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# Beyond the American bubble: does empire matter?

JAN NEDERVEEN PIETERSE

*ABSTRACT* *In the 21st century, does empire make sense? From the viewpoint of flexible and increasingly de-territorialised capitalism, does empire matter or is it a costly liability? Are the new wars an expression of US capitalism or do they reflect a US superpower syndrome and path dependence on the national security state? This paper takes the latter view and argues that the superpower syndrome is embedded in the American bubble. Civilian casualty rates in Iraq and Afghanistan are extraordinarily high. This occurs at the confluence of several trends: the USA seeking land power on a distant continent, the tendency to view countries as strategic real estate and the American bubble that leads Americans to underestimate resistance. In closing I draw a balance sheet of whether and how empire matters and briefly address the global realignments that are underway.*

Is empire the main street of history, or is it a side street, or a cul de sac? In relation to US domestic problems and economic prospects, does empire matter? In relation to global concerns, does empire matter? The background of this question is the large place the new wars (war on terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq) occupy in the USA and the large outpouring of literature on empire. In many accounts ‘empire’ is a broad-brush description. Its meanings range from control over another nation’s territory and sovereignty to an ‘empire of bases’. Arguably the issue is not empire but US hegemony and primacy; empire (control over the sovereignty of another political entity, which presently practically only applies to Iraq) is one form that primacy takes and we shouldn’t focus on the form. The question does empire matter has several meanings: does it make sense, is it important, and in what way is it important?

At the 2006 World Economic Forum in Davos the main theme was the rise of China and India; in 2005 it was the sinking dollar. At the 2006 World Social Forum, held in different places, most attention went to criticisms of neoliberal globalisation, just like the year before in Porto Alegre. In both meetings US geopolitics hardly figured. If muscular foreign policy plays big in the USA, it doesn’t necessarily matter in the rest of the world, or matter in the sense that most Americans think it would.

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This paper reflects on the implications, domestic and foreign, of the US pursuit of primacy and the realignments that are taking shape in response to US militarism. The Iraq war is widely perceived as having made the world more dangerous, war weariness is growing and the literature on American empire is overwhelming, so this treatment is pointed. The first section discusses the relationship between the new wars and neoliberal globalisation. I question whether there is a 'rational' relationship between the new wars and American capitalism. The second section addresses another major hypothesis for interpreting the new wars: the superpower syndrome and institutional path dependence on the part of the national security state. The superpower syndrome is embedded in the American bubble. 'Stuff happens' and civilian casualty rates in Iraq and Afghanistan are extraordinarily high. I argue that this occurs at the confluence of several trends: the USA seeking land power on a distant continent, the accompanying tendency to view countries as strategic real estate and the 'cultural unilateralism' of the American bubble that does not equip Americans with cultural savvy. In closing I draw a balance sheet on whether and how empire matters and briefly address the global realignments that are underway.

### **Neoliberal globalisation**

Does empire matter in light of the dynamics of contemporary globalisation? Imperialism is a particularly clunky form of globalisation—so 19th century. In the 21st century, does empire make sense at all? Is it a viable project? Does neoliberal globalisation—effected via international financial institutions and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—need empire? If the main project is freeing up markets, especially capital markets, does empire matter or is control over territory and sovereignty rather a risky and costly burden and an unnecessary distraction? Back in 2003 the *Wall Street Journal* reported: 'Iraq's occupation government unveiled a plan to transform the country into a low-tax economy wide open to foreign investment' (21 September). When the aim is creating a free enterprise economy with an open capital market, does imperialism make sense in terms of cost–benefit analysis? In fact, if the objective is obtaining Iraq's oil, isn't it much cheaper to buy it? This is a reasonable question in view of cost estimates of the Iraq war such as that by Joseph Stiglitz of between \$1 and \$2 trillion (depending on the duration of the war and including opportunity costs and long-term health care for the wounded).

American policy has been multi-track all along, pro-market *and* military. Table 1 gives a brief comparison of the Carter, Reagan, Bush I, Clinton and Bush II administrations in terms of economic and security policies.

