

## **Ennio Di Nolfo, Storia delle Relazioni Internazionali. Dalla fine della Guerra fredda a oggi.**

### **(A History of International Relations: From the end of the Cold War to Today)**

(Bari, Editori Laterza, 2016) pp. 330, ISBN: 9788859300267

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This third volume of Ennio Di Nolfo's monumental History of International Relations deals with world developments after the end of the Cold War, from 1990 until summer 2015, the year of publication of the volume. It thus excludes the dramatic and unexpected changes that occurred immediately afterwards, between 2016 and 2018, especially the British referendum decision to leave the European Union ('Brexit') and the rise of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the USA. With this time delimitation, however, the volume can be seen as an account of a historical period with a form of natural conclusion, while the subsequent period, from 2016, will most probably be considered in the future as a new phase of international relations.

In 2015 however Di Nolfo wrote the volume conscious of dealing with a period in evolution and thus, as he himself admits, often adopts a reporting style rather than methods of historical analysis. Furthermore the author is well aware of the fact that the end of ideology as an instrument for the interpretation of the dynamics of international relations means an end of the age of certainties, hence complicating significantly any analytical approach to the issue and thus relativising the assessments he tries to make. Nonetheless Hobsbawm's notion of a "short century" ending with the fall of the USSR is clearly rejected by Di Nolfo, who rather sees the wider interpretative solutions of the recent period as an opportunity to also re-interpret previous decades detached from the rigid schemes of ideology.

The core question of Di Nolfo's work is whether or not there has been a decline of US hegemony as the only remaining superpower after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block.

Treating in separate chapters all major players in world affairs and geographical regions of the globe, the author never leaves out of sight this main aspect, that is, the role played by the USA on the one hand, and on the other by its main contenders such as China, Russia, the European Union and even India in the various theatres of world affairs. Moreover the appearance, from 2001 on at the latest, of international terrorism as – to some extent – an independent actor and challenger to US hegemony, adds a new complicating dimension to the analysis.

Di Nolfo combines political with economic and financial argumentations and highlights the inseparable interdependencies of these aspects in his attempt to explain the reasons and driving forces of international events and developments.

A fundamental turning point for the new economic relations guiding the process of globalisation was, according to Di Nolfo, the crisis of the early 1970s, heralding the era of post-industrialisation and new productive relations that became visible after 1990 and still characterises the present. The continuing disparity of wealth between the poor producer and the rich consumer countries does not hide the general tendency towards globalised growth, in the poorest parts of the world as well.

Seizing the chances of globalisation while respecting diverging conditions and local particularities is one of the central messages Di Nolfo wants to transmit in his volume. This implies a common governance of this process led by the main players and in respect of the new imperatives of climate change and environmental sustainability. The fact that the main polluters in the world, the USA, China and India, have come to agreements in 2014 about the limitation of global warming gas emissions shows that this issue has become a main driving force of polycentric global governance and that they have accepted this reality for the future.

After having explained these general considerations in his first chapter - and analysed them again in his conclusion at the end of the volume - Di Nolfo starts his narrative with an examination of the thesis that after the end of the Cold War the USA would have remained a solitary super power with the task of being the world's 'policeman'. The discussion of this thesis implies a deeper analysis of the conflicts characterising the 1990s, from the first Iraq War in 1991, in which the USA seemed to be effectively the dominating power that imposed its leadership in the UN intervention without any serious counterweight, to the only apparently successful US mediation attempt under president Clinton in the everlasting Israeli-Palestinian dispute, peaking in the Arafat-Clinton-Rabin agreement in Oslo. Also the dissolution of Yugoslavia stands as an example for the limits of US leadership, which could determine the end of this War in the Dayton agreement of 1995 only due to the structural weakness of European Union Common Foreign and Security Policy and the temporary absence of Russia as a powerful actor in foreign affairs. This period came to an end with the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001 and a new doctrine enounced by president George W. Bush for America's role as the leader in a global fight for liberty against terrorism and so-called rogue states. The limits of this fight however are made evident by Di Nolfo when he comes to the problem of the Iraq War, the Iranian nuclear plants or the continuation of the Middle-East conflict despite the Oslo agreements.

The third part deals with potential or effective rivals of the US's superpower status. This chapter has a specific geostrategic imprint and first of all analyses the re-emergence of Russia as a political and military contender of US hegemony since the arrival in power of Vladimir Putin. Russian action in the Caucasus and Ukraine since the 1990s is emblematic of the country's ambitions to actively pursue a policy of regional hegemony and re-conquest of its historical sphere of interest, also by means of an outright challenge of the US and European interests.

China is the subject of the following analysis. Di Nolfo recognises this country as the one which experienced the most important transformation and growth during the period under consideration, making it one of the two or three most influential countries in the world today. Especially since the arrival of Xi Jinping in power in

2013, with an unprecedented accumulation of offices in his hand, China has become the regional hegemon in Asia. The foreign agenda of US president Obama took this into account. However Di Nolfo also underlines that China remains financially dependent on the USA as long as its dollar reserves cannot be converted into any other circulating currency. This enables the USA, for the time being, to maintain its geostrategic supremacy in Asia. The rise of India as a new regional power, seeking accords with its traditional Chinese and Russian allies, is also a challenging factor for the leading role of the USA, as Di Nolfo observes. This is why Obama tried to stress the common ground of US and Indian political, cultural and economic interests. The most important tool for the US remains its geo-strategy, pursued since the times of the Cold War, of tying itself to a ring of Pacific and South Asian countries around China.

