

“Vanishing” pax Americana as the current rational choice for the United States

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Abstract: We discuss recent global policy elements of the USA as they are, and highlight valid and rational motivations. In the core, we identify rational strategic elements in the wake of the sustainability crisis of the 21st century. The US as the sole superpower aims at saving or even strengthening her position during the crisis; and instead of a higher level of cooperation of optimistic (globally community-optimal) scenarios, highly competitive actions are trivially much safer and more beneficial for an individual (strong) actor in the crisis. There are similarly rational but unconventional elements of US global policy. The world order of the recent half century (the ‘pax Americana’), may seem to be being destroyed by its definitive power; but these steps can be equally nothing else but taking unconventional countermeasures against losing power, as well as preparing for the hardly foreseeable (cataclysmic) movements in the onset of the new era after the sustainability breakdown.

Keywords: global sustainability, global politics, USA, unipolar world order, sustainability event horizon

1 Introduction

It is still desperately little what we know about the required actions for global sustainability, and it is even less what we know about how to manage it, but we now firmly know that humanity on its host planet, the Earth is in a sustainability crisis.³

³ When we are talking about *the present global sustainability crisis*, we can talk about multiple global crises too (of which climate change is by far the most severe and important),

and as a consequence, our society and economy will be radically reshaped until the second half of the 21st century. It can be taken with certainty that our global society, economy, and other human systems will not even resemble what we currently have. [1, 2] With this little knowledge about this huge change, we can even say that there is an *event horizon* at the climax of our middle-term (maybe even short-term) sustainability trajectory: the world coming afterwards will be so different, so unknown beforehand, and so intractable with our current scientific, logical, and cultural instruments, that currently available forecasts necessarily become irrelevant at some point on this way.

It is our, and everyone's, task however to study possible strategies for the present era (until the horizon), which will have an impact on what comes thereafter. There are policymakers, businesspeople, military leaders, scientists and many more types of actors who need to study and adapt to what is going to happen. But not only the information-shielding nature of the event horizon hinders our efforts to do so. The very nature of the present sustainability crisis implies that there are radically different possible answers to the big question, and therefore there are as many expectations towards (major) players about what courses of action they take. Moreover, morally expected (community-optimized) and rationally validated (individual) strategies can be completely opposite to each other.

In this situation, we try to evaluate the recent actions taken by the largest international player, the United States of America; not only because the United States itself is the most important actor on the global level, but because of the recent, largely unexpected shifts and changes in its global sustainability policy. [3] We also study the global geopolitical strategies in which sustainability policies are embedded, and which, by our opinion, originate in the relation of the US with global sustainability. We try to examine the aforementioned phenomena as they are; we want to give a fully descriptive study. We will use moral or ideological categorizations only in cases when they are themselves part of the description.

Thus, in our age when superficial observers may have the impression that the US is destroying "pax Americana", the global order lead by itself, our scope of study will encompass two main areas in which we are going to arrive at the contrary conclusion:

1. What is the United States doing about global sustainability efforts, why is this contrary to the mainstream expectations, and what is the rational strategy in which this fits well?
2. How and why is this parallelled in the global foreign policy of the US as the sole but challenged superpower; and how can this be again a part of a rational scenario? Last but not least, why are these two policy levels

but from a political decision-theoretical point of view, we can remain at the general notation of a single crisis.

tightly connected, and what are the conclusions coming from this tight connection?

2 Review on the relation of global sustainability efforts and the role of the United States

Humanity's steadfast march into what we may call a "climate catastrophe" is not a recently originated and recognized process. Scientific results showing the depth of the problem [4] and its anthropogenic nature have been known for more than half a century. [5] It has been for long known therefore that avoiding a cataclysm needs human action. According to this, the first global sustainability summit took place back in 1972, in Stockholm, where 113 member states of the United Nations were present (among severe political discord and even a boycott of the eastern bloc), resulting in the *Stockholm Declaration* [6, 7] with 26 principles that can be identified as the roots of today's *Sustainable Development Goals*, [8] an action plan, and the creation of the *United Nations Environment Programme*. It was also there where the very first practical global action against exhaustion of global environmental resources originated: protection of oceans. [9] In the 1979 Geneva Conference, called retrospectively as the *first climate summit*, [10] climate change reached the status of the topmost important global sustainability question (which has been remained so), and among other results, this finally led to the foundation of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) in 1988. The first (and so far only) efficient global sustainability cooperation started in 1987, when the *Montréal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer* (the first universally ratified treaty in UN history) was accepted.