What these administrations all have in common are a strong military–industrial complex, expansive foreign policies and interventions, and aggressive international trade and economic policies. Yet recent decades have not been imperial in the sense of lasting territorial occupation. Neoliberal globalisation since the 1980s has taken the form of market domination exercised through the IMF, World Bank, WTO and transnational

TABLE 1. Policy profiles of recent US administrations

	<i>Economics</i>	<i>Projects</i>	<i>Interventions, wars</i>
Carter	IMF, WB	Carter Doctrine	Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iran
Reagan	IMF, WB	Rollback	Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Iran – Contra, Central America, Grenada
Bush I	IMF, WB	New World Order	Gulf war, Panama
Clinton	IMF, WB, WTO, NAFTA, APEC	Enlargement	Crisis response (Somalia, Balkans, Kurds), Iraq sanctions
Bush II	FTAs (WTO)	Preventive war	Afghanistan, Iraq

corporations, without assuming control over sovereignty. The George W Bush administration continues the usual US preoccupations but deviates from past policy in how it handles economic and military policies. In both spheres it has been more unilateral and aggressive, has relied less on multilateral institutions, valued bilateral free trade agreements over the WTO and has taken hegemony to the point of empire.

Some argue that the USA has been imperialist all along (Chomsky, Zinn, Parenti, Petras, etc), so the new wars are like a latent truth becoming manifest. This approach uses a soft-focus, wide-angle understanding of empire, in which empire becomes a metaphor for domination. Indeed, the USA has experienced multiple imperial episodes and exercises global hegemony. But the ‘continuous imperialism’ argument uses empire loosely, overstates the continuity of US policies and underestimates the sharp turn that recent policies and the Iraq war represent.

The conventional view that imperialism is intrinsic to capitalism is much too generalising. David Harvey (2004) interprets the Iraq war as an instance of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ and as part of a recurrent capitalism survival and crisis management strategy. The assumption that empire is profitable is a Marxist thesis dating from Lenin and Luxemburg. But material gain needs to be demonstrated. War and empire are themselves huge transfers of resources and a redistribution within capitalism and among capitals. Indeed, a fundamental problem is the aggregation of ‘capitalism’—which capitalism, which faction of capital? Harvey’s *New Imperialism* doesn’t identify the actual agent, besides a brief reference to oil interests, while assuming the character of the overall process and outcome. There are steep differences between different factions of capital in relation to the new wars and the Bush administration’s economic policies and tax cuts. Arguably military and energy industries are beneficiaries while Wall Street, in general, is not. There has been a disconnect between the Bush II administration and Wall Street, and the Treasury has been a weak link (unlike during the Clinton administration with Robert Rubin), manned by a former CEO and then a conservative economist. Only in the final phase was a Wall Street banker, Paulson, brought in. General-level explanations of the capitalism = imperialism variety don’t measure up. Explanations can refer only to particular strands and segments of capital.

That there is a 'rational' relationship between US military expansion and US capitalism is the assumption of neo-Marxist takes on US hegemony generally. This is a difficult assumption because economic actors are many and diverse (banks, institutional investors, corporations, government agencies) and rallying them behind a single project would be easier said than done. Arguably the circuits of power overlap with those of capital but not in a linear fashion. Business circles and media have been divided on the Iraq war with the *Wall Street Journal*, the American Enterprise Institute and other neo-conservative think-tanks in favour and many others sceptical or opposed, such as *Business Week*, *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and the Cato Institute. From the viewpoint of corporations the winners are few (military industries, Halliburton, Bechtel, energy companies); many are indifferent unless the cost of military expansion becomes excessive (Wall Street) and many are damaged by US militarism (exporters). The steep loss of US legitimacy over recent years represent a failure of brand management (brand USA) whose overall effect is that American brands world-wide are no longer 'cool'. This is a matter of growing concern for American business groups (Fidler & Husband, 2003; Holstein, 2005).

Why then the Iraq war? Part of the answer is segmented elites and knowledge segmentation: grand strategy—but no economics; foreign policy—but no analysis of domestic dynamics, etc. Nevertheless this remains a fundamental question. All along the war economy and war-as-business unfold alongside and interact with neoliberal globalisation. But how sustainable is this? If military interventions are brief and successful this doesn't necessarily matter much. But lengthy and unsuccessful military interventions and 'quagmires', as in Iraq and Afghanistan, multiply the financial and political cost.

