

How will America handle the fall of its Middle East empire?

Пише: Peter Osborne
недеља, 03 април 2011 12:17

(The Telegraph, February 24, 2011)



Empires can collapse in the course of a generation. At the end of the 16th century, the Spanish looked dominant. Twenty-five years later, they were on their knees, over-extended, bankrupt, and incapable of coping with the emergent maritime powers of Britain and Holland. The British empire reached its fullest extent in 1930. Twenty years later, it was all over.

Today, it is reasonable to ask whether the United States, seemingly invincible a decade ago, will follow the same trajectory. America has suffered two convulsive blows in the last three years. The first was the financial crisis of 2008, whose consequences are yet to be properly felt. Although the immediate cause was the debacle in the mortgage market, the underlying problem was chronic imbalance in the economy.

For a number of years, America has been incapable of funding its domestic programmes and overseas commitments without resorting to massive help from China, its global rival. China has a pressing motive to assist: it needs to sustain US demand in order to provide a market for its exports and thus avert an economic crisis of its own. This situation is the contemporary equivalent of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), the doctrine which prevented nuclear war breaking out between America and Russia.

Unlike MAD, this pact is unsustainable. But Barack Obama has not sought to address the problem. Instead, he responded to the crisis with the same failed policies that caused the trouble in the first place: easy credit and yet more debt. It is certain that America will, in due course, be forced into a massive adjustment both to its living standards at home and its commitments abroad.

This matters because, following the second convulsive blow, America's global interests are under threat on a scale never before seen. Since 1956, when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pulled the plug on Britain and France over Suez, the Arab world has been a US domain. At first, there were promises that it would tolerate independence and self-determination. But this did not last long; America chose to govern through brutal and corrupt dictators, supplied with arms, military training and advice from Washington.

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The momentous importance of the last few weeks is that this profitable, though morally bankrupt, arrangement appears to be coming to an end. One of the choicest ironies of the bloody and macabre death throes of the regime in Libya is that Colonel Gaddafi would have been wiser to have stayed out of the US sphere of influence. When he joined forces with George Bush and Tony Blair five years ago, the ageing dictator was leaping on to a bandwagon that was about to grind to a halt.



In Washington, President Obama has not been stressing this aspect of affairs. Instead, after hesitation, he has presented the recent uprisings as democratic and even pro-American, indeed a triumph for the latest methods of Western communication such as Twitter and Facebook. Many sympathetic commentators have therefore claimed that the Arab revolutions bear comparison with the 1989 uprising of the peoples of Eastern Europe against Soviet tyranny.

I would guess that the analogy is apt. Just as 1989 saw the collapse of the Russian empire in Eastern Europe, so it now looks as if 2011 will mark the removal of many of America's client regimes in the Arab world. It is highly unlikely, however, that events will thereafter take the tidy path the White House would prefer. Far from being inspired by Twitter, a great many of Arab people who have driven the sensational events of recent weeks are illiterate. They have been impelled into action by mass poverty and unemployment, allied to a sense of disgust at vast divergences of wealth and grotesque corruption. It is too early to chart the future course of events with confidence, but it seems unlikely that these liberated peoples will look to Washington and New York as their political or economic model.

The great question is whether America will take its diminished status gracefully, or whether it will lash out, as empires in trouble are historically prone to do. Here the White House response gives cause for concern. American insensitivity is well demonstrated in the case of Raymond Davis, the homicidal CIA man who shot dead two Pakistanis in Lahore. Hillary Clinton is trying to bully Pakistan into awarding Davis diplomatic immunity. This is incredible behaviour, which shows that the US continues to regard itself as above the law. Were President Zardari, already seen by his fellow countrymen as a pro-American stooge, to comply, his government would almost certainly fall.

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Or take President Obama's decision last week to veto the UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements. Even America itself accepts that these settlements are illegal. At a time when the Middle East is already mutinous, this course of action looks mad.

The biggest problem is that America wants democracy, but only on its own terms. A very good example of this concerns the election of a Hamas government in Gaza in 2006. This should have been a hopeful moment for the Middle East peace process: the election of a government with the legitimacy and power to end violence. But America refused to engage with Hamas, just as it has refused to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or to acknowledge the well-founded regional aspirations of Iran.

The history of the Arab world since the collapse of the Ottoman caliphate in 1922 can be divided schematically into two periods: open colonial rule under the British and French, followed by America's invisible empire after the Second World War. Now we are entering a third epoch, when Arab nations, and in due course others, will assert their independence. It is highly unlikely that all of them will choose a path that the Americans want. From the evidence available, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton are muddled and incapable of grasping the nature of current events.

This is where the British, who have deep historical connections with the region, and whose own loss of empire is still within living memory, ought to be able to offer wise and practical advice. So far the Prime Minister, a neophyte in foreign affairs, has not done so. His regional tour of Middle Eastern capitals with a caravan of arms dealers made sense only in terms of the broken settlement of the last 50 years. His speeches might have been scripted by Tony Blair a decade ago, with the identical evasions and hypocrisies. There was no acknowledgment of the great paradigm shift in global politics.

The links between the US and British defence, security and foreign policy establishments are so close that perhaps it is no longer possible for any British government to act independently. When challenged, our ministers always say that we use our influence "behind the scenes" with American allies, rather than challenge them in the open. But this, too, is a failed tactic. I am told, for example, that William Hague tried hard to persuade Hillary Clinton not to veto last week's Security Council resolution, but was ignored. It is time we became a much more candid friend, because the world is changing faster than we know.

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