

The Siren Call of a ‘System Leader’

The United States may be destined for a shorter historical existence than the Mongol era established by Genghis Khan

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A considerable spectrum of the liberal West takes the American interpretation of what civilization consists of to be something like an immutable law of nature. But what if this interpretation is on the verge of an irreparable breakdown?

Michael Vlahos has [argued](#) that the US is not a mere nation-state but a “system leader” – “a civilizational power like Rome, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire.” And, we should add, China – which he did not mention. The system leader is “a universalistic identity framework tied to a state. This vantage is helpful because the United States clearly owns this identity framework today.”

Intel stalwart Alastair Crooke, in a [searing](#) essay, digs deeper into how this “civilizational vision” was “forcefully unfurled across the globe” as the inevitable, American manifest destiny: not only politically – including all the accouterments of Western individualism and neo-liberalism, but coupled with “the metaphysics of Judeo-Christianity, too”.

Crooke also notes how deeply ingrained the notion that victory in the Cold War “spectacularly affirmed” the superiority of the US civilizational vision among the US elite.

Well, the post-modern tragedy – from the point of view of US elites – is that soon this may not be the case anymore. The vicious civil war engulfing Washington for the past three years – with the whole world as stunned spectators – has just accelerated the malaise.

Remember Pax Mongolica

It’s sobering to consider that Pax Americana may be destined to a shorter historical existence than Pax Mongolica – established after Genghis Khan, the head of a nomad nation, went about conquering the world.

Genghis first invested in a trade offensive to take over the Silk Roads, crushing the Karaites in Eastern Turkestan, conquering Islamic Khorezm, and annexing Bukhara, Samarkand, Bactria, Khorasan and Afghanistan. The Mongols reached the outskirts of Vienna in 1241 and the Adriatic Sea one year after.

The superpower of the time extended from the Pacific to the Adriatic. We can barely imagine the shock for Western Christendom. Pope Gregory X was itching to know who these conquerors of the world were, and could be Christianized?

In parallel, only a victory by the Egyptian Mamluks in Galilee in 1260 saved Islam from being annexed to Pax Mongolica.

Pax Mongolica – a single, organized, efficient, tolerant power – coincided historically with the Golden Age of the Silk Roads. Kublai Khan – who lorded over Marco Polo – wanted to be more Chinese than the Chinese themselves. He wanted to prove that nomad conquerors turned sedentary could learn the rules of administration, commerce, literature and even navigation.

Yet when Kublai Khan died, the empire fragmented into rival khanates. Islam profited. Everything changed. A century later, the Mongols from China, Persia, Russia and Central Asia had nothing to do with their ancestors on horseback.

A jump cut to the young 21st century shows that the initiative, historically, is once again on the side of China, across the Heartland and lining up the Rimland. World-changing, game-changing enterprises don't originate in the West anymore – as has been the case from the 16th century up to the late 20th century.

For all the vicious wishful thinking that coronavirus will derail the “Chinese century”, which will actually be the Eurasian Century, and amid the myopic tsunami of New Silk Roads demonization, it's always easy to forget that implementation of myriad projects has not even started.

It should be in 2021 that all those corridors and axes of continental development pick up speed across Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, Southwest Asia, Russia and Europe, in parallel with the Maritime Silk Road configuring a true Eurasian string of pearls from Dalian to Piraeus, Trieste, Venice, Genoa, Hamburg and Rotterdam.

For the first time in two millennia, China is able to combine the dynamism of political and economic expansion both on the continental and maritime realms, something that the state did not experience since the short expeditionary stretch led by Admiral Zheng He in the Indian Ocean in the early 15th century. Eurasia, in the recent past, was under Western and Soviet colonization. Now it's going all-out multipolar – a series of complex, evolving permutations led by Russia-China-Iran-Turkey-India-Pakistan-Kazakhstan.

Every player has no illusions about the “system leader” obsessions: to prevent Eurasia from uniting under one power – or coalition such as the Russia-China strategic partnership; ensure that Europe remains under US hegemony; prevent Southwest Asia – or the “Greater Middle East” – from being linked to Eurasian powers; and prevent by all means that Russia-China have unimpeded access to maritime lanes and trade corridors.

The message from Iran

In the meantime, a sneaking suspicion creeps in – that Iran's game plan, in an echo of Donbass in 2014, may be about sucking US neocons into a trademark [Russian cauldron](#) in case the regime-change obsession is turbocharged.

There is a serious possibility that under maximum pressure Tehran might eventually abandon the JCPOA for good, as well as the NPT, thus openly inviting a US attack.