A reasonable question is: 'Why is the juggernaut of the West so pre-occupied by the flea of al-Qaida?' (Bunting, 2004) The war on terrorism instils a regime of fear and creates an enemy narrative that serves as a successor to the Cold War and does everything the Cold War did. It upholds executive power, sustains the national security state, consolidates secrecy, instils patriotism, dims criticism, cements alliances and creates a discursive and ideological framework. Zygmunt Bauman argues that 'politicians have abdicated any responsibility for moderating the impact of the inherent insecurity and instability of market capitalism, so they offer to assuage other types of insecurity' (in Bunting, 2004). While neoliberal globalisation marches on the regime of fear diverts attention from growing financial and corporate power and social instability. At a time of growing social insecurity in the USA the talk is of privatising social security and every effort is aimed at shrinking social government—by tax cuts, jacking up the deficits and removing barriers against corporate malpractice. Not social or human security but military security is the biggest global growth industry.

If the war on terror is a perpetual war, security budgets can only grow; thus indirectly the security state directs funds away from social spending and education. In this broad sense neoliberal globalisation (the hegemony of finance capital and growing corporate power, both unaccountable) and the

regime of fear of the war on terror are complementary operations. Corporate logics dovetail with the logic of war directly (military industries, big oil, construction) and indirectly: military and homeland security controls the airwaves and trumps social security. One option in interpreting the situation is that a new merger, neoliberal empire, is attempting an unstable configuration.

Neoliberal empire twins practices of empire with those of neoliberalism. The core of empire are the national security state and the military–industrial complex; neoliberalism is about business, financial operations and marketing (including the marketing of neoliberalism itself). The IMF and World Bank continue business as usual, though with less salience and legitimacy than during the Clinton years; so imperial policies come in addition to and not instead of the framework of neoliberal globalisation. Neoliberal empire is a marriage of convenience with neoliberalism, indicated by inconsistent use of neoliberal policies, and an attempt to merge the America whose business is business with the America whose business is war, at a time when business is not doing great (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004: 45).

Part of the neoliberal legacy since the Reagan administration is the lean state. Since Reagan's rollback of communism, US expansion has coincided with government rollback, dismantling all state capabilities *except* security capabilities. But can a lean state be an imperial state? Is it up to the task? Is it possible to have hegemony and empire on the cheap? What indicators there are of neoliberal empire—particularly along the lines of war-as-business (Johnson, 2004)—suggest that this is an improvisation rather than a sustainable strategy.

### **Superpower syndrome**

A different assumption is that the American rendezvous of power operates autonomously from the rendezvous of capital and has a momentum of its own. This is the general drift in US political science (eg Bacevich, 2002; Brown, 2003; Posen, 2003). Part of this is a *historical depth* that goes back to postwar US globalism, to the cold war and post-cold war episodes. It involves a *regional depth* in US security commitments, particularly in the Middle East and Israel, which are anchored in the regional commands that orchestrate its 'empire of bases' (Priest, 2003). The *strategic depth* has been summed up as 'OIL (oil, Israel, logistics)'. It involves *political depth* in that support for the military–industrial complex and forward policies is fundamentally bipartisan and long-term and involves many Washington beltway careers. This in turn is founded on *cultural depth* and the ingrained self-perception of the USA as arbiter of the world (discussed below). Finally, it involves secret agendas and the discreet charms of grand strategy.

The George W Bush administration is characterised as no other by secrecy and the multiplication of command and intelligence units, such as the Special Operations unit in the Pentagon and the Special Forces Command in Iraq

(Kibbe, 2004; Hersh, 2004). The pattern is that of a state within a state within a state, or command and control circles in which the outer circles perform legitimate tasks and the inner circles operate according to covert plans (Risen, 2006). This sheds some light on the twilight atmosphere around this administration: vague policies clustered around bland ideals (freedom, democracy, peace) that are never quite elaborated; policies that are blatantly at odds with ideals; a hard-line Wilsonian approach that is more hard-line than Wilsonian; and recurrent clashes between overt and covert agendas.

Institutional path dependence means essentially that US foreign policies must be interpreted primarily (though not exclusively) in terms of institutional drives in and around the national security establishment. The concentration on military power reflects a superpower syndrome. The USSR's losing the cold war arms race leaves the question of what happened to the victors. For the USA the prize of cold war victory was not a peace dividend, not 'the end of history', but hardened reliance on the path that allegedly brought victory. This was turned into a programme in Charles Krauthammer's 1990 article on the unipolar moment and resumed in his essay on 'prolonging the unipolar moment' (Krauthammer, 1990–91; 2002–03). Krauthammer argued that the USA should adopt a policy of 'democratic realism' and intervene 'where it counts'. Looking back, Fukuyama recast this episode as the 'neoconservative moment' (2004).

