Review of "The Next Decade"

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In these times, George Friedman does not need an introduction; he is a well-known social scientist interested in the geopolitical issues and the role of the US as the main global power. On this occasion he gives a snapshot of the international affairs that the US should face in the next ten years. *The Next Decade* is an all-encompassing and portentous analysis that explores the challenges and benefits for being the only super-power post-Cold War. Americans know but do not accept how their economic prosperity is based on the suffering of other countries, how the Republic, which they have constructed, gradually became the first economy of the world. This is a good option if one is American, but runs a serious risk to collapse democracy. For Friedman, history is witness to the fact that imperialism has been pitted against democracy.
These dilemmas pose for Americans a serious question: is the Empire synonymous with dictatorship? Certainly, everyone knows that the US has emerged as the only power after the communist collapse. Far from a positive scenario, however, this unlimited power recycled the democratic institution of America into a global empire. Cynically, citizens valorize the benefits of being the main economy of the world, but ignore the costs. To put things straight, Friedman adds, the growth of the open market encouraged by the US in the world created an incomparable and irreversible sentiment of resentment which resulted in 9/11 attacks.

Not surprisingly, the sense of reality imposed the American alienated system, which prioritized its own liberty, on others by enslaving the underdeveloped countries abroad. To some extent, terrorism and Al-Qaeda not only remind citizens traumatically how far the hate goes, but also uncover the veil of ignorance (alienation) that subsumed the citizenship to date. As psychoanalysts say, sooner or later, the sense of reality imposes. G. Friedman goes on to write:

A fact that the American people have trouble assimilating is that the size and power of the American Empire is inherently disruptive and intrusive, which means that United States can rarely take a step without threatening some nation or benefiting another. While such a power confers enormous economic advantages, it naturally engenders hostility. (p. 10)

As the previous introduction noted, decisions made in the US affect daily the lives of many non-Americans across the world. An example of this is the fact that Obama’s rise to power was celebrated in many cities beyond the boundaries
of the US, which even comically earned a Novel Peace Prize in spite of the fact that his armies were occupying Afghanistan and Iraq. It is important not to lose sight of this uncanny influence; it did not derive from conquest or the direct intervention, but it resulted from a process of acculturation, admiration inherited from all empires.

Unlike other empires that constructed their hegemonies by the imposition of war, the US tilted towards trade and commerce. Following Friedman’s prefatory remarks, the US never intended to be the main power, a unique empire without rivalry. This country only was enthralled by the circumstance of economies and global politics. Over the years, America showed itself how democratic it would be with respect to the Soviet Union. Once Soviets undermined their influence on the US, the democracy that characterized the life of the country set the pace to a tyranny. An empire obsessed to fight against “terror” violated not only international covenants but also ignored other historic allies.

This type of new unintended Empire has faced a lot of problems, two World wars, 9/11 and almost four financial crises. One thing seems to be clear. Unlike Rome or Britain, the United States is not being designed from literature and science. If Romans needed a Virgil and Englanders made from Kipling their national pride, America is experiencing an unsorted growth.

In the next decade, America not only will strengthen its leadership in the world but also should take a proactive role in the political configuration of developed countries. The stability of this world is determined by the success of the US in maintaining its hegemony. Otherwise, terrible threats may surface. To put this bluntly:
...bringing order to Empire is a necessity because even though the United States is overwhelmingly powerful, it is far from omnipotent, and having singular power creates singular dangers. The United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, for example, precisely because of its unique power. The president’s task is to manage that kind of power in a way that acknowledges the risks as well as the opportunities, then minimizing the risks and maximizing the benefits. (p. 22)

Beyond the ethnocentrism of Friedman’s discourse one might speculate to what extent terrorism is not a direct consequence of imperialism. In this token, Friedman admits that the survival of democracy is only possible by the observance of a constitutional text. The founding parents such as Lincoln or even Roosevelt made hard decisions, sometimes ignoring some grounding rights. Their goal, rather, was motivated to use the Constitution to pave the ways for restoring the force counter-balance. At this time, the US is subject to its destiny; this means that it should expand the free market and democracy to the world. However, some blow-backs may surface. The concept of preemption and prevention are vital to ensure the success of America as the main power at a global level.

In this book, Friedman calls for the organization of international foreign policies in order to prevent regional fragmentation. What is not clear is under what basis the hegemony of the US is better than others? What should officials do in conscientizing Americans of the great future waiting for them?

To be honest, Friedman’s examination starts from a biased old prejudice. Economic powers reserve their rights to expand their markets to other less developed nations. In
doing so, civilization not only survives, but also conflict is deterred. The ends justify the means. However, in his analysis the social conflict is of paramount importance to bring peace. Fraught with amoral suggestions but impressively accurate observations, this book exhibits a new way of thinking the politics in the US, which has arisen post the Twin Towers attacks.

To make a safer world, a more counter-weight balanced power is needed. Military intervention is the last resource, only when the balanced power tactic does not work. Whether or not Rome faced serious problems to keep the spirit of the republic, how will the democracy be preserved? In any democracy, the foundational rights of self-determination are under siege when the Empire surfaces. The fears about imperial ambitions are historically justified. However, given the privileged situation of the US today, there is no other option as to whether to be an Empire or not. It is impossible to go back to the economy of previous centuries, accompanied with the real dangers to destabilize the entire region; for that reason, the only solution aims at the acceptance of the costs of Imperialism. Friedman recognizes that the danger of The Republic is fear. Greater potential hazards or enemies would sacrifice all individual liberties. The solution seems to be simple. The founding parents of the Republic envisaged that the American presidency should rule in the international affairs with other nations, while the Constitution, Supreme Court and Senate should govern the internal order. Like the market where investors, consumers, and managers interact, the civil society should be outside from presidential control. The president’s power must be negotiated with many other actors who prevent the appearance of a dictator. Ideals without power become simply words, but power without ideals is the essence of evil. Both should be combined in the civil society. As Machiavelli put it, war is
the only mechanism that serves as a catalyst. The difference between a bad or good president seems to be related to the expediency and the abilities to make what the time demands. A bad president sometimes makes what is a correct choice, but his behaviour is heedless of moral principles. Rather, a good president only acts as the moment requires. In some special way, Friedman says what many other left-related scholars denounce as well; the decline of Soviet Union made the US the unique power, which may lead this nation to its collapse. The restoration of counter-balanced power not only is suggested but also necessary. The Republic inside the US flourished thanks to this idea.

Is the current financial crisis the end of American Empire, or only the outset? For Friedman, the financial crisis that appeared in 2008, far away from being a threat, is an opportunity that the US should not pass over. Provoked by the war on terror conducted by the Bush administration, the financial crash was based on the desire of low risk for making business. Every crisis needs change. It is not true that this was the worst crisis since the 1930s Great Depression. Not only Roosevelt but also Reagan faced similar situations in the past. A crisis produces a substantial change in the boundaries between market and state. In Roosevelt’s time, the great depression pushed toward some radical measures aimed at strengthening the role of state in regulating the market. Reagan opted to de-structure big government in favor of capital and corporations. As a result, the balance between state and market was changed according to the economic environment.

Last but not least, now, the State must do the same by controlling the financial elite and its interests. Seen in this perspective, there is a serious debate between left and right with respect to the role of state. For some, if the state
intervenes in the market it creates instability, distrust and disinvestment. For others, reducing state power means more independence for the market and less poverty for people. Whatever the case may be, the next decade may be a Pandora’s Box. The nightmare of the founding parents that the US could become an Empire, similarly to British power, seems to be today a reality.