

The Only World Power is Determining Its Future Role

During the US presidential campaign, foreign policy has played only a superficial role. But after the election in November, there will be a fundamental debate about it – and not only in Washington.

By Matthias Nass

When the ugliest and most primitive of election campaigns in recent US history is over, when the battle is won and Hillary Clinton returns to the White House, a strategic debate about America's future role in the world must begin. This has not been talked about much in recent months, at least not with the seriousness that the topic deserves. Although the United States threatens to sink into the Trump swamp these days, it still remains the only world power upon which all of our well-being and woe are contingent.

In discussions in New York and Washington, one quickly becomes aware of the need for an inventory of the US's role abroad. The bi-partisan consensus of the foreign policy establishment is a thing of the past – even on the most fundamental questions.

Under Barack Obama, America was seeking a “pivot to Asia”, a region where the economy was booming. The contest in the Asia Pacific region would decide who would determine the tone of 21st Century world politics: the well-established United States or the emerging China. All this felt very plausible, and continues to be so today.

But these visions were overtaken by reality. Suddenly, Washington was being provoked by a power that was no longer “on the list”: Russia returned to the world stage with cold-blooded cynicism through the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in Syria. Today no one calls Putin's empire a “regional power,” as Obama had in an earlier, overconfident moment.

The old, familiar centers of conflict are demanding the attention of American strategists again. The United States is sending more soldiers to Europe, the region from which they had hoped to slowly withdraw. They transfer more money than ever before to Israel, and engage with the autocracies in the Middle East from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, all governments whose demise had been predicted following the Arab Spring.

And in Asia: are visions for the future also not breaking apart when faced with the realities? China's growth is slowing. In the conflict over the South China Sea and in the island conflict with Japan, the leadership of the People's Republic is striking an uncomfortably sharp tone. In the Philippines, for decades a close ally of the United States, President Duterte is threatening to throw the Americans out of the country and turn to China and Russia.

And then there is the dispute over the nuclear rearmament of North Korea that worries everyone more than any other conflict in Asia. Kim Jong Un's bomb mania could seriously damage Chinese-American relations, and increase the demand for nuclear weapons in South Korea, perhaps even in Japan. In other words – it could bring Asia to the brink of catastrophe. A senior US diplomat referred to it as the "toughest nut we need to crack."

Because the situation around the world is as confusing as it is threatening, there is talk in Washington about the need for a new definition of American – and in general, Western – foreign policy. This inevitably raises the question of the future international system: should the existing order created in the post-war period simply evolve further and involve China? Or does it need to be adapted to the ideas and approaches of the "new powers" – including China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, and others?

It is clear, however, that a new approach to foreign policy will require the West to first address its own problems. Nationalism, populism, and protectionism – they are primarily homemade issues. If the liberal, Western-shaped world order is to assert itself against the authoritarian temptation of Chinese, Russian, or Turkish provenance, then Americans and Europeans will have to apply great resolve to patch the social cracks in their own societies.

This is how the Western agenda looks after the US elections on November 8th. In Berlin, too, everyone is waiting for the end of the paralyzing transitional period in Washington, and hoping for a Clinton administration that defines America's role in the world with new vigor and ambition. "Hillary," said a senior official in the German government, "will try to bring the West back together again. That's her top priority." It will be necessary!

This article is part of a regular series of contributions from Matthias Nass for the Bucerius network. Matthias Nass began his career with ZEIT in 1983, and from 1998 to 2010 served as Deputy Editor-in-Chief. Since 2011, he has served as Chief International Correspondent for the newspaper. His area of expertise is foreign and security policy. This article was originally published in ZEIT Online on October 12, 2016. The opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the author, and do not reflect the official position of any of the Bucerius Institutions.