As part of the script of unipolarity US governing elites invest in grand strategy and mega-power symbolism. This involves grandstanding as an international style and non-co-operation with international treaties such as the Kyoto protocol. It reflects, in Robert Cooper's terms, a paradigm of defensive state modernism, in contrast to postmodern state trends (pooling sovereignty, international co-operation, treaties and covenants such as that of the International Criminal Court, etc) that prevail in Europe and other parts of the world (Cooper, 2000).

US governing elites tend to view the world in terms of *strategic challenges* (nuclear Iran, nuclear North Korea, energy supplies, etc) rather than economic, ecological or cultural challenges. Economic challenges are left to corporations and to international trade policy, which is also cast in strategic terms. Cultural change too is viewed in terms of its strategic implications and the post-9/11 preoccupation with 'cultural extremism' and conservatism inspires 'tough liberalism' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2005). Strategic challenges are talked about in terms of necessity and fatality rather than in terms of trade-offs and the costs and benefits of alternative ways of handling world order, such as strengthening international organisations and international law. Unipolarity as premise means that US governing elites tend to ignore alternative ways of handling world order *or* to view them as rivals to US power.

This is so regardless of winning or losing the new wars; what is 'winning' itself has become problematic and unclear. It follows from the script of unipolarity that strategic aims become functionally autonomous and detached from their actual attainment. Is the war on terrorism and 'democratic realism' actually intended to succeed and what precisely defines

success? With the shifting reasons for war (weapons of mass Destruction, regime change, democracy in the Middle East), how is one to keep track of the objective? On what terms is it intended to succeed: in terms of its overt (democracy) or covert aims (geopolitics)? It is likely that the administration is divided on the objectives. Having the Iraqi state fall apart, unable to control its oil industry, and with ethnic factions forever jostling for position may be the outcome some neo-conservative strategists were aiming at, and this suits Israel. But it suggests that US objectives in Iraq are inherently contradictory: geopolitics and democracy, a mishmash of covert and overt aims. The mismatch too is calculated; however, the unintended effects prove to be more erratic than bargained for.

In view of technological changes contemporary globalisation diffuses power to many different actors, including non-state actors. Contemplating this in the 1990s Richard Haass (2001), then director of policy planning at the State Department, concluded that empire would not be a feasible policy.

Now non-state actors in Iraq and Afghanistan are proving to be more formidable foes than planned for. The Iraq war has turned into an asymmetrical war and arguably a people's war, involving different peoples and forces in the region. A lesson of Vietnam is that in protracted people's war popular support, logistical supply lines, culture and time are all against the invader; one can bleed but not win. In Afghanistan the US game of musical chairs, first supporting the south (the Pashtun and the Taliban) against the USSR and its northern allies, and since 2001 the Northern Alliance against the south, has produced an enduring stalemate. As protracted people's wars both wars will probably yield decades of instability without clear outcomes.

'Democratic realism' means pursuing US national interests while respecting or promoting democracy, which easily translates into an instrumental take on democracy—democracy if and to the extent that it furthers US interests or democracy as an abstract value in which the end justifies the means and the label redeems the package. In the Middle East democracy means controlled democracy, in which inconvenient outcomes such as Hamas in Palestine are vetoed. This is not unlike the character of democracy in the USA. The Congress has a 32% approval rating but a 98% re-election rate thanks to elaborate gerrymandering (and shrinking voter turnouts).

Is the USA actually at war or is war a symbolic exercise—a war of choice, a vanity war with vanity trappings? Elaborate airport security checks by screeners who haven't been screened themselves; Halliburton trucks peddling up and down Iraq empty to jack up costs; war on poverty, war on drugs, war on terrorism, 'No Child Left Behind' are exercises that display a similar pattern: symbolic over-determination, a mismatch between resources and purpose, more fluff than action, but with real consequences and a punitive streak.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq show bungling and incompetence at every level—in pre-war intelligence and diplomacy, post-war planning and operations, in every respect except actual major combat. The USA spends more on the military than the next 21 biggest military spenders combined—as much as half the world's total military spending (48% in 2005). How is this



