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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Pax Americana Is Over

Roger Cohen DEC. 16, 2016

The thing about “The Apprentice” is you could turn it off. Now we get to watch Donald Trump all the time. There’s nowhere to hide. I was in Papua New Guinea recently. His name kept coming up.

The appointments cascade at reality-show speed. Rick Perry to head the Energy Department whose name he couldn’t remember when he wanted to dismantle it! Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency he’s spent the last several years suing! A fierce critic of worker protections to be secretary of labor! An oil executive, Rex Tillerson, whose company owns drilling rights on 63.7 million acres in Russia to handle dealings with Vladimir Putin when Moscow just infiltrated the American election process!

Next up: Kim Jong-un as press secretary, Cruella de Vil to head the Humane Society, and Mata Hari to lead the Cybersecurity National Action Plan.

All this is further evidence of Trump’s genius. He is master of the Art of Disorientation. He’s turned Americans into cartoon characters whose heads are always spinning. How the president-elect must laugh at all the fact-based journalism (ghastly tautological phrase) dedicated to disproving things he never believed and can’t remember anyway.

The disoriented are more inclined to seek saviors. Trump knows that. He's been right up to now. Before anyone else, he was onto the way that direct democracy through social media has buried representative democracy.

One minute it's "millions" of illegal votes for Hillary Clinton; then dangling little Mitt Romney; then being too smart for intelligence briefings. Let's face it, folks. We have no idea what is about to happen in the White House or at White House North in Midtown Manhattan. We are in whatever territory lies beyond unknown unknowns.

But some things may be emerging from the fog. Trump is not interested in the rules-based international order the United States has spent the last seven decades building and defending. His foreign policy will be transactional. If it profits America, fine. If not, forget about it. Trump's United States will be agnostic on human rights, freedom and democracy. America, suspending moral judgment, will behave a lot more like China on the world stage.

Except that's a little unfair to China. The Chinese do understand the benefits of free trade (and they certainly understand that when Trump rips up the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a strategic plan to offset Chinese power couched in an economic arrangement, Beijing grows stronger). Because they often can't breathe, the Chinese also understand, in a way Trump does not, the importance of fighting climate change.

As an exercise, I've been trying to imagine Trump saying something — anything — about the heinous destruction of Aleppo by the forces of Putin and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. I've been trying to imagine what Trump might say about the brutal crimes against Syrian civilians in the beleaguered eastern sector of that once glorious city. I came up blank.

He did say it was "sad." He said he'd ask Persian Gulf nations to put up money for "safe zones." Good luck with that as the war nears its sixth year.

I guess that's one advantage of the amorality in which Trump traffics: You may as well refrain from any moral stand because nobody will believe you anyway.

(To be fair, Syria is a huge stain on the Obama presidency.) It would be obscene for Trump to speak of principles. That is a problem.

America is an idea. Strip freedom, human rights, democracy and the rule of law from what the United States represents to the world and America itself is gutted. Of course, realpolitik driven by interests is integral to American foreign policy, but a valueless approach of the kind Trump proposes leaves the world rudderless.

Pax Americana is over. It had a good run. A Putin-Trump alliance at the service of the butcher Assad — combined with the undoing of the military alliances, trade pacts, political integration and legal framework of the postwar order — constitutes its death knell.

Maybe everything will work out fine with a nuclear South Korea, a nuclear Japan, Baltic States exposed to the whims of Putin, the United States Embassy moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a flimsy NATO abjured by America, and swaggering Texan oil men running things while Trump takes time off in New York.

I doubt it. The embassy move alone could ignite widespread violence. David Friedman, the man Trump has nominated as ambassador to Israel, seems certain to stoke the fires.

Trump's plans are full of contradictions he hasn't begun to address. He's against the Iran nuclear deal although of course he's never read it. But Putin is for it. Trump wants to eliminate the Islamic State. So does Russia, whose ally in Syria is Iran. Trump wants an America-first, business-driven policy. Boeing just signed a big deal with Iran. So maybe Trump ends up doing the only sane thing: preserving a nuclear deal that's in everyone's interest.

Who knows? Markets think they do. They love Trump. That's because Trump believes big guys should take everything and little guys should take nothing.

But wasn't it the little guys who voted for Trump? That's funny, really it is. Or as he would put it, "Sad."

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on December 17, 2016, on Page A13 of the New York edition with the headline: Trump's Chinese foreign policy.

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