The first report of IPCC in 1990 [11] was focusing on the anthropogenic impact on climate change. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro; where the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been introduced, and the long series of conferences of parties (COP's) to it has begun. In 1997, COP3 established the Kyoto Protocol, the first legally binding climate target at 5% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions for 36 developed countries until 2008–2012 with respect to 1990. The United States signed the protocol, but has not ratified since then, due to a non-binding 1997 resolution of the senate (unanimously) that international agreements of this kind (containing no commitments of developing countries) should not ever be ratified, [12] rendering Kyoto Protocol's meticulously designed "principle of common but differentiated responsibilities" effectively failed. The next international major milestone, the Paris Agreement was achieved in 2015 (COP21), with an explicit and globally well-defined target of keeping global warming under 2, or 1.5 if possible, degrees above the pre-industrial level, coming into force in 2016. The emerging serious scientific consensus about the needed

global emission scenario (50% reduction of the peak emission until ca. 2030, and net climate neutrality before 2050 [13]) as well as the more and more unfavourable scientific results (gradually worsening prognoses) [14] have challenged the motivations of parties to adhere to Paris commitments. The European Parliament declared climate emergency, [15] and soon passed a law [16] requiring an 55% reduction of ghg emissions (with respect to 1990, not the global peak year), and net neutrality until 2050, but this all seems to be based on production carbon footprint figures, rather than consumption figures, giving way to carbon footprint outsourcing (largely disregarding embodied emissions in trade, EET [17]).

On the level of political declarations, there is an apparent swing between climate skepticism and activism depending on the party leading the USA. [18] Democrats seem to favour policies towards climate sustainability, while republicans oppose active participation in those efforts. Now the memories have already faded, but the bet was the highest, and a real breakthrough may have been the nearest when George W. Bush and Al Gore contended for the presidency; the latter campaigning with an environment conscious electoral programme of an unprecedented quality. No-one knows what would have followed after an eventual victory of Gore, but his steadfast activism both earlier as a vice president, and later as a civilian activist represents almost an alternative history. [19] The actual course of events had Bush win, and then, the Democrat Barack Obama elected in 2008, and subsequently in 2012. The Obama administration ratified the Paris Agreement, and in parallel strengthened sustainability-oriented industrial policies. [20] Donald Trump's election in 2016 radically changed the landscape; not only by swinging to the opposite direction, but by the deconstruction of several diplomatic norms, conventions and protocols. As for the global sustainability struggle and specifically the Paris Agreement, president Trump made an apparent U-turn by withdrawing from it (and industrial policies distancing the US from sustainability). His successor, Joe Biden once again ratified it, and now, the second Trump administration is currently preparing for the re-withdrawal, [21] thus rendering the mainstream theoretical scenario of global cooperative climate protection effectively void.

Despite the high contrast of the pictures based on the presidents and their administrative apparatus, some continuous rationality behind different US leaderships is useful to hypothesize behind all of the above turns and actions. First, independent of the personality and even the partisan position of the current president, the federal state of the United States is run by a strong and professional bureaucracy, which retains a large part of its momentum and behavioural patterns through changes of leadership. Second, as the smart-tuned strategic parameters of the European Union, the global climate champion also suggest (see above), the real difference between "climate friendly" and "climate skeptical" policies is marginal if we compare them to scientifically justifiable (really climate friendly) trajectories [22] towards sustainability. It is then not far from the truth that substantially strong cooperative climate friendly policies expected from e.g. the US are almost equally breached by Democrat and Republican governments so far (look at e.g. the

unanimous Byrd–Hagel resolution mentioned above, [12] or the skyrocketing carbohydrogen exports under Obama, the first Trump, and the Biden era [23], one of the last sellouts of a necessarily shrinking non-sustainable industry [24]).

3 Methods of identifying current motivations

Our analysis of the most recent geopolitical movements is based on identifying their relation to the global sustainability struggle as the most central and fundamental motivation of them, and then unfolding the consequences and effects on other layers of global politics. Therefore we will follow basically two threads of reasoning: 1. where are the origins of these history-forming processes, and 2. how is then the scene of global politics built up on these foundations.

As we will see, the most fundamental motivation identified behind the movements studied here is how the actors, and first of all, the United States, is related to the challenge of our age: global sustainability. And while the political behaviour of recent Democrat leaderships of the US have followed an (appropriately diluted) cooperative strategy in the global scene, the Republicans, and especially the two Trump administrations seem to do the opposite. And while the cooperative strategies are somehow “the most admissible for the global public” because they keep with the collective general goals of humanity, the highly competitive (‘anticooperative’) ones can be regarded as a game-theoretic imperative, a cold-rational optimum for the US itself.