\$400–\$500 billion per annum spent? Despite a national security budget of over \$500 billion for 2004–05, ‘the military says it has run \$1 billion a month short over the last year paying for the basics of war fighting in Iraq: troops, equipment, spare parts and training’ (Weiner, 2004). The Pentagon runs 77 major weapons programmes at a cost of \$1.3 trillion, ‘11 times the yearly bill for operating and maintaining the American military’ (Weiner, 2004). This includes boondoggle projects such as the multibillion dollar missile defence shield. The preparations for future wars leave no money for actual war. Eighty percent of Pentagon spending is with six major corporations and over 40% is in no-bid (and cost-plus) contracts (Wayne, 2004). The ‘revolution in military affairs’, or the technological modernisation of the armed forces, means major private sector technology contracts, which increase the cost to the Pentagon, and troop cutbacks, which means that, with two major engagements, in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US military is over-stretched. While some weapons programmes are now cut back, the 2005 budget still yields a 5% increase in military spending, while a decision on troop expansion is delayed until 2006. As Barnett (2004) notes, US strategic precepts focus on another great power opponent, while the real-world adversaries are small-scale guerrillas, so there is a fundamental mismatch between capabilities and threats. Group think in US military circles is known as ‘Drinking the Kool-Aid’, using the analogy of the Jonestown massacre (Lang, 2004). Generals who say more troops are needed are retired prematurely and troops serving in Iraq are threatened and demoted if they present the situation as a guerrilla war or civil war. Another factor is institutional culture. A CIA truism is that ‘an operation that involves diarrhea on a daily basis will not be implemented’ (Baer, 2003). As the public whipping boy of presidential failures the CIA has ‘battered child syndrome’, so morale is low and risk aversion high.

Thus the steady, spectacular upward curve of US military spending has not produced a parallel increase in US military capabilities. The point should not be exaggerated but a reasonable question is to what extent the US military – industrial complex exists in a parallel universe as a military preoccupied with science fiction warfare, with the Pentagon as another Enron, shuffling numbers. Unipolarity exists as an aura of power sustained by fictions of state.

Ordinary reports from mainstream sources point to anomalies. In September 2004 the central CIA unit of the war on terrorism had no more staff than it had before 9/11. In September 2004, of the \$87 billion allocated for Iraq reconstruction, only about \$1 billion had been disbursed. Also in September 2004 the Pentagon office responsible for training and gearing up the Iraqi forces had only a third of its staff. The usual explanation is plodding bureaucracy, but a further option is that US government ineptitude is systemic. After all the campaigns against big government and the continuous downsizing of its functions, personnel and prestige, is it still a capable government? Downsizing and rolling back government means undercutting state capabilities and institutional erosion. By this logic neoliberal capitalism is structurally incapable of empire or nation building and, if it attempts it, it is a make-believe operation in which more effort is dedicated to marketing and propaganda than to the actual product. Is an advanced nation that is

incapable of keeping one of its major seaports from collapse in the face of anticipated disaster, capable of rebuilding other nations in distant and alien cultural and geographical settings?

### **The American bubble**

At times the USA seems to exist in a time space all of its own—preoccupied with dramas of power and with its number one status in the world theatre, as if in an endlessly prolonged Larry King Live Show. The American bubble is a power bubble, all about tweaking and negotiating power, which is typically discussed as an intricate insider debate of factional shuffles. In bookshops the politics shelf is two to three times the size of any other non-fiction section: the US public sphere is long on politics and short on economics, culture and society.

In the American bubble muscular foreign policy talk dominates—such as what should be the terms for ultimatums to Iran, Syria, North Korea? The US public is routinely primed for America's role as world arbiter—an annual theme of the syndicated *Parade* magazine (the largest circulation magazine in the USA) is 'Who are the world's worst dictators?' in an inverse popularity contest. These are cherished subjects on talk radio. Components of the American bubble are the inward looking character of debate, high doses of ideology and fervent moralism. Back in 2000 Condoleeza Rice stated that US foreign policy should be guided by national interest and American values and casually added that 'American values are universal values' (2000: 49). In 2002 US intellectuals such as Huntington and Fukuyama signed a statement according to which *What We're Fighting For* is 'American values'.

By collapsing 'American values' with universal values Americans claim to capture globalisation. Thus the US fight is the world's fight and, through the war on terrorism ('with us or against us'), it leads the world to freedom, democracy and ending tyranny. This dangerous illusion at the heart of the American bubble inflates the bubble to a global balloon.

