascendance might reinforce Japan's strategic dependence on the US, notwithstanding any short-term rifts in Japanese-American relations.

The same paradigm applies to Europe with regard to the Russian challenge. Europe is the only region in the world that refuses to increase military expenditure, as if Europeans had once and for all decided to outsource defence to the US. The Lisbon treaty will change nothing on this front. Attempts to create a European defence industry have met roadblocks that attest to the countless weaknesses of Europe's putative power.

Turning to power instinct, while many countries undoubtedly have it, not many have the means to match their ambitions. Russia has an important military arsenal. But power does not simply equate with show of force. It also has to do with attraction. Russia is characterised by its absence of attractiveness to almost everyone in the world, save the regimes that have had a brush with the west.

Meanwhile, Europe runs up against the fact that it is not a state. The only influence it commands is a normative one, a capacity to shape the world through the diffusion of norms in global regulation - finance, environment, food security, and so on. This is far from negligible, but cannot make up for the lack of strategic power.

In any case, it is clear why the US does not embrace the rhetoric of a multipolar world that would place it on an equal footing with other important world actors. There is no reason for Washington to accept such a reconfiguration of the global order when it continues to hold an appreciable advantage over other countries in all three areas. It makes

sense that the Obama administration prefers to speak in terms of partnerships rather than multipolarity.

The US does understand that it can no longer dominate the world as it pleases, and that the gap that separates it from the rest has shrunk. As a result, the US needs the rest of the world to maintain its pre-eminence, not to dissolve it. The objective is to select privileged partners for international action, to better maintain leadership in all domains.

The world currently shares three global agendas: the strategic agenda that continues to be massively dominated by the US, the economic agenda, which is more widely distributed, and the climate agenda, where the US is clearly on the defensive.

The Obama administration is attempting to stay at the heart of the game by making room for others while preventing the rise either of a coalition that might force its hand on a particular issue, as recently demonstrated by the Singapore climate change declaration, or of a challenger that might take its place (China).

Of course, the structure of the international system is in perpetual evolution and America's willpower alone will not suffice to freeze the game. It would be a mistake, however, to underestimate American influence, after having grossly overestimated it for so long. An even greater mistake would be to conclude that the US has abandoned its bid to remain master of the game, for all the charm of Mr Obama.

The writer is research director of the Centre for European Studies at Sciences Po. His latest book is "La Norme sans la Force"

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