Note the ‘game-theoretic imperative’ nature of the anticooperative behaviour. This statement suggests not only that this extremity of strategies can be rational, but something stronger: this rational choice is dictated by the current situation. Taking the highly competitive strategy under these circumstances may be then a direct consequence of not intending to change history (not taking the cooperative way for sustainability, and expecting all the other parties to do similarly), but simply optimizing to how it currently evolves (taking an individually optimized strategy, and handling the situation as unchangeable). For a cold-rational actor, the latter position can have further advantages in addition to the trivial game-theoretic choice of competition over cooperation (the Nash equilibrium of such games); e.g. one of its further advantages is that it requires no effort against the global trends which show a combination of competition against sustainability, and some signs of lukewarm sustainability efforts at most, setting an overall global tendency against sustainability anyway.

Built on top of the cold-rational answer to the sustainability challenge, we are able to analyze the most recent short-term movements in global politics. Why is the US taking unconventional steps against its closest allies, and favourizing an apparent enemy, Russia? What is the course of events in global politics for which the US

takes these steps as some kind of preparation? Of course, the final answer lies in the above cold-rational analysis of the global sustainability struggle.

4 Results: the rationale of current moves

4.1 The most harsh answer to the greatest-ever challenge

What happens when an actor in a situation which needs perfect cooperation as the collective optimum comes to the conclusion that there is no chance for that cooperative action? What if the leadership of the US analyses the global landscape of the sustainability struggle, and concludes there is no hope for global cooperation? And what if they, moreover, learn that even the hypothetical success of the cooperative scenario will have detrimental effects both on the US elite's internal power, and the power of the United States in its foreign relations? Even if they do not sympathize with competitive (and destructive) outcomes, they can easily come to the conclusion that adapting to them, or even stimulating them is the only optimum for them and the United States as a global power.

But why would the US elite come to such a grief conclusion about the near future of humanity? The competition vs. cooperation answer is the game-theoretic nature of the global sustainability struggle: while a collective optimum or merely a modest collective survival is only possible with full cooperation of all parties, these parties as individual actors can maximize their payoffs by letting the others do the job, while they not only enjoy the free ride, but also gain further advantage by not wearing down themselves in the struggle. This game-theoretical setting is known as the tragedy of the commons, [25, 26] and inevitably leads to a fully competitive, and as for the collective goals, destructive outcome. In addition to this, the internationally cooperative strategy, complete with ecological austerity which is unacceptable for the 21st-century consumer citizens even at its lowest satisfactory level (like everywhere else in the world, e.g. [27]), promises no popularity on the national level. And on top of these effects, there comes what we have touched in the introduction: the strategy in the great struggle (turmoil) during the sustainability crisis will be a preparation for life after the sustainability event horizon.

How will the United States be the fittest for the unknown new era, moreover, how can it retain or even strengthen its globally dominant position? As we have stated, no-one knows what the new world will look like, but most probably the more wealth an actor acquires at the expense of the others, the better choices it is going to have. When we talk about wealth, of course, there will be parts of it which will not persist into the new era, but the most durable physical wealth, e.g. gold, or the portion of the ecological treasury one has, i.e. controlled territory, or well-maintained military capabilities will certainly not be useless. This all gives an amplified version of the

tragedy of the commons, where competitive destruction of the common good is not only a consequence of the relation of players, but it emerges as a short-term goal (this is the game-theoretic structure of e.g. the ‘fishbanks’ game, [28] where the non-cooperative outcome is a rush for destroying the common resource). Therefore the chance (or even the imperative) for a rational actor to engage in competitive strategies is extremely high. This way is, in addition, the most profitable for strong actors: being a strong competitive participant, having the opportunities of a strong player, and retaining or increasing a strong position all improve both the viability and the payoff of the competitive strategy. And the United States is not merely a strong actor; it is by far the strongest; however, it feels challenged by China, [29] giving more motivation for the full competition.

One word too many, if ideological, moral considerations, fulfilment of expectations of international observers, or simply formal diplomatic frameworks of international action are set aside, the purely rational choice for the United States in the present sustainability crisis is not only breaching cooperation, but starting a competition in destroying all the available environmental (climate) resources of humanity which can be exploited until the sustainability event horizon arrives.