As it stands, Tehran has sent two very clear messages. The accuracy of the missile attack on the US Ayn Al-Asad base in Iraq, replying to the targeted assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani, means that any branch of the vast US network of bases is now vulnerable.

And the fog of non-denial denials surrounding the downing of the CIA Battlefield Airborne Communications Node (BACN) – essentially an aerial spook shop – in Ghazni, Afghanistan also carries a message.

CIA icon Mike d’Andrea, known as ‘Ayatollah Mike’, The Undertaker, the Dark Prince, or all of the above, may or may not have been on board. Irrespective of the fact that no US government source will ever confirm or deny that Ayatollah Mike is dead or alive, or even that he exists at all, the message remains the same: your soldiers and spooks are also vulnerable.

Since Pearl Harbor, no nation has dared to stare down the system leader so blatantly, as Iran did in Iraq. Vlahos mentioned something I saw for myself in 2003, how “young American soldiers referred to Iraqis as ‘Indians’, as though Mesopotamia were the Wild West”. Mesopotamia was one the crucial cradles of civilization as we know it. Well, in the end, that [\\$2 trillion](#) spent to bomb Iraq into democracy did no favors to the civilizational vision of the ‘system leader’.

The Sirens and La Dolce Vita

Now let’s add aesthetics to our “civilizational” politics. Every time I visit Venice – which in itself is a living metaphor for both the flimsiness of empires and the Decline of the West – I retrace selected steps in *The Cantos*, Ezra Pound’s epic masterpiece.

Last December, after many years, I went back to the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, also known as “The jewel box”, which plays a starring role in *The Cantos*. As I arrived I told the custodian *signora* that I had come for “The Sirens”. With a knowing smirk, she lighted my way along the nave to the central staircase. And there they were, sculpted on pillars on both sides of a balcony: “Crystal columns, acanthus, sirens in the pillar head”, as we read in Canto 20.

These sirens were sculpted by Tullio and Antonio Lombardo, sons of Pietro Lombardo, Venetian masters of the late 15th and early 16th century – “and Tullio Romano carved the sirens, as the old custode says: so that since then no one has been able to carve them for the jewel box, Santa Maria dei Miracoli”, as we read in Canto 76.

Well, Pound misnamed the creator of the sirens, but, that’s not the point. The point is how Pound saw the sirens as the epitome of a strong culture – “the perception of a whole age, of whole congeries and sequence of causes, went into an assemblage of detail, whereof it would be impossible to speak in terms of magnitude”, as Pound wrote in *Guide to Kulchur*.

As much as his beloved masterpieces by Giovanni Bellini and Piero della Francesca, Pound fully grasped how these sirens were the antithesis of *usura* – or the “art” of lending money at exorbitant interest rates, which not only deprives a culture of the best of art, as Pound describes it, but is also one of the pillars for the total financialization and marketization of life itself, a process that Pound brilliantly foresaw, when he wrote in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* that, “all things are a flowing, Sage Heraclitus says; But a tawdry cheapness, shall reign throughout our days.”

La Dolce Vita will turn 60 in 2020. Much as Pound’s sirens, Fellini’s now mythological tour de force in Rome is like a black and white celluloid palimpsest of a bygone era, the birth of the Swingin’ Sixties. Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) and Maddalena (Anouk Aimee), impossibly

cool and chic, are like the Last Woman and the Last Man before the deluge of “tawdry cheapness”. In the end, Fellini shows us Marcello despairing at the ugliness and, yes, cheapness intruding in his beautiful mini-universe – the lineaments of the trash culture fabricated and sold by the ‘system leader’ about to engulf us all.

Pound was a human, all too human American maverick of unbridled classical genius. The ‘system leader’ misinterpreted him; treated him as a traitor; caged him in Pisa; and dispatched him to a [mental hospital](#) in the US. I still wonder whether he may have seen and appreciated La Dolce Vita during the 1960s, before he died in Venice in 1972. After all, there was a little cinema within walking distance of the house in Calle Querini where he lived with Olga Rudge.

“Marcello!” We’re still haunted by Anita Ekberg’s iconic siren call, half-immersed in the Fontana di Trevi. Today, still hostages of the crumbling civilizational vision of the ‘system leader’, at best we barely muster, as TS Eliot memorably wrote, a “backward half-look, over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.”

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Featured image: Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni) and Maddalena (Anouk Aimee) in La Dolce Vita, impossibly cool and chic, are like the Last Woman and the Last Man before the deluge of ‘tawdry cheapness.’

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