

## **AFTER AMERICAN DOMINANCE: POPE FRANCIS AND THE VATICAN'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY**

*Massimo Franco*

Pope Francis is the first global pope. This is a big departure from John Paul II (r. 1978-2005). His life had been shaped by the struggle against Communism, so he was a natural ally to the United States until the Soviet Union collapsed. Benedict XVI (r. 2005-2013) espoused a more Eurocentric approach. He was most concerned about Europe's increasing secularization, even though Catholicism was growing elsewhere. Under Francis, the Holy See is steering a new course between the United States and its rivals—in an effort to extend the Vatican's soft power throughout the world.<sup>1</sup>

### **Beyond a Unipolar World**

The Syrian crisis witnessed, among other things, a curious convergence of interests between the Vatican's Catholic ecumenism and Russia's Orthodox nationalism. Francis saw Vladimir Putin as a sort of Christian Czar, defender of Christian minorities in a Middle East that, not by chance, the Vatican labels "the Near East." Why did this Russo-Papal "alliance" matter? First and foremost, the Vatican is simply not at ease in a unipolar world. A world dominated by the United States as global policeman—as was the case after 1990—is worrying to the Holy See. To exercise its soft power, the Vatican needs many players on the world stage.

The crisis offered Francis the opportunity to emphasize the importance of not only the Vatican but also other state and non-state actors in world affairs. For Russia, it was an opportunity to assert its relevance on the global stage. In preventing a military attack against Bashar Assad's regime, Putin was at least as important as U.S. President Barack Obama. Pope Francis joined the front determined to stop the spiral towards a war in Syria and spoke out against a military strike, saying what Obama probably feared but couldn't admit publicly.

**Massimo Franco** is a political columnist for *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's leading newspapers. He is also the author of several books, including *The Crisis in the Vatican Empire: From the Death of John Paul II to the Resignation of Benedict XVI* (Mondadori, 2013) and *Parallel Empires: the Vatican and the United States—Two Centuries of Alliance and Conflict* (Random House, 2009).

This move served as a corrective to the perception of strategic alignment between the Vatican and the West, which, from the Vatican's viewpoint, had been a reluctant and forced one. The pontiff was anxious to distance the Holy See from U.S. unipolarism.

Multipolarism coheres well with Francis's mindset. The pontiff uses geometrical figures to depict global society. He conceptualizes the world in the age of globalization not as a polished sphere, without angles and differences. Rather, he sees it as a polyhedron with many different faces. In short, he believes the world is enriched and unified by its diversity.

Recognizing these divergent trends in foreign policy means promoting and accepting pluralism and a reinvigorated balance of powers. The Pope developed this vision during his years as archbishop of Buenos Aires, a global, Latin American megacity where interfaith relations and inequalities are the rule.

At the same time, the papacy's new approach toward the Middle East has been necessitated by mistakes on the part of Western powers. The United States weakened its credibility in the region by waging war in Iraq and other shortsighted actions. The uncritical support of the Arab Spring in North Africa and then the shifting strategy towards the regime in Egypt further hollowed out America's standing in the Middle East.

This criticism is not directed only at President Obama. Most of the present difficulties are a byproduct of the George W. Bush presidency. Meanwhile, Europe tends to show indifference for the destiny of native Christians living in the difficult environment of the Middle East. The Vatican views the decisions taken by Western powers in the past decade and a half as disastrous for the region's Christians.

### **Changing Paradigms & Regional Rebalancing**

For different reasons, the Vatican and Moscow both consider the Balkanization of this strategic region as a negative development—and hope to avoid it. The Holy See fears the fragmentation of the present states in the Middle East, and considers the creation of one-party, one-religion nations as heightening the risks of region-wide war. Vatican leaders also realize that many priests and patriarchs in Syria are pro-Assad because they fear the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Furthermore, current developments foreshadow an end of the role of Middle Eastern Christianity as a historical bridge between different faiths and cultures. Putin, for his part, is worried by the prospect of a clash between different ethnic and religious groups. That might encourage Islamic terrorism near the southern borders of Russia and in Central Asian republics to the east.

The Holy See and Russia share a negative view of the way the West has confronted Assad. In particular, they have little regard for the United

States' support to the Syrian rebels. Their common assessment is that the rebels have been infiltrated by radical Muslims and even by groups close to the Al Qaeda terrorist network.

That does not mean that the Vatican and Russia see Assad as their champion. Like Washington, Moscow and Papal Rome know Assad is a cruel dictator and want him out. However, in the absence of an alternative, Assad still appears a sort of lesser evil compared to Islamic radicals. What happened in Maghreb and Egypt after the Arab Springs is a terrible reminder of the dangers ahead, particularly for minority Christians.

At present, the only clear reality is that the old balance of power in the region is over and a brand new one is emerging. In this context, Pope Francis's cooperation with Putin over Syria does not mean that the Holy See has sided with Russia over the United States. Nor does it signal a papal desire to distance the Church from "Western values." Instead, it underscores a more pragmatic approach to international relations as the Vatican seeks to draw new lines of dialogue and diplomacy.

Russian-Papal cooperation with respect to Syria was a tactical choice—an "alliance" that has been challenged by developments in Ukraine. In the Ukraine, Catholics have sided mostly with the anti-Russian protests. There is a striking difference in the way the Holy See reacted to the crisis in Syria in 2013, and to the Ukraine crisis in 2014: very assertive in the first case, very cautious in the latter.

These contrasting reactions reflect the same strategic goal: to steer a delicate course between the United States and Russia, so that the Vatican can most effectively exercise soft power on the international stage. Pope Francis does not want the Vatican to be squeezed on the West's side as in past decades. In his view, that badly damaged the Holy See overall in the Islamic world. He is a post-Cold War pontiff. And his view reflects not so much a West-East divide, but a North-South one. His election signaled the end of a Eurocentric and Italy-centric Vatican, and the victory of the Latin American model of Catholicism against the Roman Curia. Major changes are already apparent, but we are still near the beginning of the current pontificate, and further developments are to come.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This policy commentary was originally published online by APPSI and its affiliate, the Japan Policy Research Institute, as *JPRI Critique* Vol. 21 No. 2 (February 2015).