Subsequently, Di Nolfo dedicates the fourth part of his narrative to the European Union and its internal problems of the integration of an ever growing number of member states since German reunification and the Treaty of Maastricht. A possible counter-tendency to this growth (as effectively initiated by the Brexit vote in 2016) is in no way forecast, even if the economic and financial crisis since 2008 has revealed the lack of inner cohesion of the Union and its institutions, putting in question its very reason of existence. "What is the sense of the Union?" Di Nolfo asks explicitly, without giving a clear answer.

The EU's capacity to act as a single actor in international relations has been compromised by diverging strategic interests and cultural heritage of different groups of member states, as has already been made apparent from the Yugoslav crisis in the early 1990s. Di Nolfo questions the contradictions of a Union that had been conceived for a different purpose to the international conditions of the post-1990 period. This is also reflected by the new position which European countries had to assume within the framework of a changing NATO, which since 1999 has been redefined as a global defence network.

Di Nolfo dedicates a rather small part of his volume to Latin America. The central issue for this continent has been the tendency to emancipate from US hegemony, both by aligned regimes like Chile and Argentina after the end of military dictatorships in the 1990s, as well as by those choosing to oppose the USA on ideological and economic grounds following to a certain extent the Cuban tradition of Fidel Castro. Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez especially represented this option, followed by other, though less radical and firmly democratic leaders like Bolivian Evo Morales or Brazilian Lula da Silva.

The African continent is characterised by ethnic and economic rather than ideological divisions, even if post-colonial regimes since the 1960s had often pursued ideological policies for their countries' reconstruction processes. Analysing the internal events of many African countries, Di Nolfo sees the continent heading towards significant development overall, after decades of difficult detachment from its colonial heritage, accompanied by corruption and ethnic conflict. Since the early 2000s especially, he concludes, parts of the continent have made rapid progress in emancipating itself from their dependence from western economic aid, even if this is only applicable for some countries, while others remain in a problematic situation of internal, often ethnic-religiously motivated divisions. Africa, or at least its sub-Saharan part, is still considered to some extent a "forgotten area" in the framework

of international relations, even if Di Nolfo believes that within a few decades this might change substantially.

Di Nolfo then dedicates the sixth part to the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 and the transformations and destabilisations it unleashed in the North African and Middle Eastern areas. In particular the case of Egypt reveals the dilemma that the western powers faced, between their support for the principle of democratisation, thus accepting Muslim fundamentalist elected president Mursi, and the needs for guaranteeing a certain stability and alignment to the West, which instead imposed collaboration with the old military hierarchies, now represented by president Al-Sisi after Mursi's arrest. Besides the widespread destabilisation of state structures, Islamist fundamentalism has, since then, been the main challenge erupting out of the 'Arab Spring'. Being a relatively fresh and elusive phenomenon at the times of the volume's writing (early 2015), Islamic State is inevitably analysed by Di Nolfo with some caution. He highlights the strategic differences between Al-Qaida and the condemnation of the Caliphate by major Muslim leaders, but also admits to an initial underestimation of the phenomenon, especially its links to a radicalising Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The same chapter concludes by connecting the problem of ISIS with the position of Israel in the transformed and radicalised context of the Arab world after the 'Arab Spring'.

A final, separate chapter, is dedicated to the foreign policy agenda of US president Barack Obama since 2009. Di Nolfo shows some understanding for the difficulties in which Obama had to start his term in office, especially due to the economic crisis, but does neither hide the contradictions and flaws of his doctrine of 'leading from behind'. According to this strategy, instead of imposing its military might, the US would more carefully evaluate its initiatives, and assure a stronger involvement of its allies. Obama recognised that the Pacific area needed increased attention from the USA's side while the European partners had become more self-reliant within the transatlantic alliance. Projects like TTIP were supposed to tighten links between the US's partners in both regions. However, Obama's strategy proved lacking in its consideration of third parties' initiatives, and he had to adapt it time and again to the events, from the Syrian theatre to the Ukraine crisis and other scenarios. Nevertheless in 2014, rejecting the thesis of a superpower in decline, the president assessed the role of America as still being the only world leader, as a continuing historical mission and engaging an obligatory responsibility for the USA.

Di Nolfo accords some credibility to this, due to the persistent weaknesses of all other potential world leaders: with the failure of a European Union foreign policy; with the limits of Russian influence and power; and with persistent inner problems and external dependencies for the Chinese. The world is thus on the way to becoming a polycentric order in the long run if those actors manage to overcome their barriers, but for the period under inquiry, from 1990 to 2015, Di Nolfo confirms that the leading role of the USA in the world has remained untouched.