4.2 The necessary trends implied in shortest-term global politics

On top of the broken-down sustainability struggle, the most prominent natural short-term trend of global politics is a harsher global competition and in this competition, the increasing importance of international alliances. Because China has emerged as the US’ sole competitor for global leadership, this will mean a more fluctuating landscape in which alliances around these two poles and their growing or shrinking sizes form the basis of power dynamics. There are solid cores around the global players, which we expect to be rather stable, while the instabilities will dominate the peripheries of the alliances and the *terra nullius* between them. The resulting new global geopolitics of the USA must then focus on the periphery of the Western alliance. While the US can be negligent or even conflict-seeking within the core of its own alliance (resources may not only be spared on these relations, but sometimes even extracted, and reassigned to others), the same US policy must be “irrationally friendly” to global second-tier (or lower-tier) partners whose alignment is not clear in advance.

The set of second-tier powers in this landscape is concentrated in Eurasia. Whether on an emerging or submerging path, it encompasses the European Union, Russia and India (inclusion of other powers, as well as their positioning on the second or the third tier of global politics can be the subject of further discussion, but these three are the most probable greatest powers behind the two first-tier ones). These three second-tier polities can clearly show how the periphery of the US-lead alliance

has to be managed during the upcoming hard years (leading up to the aforementioned sustainability event horizon).

First, the European Union is unquestionably at the hardest core of the alliance of the USA. [30] Because then there is no doubt, for cultural, historical, economical and other reasons, that the European Union will never end up as a Chinese ally, there is no reason for the US to invest in this alliance, when political, economical, military, etc. resources that can be invested into such an alliance become scarce. Second, the place of India seems to be not as solid in the alliance structure as the EU, but if we study it from the opposite direction, the picture is clearer: India and China as historical (geopolitical, cultural, economical, etc.) enemies are very unlikely to evolve as close allies in the future. [31] The slight ambiguities that come into consideration when we are discussing these relations come from the 20th-century cold war era: India was then rather a Soviet ally than a western one. This leads us to the third second-tier power in this story: Russia. The only (very slightly) ambiguous valence of India's network of alliances leads to Russia, which means that India's position in the two-pole structure of the middle and late 21st century can be slightly (if at all) influenced by the position of Russia. [32]

And this is where we arrive at the third member of our set of most probable second-tier players: Russia. As the events of the recent years show, [33, 34] Russia is prone to become a subordinate ally of China, because its global ambitions and the exhaustive Russo-Ukrainian war are simply not sustainable by its economic strength. Although many observers expect a collapse of the Russian state under this burden, [35] this may not happen. However, the slow decline in power from 1991 (the dissolution of the Soviet Union) is accelerating, and Russia's demise as a superpower is now evident. [36] Russia also has conflicting interests with China in parallel. Control over its vast Siberian territories can be challenged by China, and relations with India, as well as Russia's European cultural heritage, and of course its superpower identity can also lead to conflicts with China. This all puts Russia in the role of a peripheral ally of the USA; and thus the benefit-to-cost ratio of tying Russia to the US alliance (in a cultural-historical perspective: to the Western world) is by far the highest of its kind now.⁴ Relatively strong ties of India to Russia and their possible consequences in such a dilemma are a plus in this cost-benefit analysis.

Conclusion

We have discussed the recent and past non-cooperative sustainability policy of the USA, the restructuring of international focus exhibited by the new government (an

⁴ An interesting process in the background is a possible EU–India rapprochement, [37] which can both serve as a short-term backup for these two when their ties to the US seem to loosen (its intended goal), and as an improvement of the US-led global alliance in the long run (not intended).

ongoing process when this paper is being written), and the connection between them. Given that the US government expects (or simply only does not rule out) a global sustainability collapse in the coming decades, its focus on its cooperations and alliances may get restructured, and its close allies may get not only less attention, but even unfamiliar treatment. This, regardless of its entirely intentional or partly unintentional nature, can then fit into a rational, though rather cold-minded, cynical global strategy of the US.

Will then pax Americana vanish? Does the current leadership of the US intend to do so? Based on our discussion, the situation is the opposite: the leaders of the USA are working on saving the role of the USA as the leading superpower (of course, with steps more or less faithful to the strategy). This strategic mainline is rational when it is embedded into an expected turmoil and the next, yet unknown age after the event horizon of global sustainability, simply building upon the most probably unfavourable outcome of the global sustainability crisis in the 21st century.

Disclaimer for the political content

This paper discusses its topic on an “as-is” basis; no expectations, ideological stances or other subjective relation of the authors to it is intended to appear in the text. Results can be used both for the validation and the criticism of the treated subject and its properties; the actual discussion is merely about their existence and logical, rational nature as observable political phenomena.

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