In American media the ratio of pundits to reporters and opinion to information is roughly in the order of 10 to 1. Commentators and retired generals trump foreign reporting and produce 'embedded commentary' and in effect ideological drill based on recycling television images and comments in a pattern of incessant circular commentary. White House media hype is part of power narcissism and the mainstream media play their deferential part. The media perform a game of mirrors in which media are the content of media. The media interview media pundits whose business is spinning spin.

Part of the American bubble is radio silence amid media noise—scandal after scandal but little follow-up; in Paul Krugman's words, a culture of cover-ups. Investigations are left to politically embedded commissions. One effect is systemic unreality—a preventive war in which there is nothing to prevent, an occupation cast as liberation, a coalition of the willing that isn't really willing and not much of a coalition, Iraq reconstruction efforts that don't produce reconstruction, a \$40 billion per annum intelligence effort that doesn't produce intelligence. A rollercoaster empire whose Kodak moments

turn out to have been manufactured—the fall of Saddam’s statue, the rescue of Private Lynch, the way Saddam was captured, the death of Pat Tillman. Throughout, the nation is tangled up in doublespeak and treats vaudeville as if it is high drama.

A steady outpouring of trade books leaks information from inside the White House, Pentagon, CIA, Treasury and other quarters, recycles familiar paradigms and is operational rather than fundamental in nature—tweaking discourses and technologies of control. Operational questions are discussed *ad infinitum*; fundamentals (why, to what end?) are not discussed. Operationalism too is part of what Jackie Orr (2004) calls ‘the militarization of inner space’.

Since the new wars can be publicly discussed only in terms of their overt aims the discussion of covert objectives takes place elsewhere, in a bubble inside the bubble—a security bubble nested inside the American bubble. Since the actual aims of war are classified, they cannot be discussed in the public sphere or scrutinised in terms of their validity, methods, attainment or cost-effectiveness. Hence what discussion takes place unfolds on an unreal footing. Presumably then the USA spends a trillion or so dollars on bringing democracy to Iraq by force. In this setting killing Zarqawi, a head of a hydra-headed insurgency, is applauded as a milestone for Iraqi democracy.

The American bubble is also American babble. America is deeply engaged in a non-stop conversation with itself. In mainstream media foreign voices—other than the occasional government leader or foreign correspondent—are about as common as Edelweiss on the prairie. During decades of involvement with Iraq, how many Iraqis—other than US appointed officials—have been heard engaged in conversation on US media? Images of Saddam, brandishing a rifle and then in captivity and court, and images of combat and insurgency dominate. Presumably this is all about the ‘liberation’ of Iraqis, but who are they?

The American bubble is also a bubble economy. Obvious questions are: are the military industries a wise investment and do they have a sound multiplier effect? Does geopolitics make money and for whom? Does it halt the decline in the US share of world manufacturing? Can it turn around the US trade deficit or cut the current account deficit? Does it create jobs?

Polls report that the US image in the world is steadily declining—even among its allies, Britain, Australia, Italy, the USA is not trusted and not ranked among the top 10 nations. The UN is more trusted than the USA. In the insularity of national cocooning sound bite analysis, polarised debate, extreme nationalism and rightwing drift become normal. But Americans cannot afford to think of US policies solely in the terms of the American bubble and through the lens of corporate media, for the international public views them in lights that are *not* deferential. The American bubble and American doublespeak (the ideology of freedom) limit the capacity of Americans to understand the world and assess the resistance to their projects, and they limit their capacity for reflexivity and self-correction. This is the core problem of the US public sphere. All large countries inhabit a comfort zone cocooned from the world, but not all dabble in global hegemony,

which requires some degree of mature debate and cultural empathy. Combine this with a large military and ‘stuff happens’.

**‘Stuff happens’ (a lot)**

We are all now postmodern savvy enough to know that what matters is not just what is said but how it is said, what matters is not just what is said but what is done, and not just what is done but how it is done. This sheds light also on the new US wars.

An obvious interpretation of the failure of the Iraq war is that the objective of bringing democracy was unreal and its implementation inept. From the start the implementation wasn’t geared to achieving the objective: the failure to provide postwar security, peacekeeping and policing, dismantling the Iraqi armed forces, compulsive de-Baathification, etc all had disastrous consequences for establishing order and democracy. These shortcomings are so glaring that the alternative scenario makes sense: geopolitics and oil as the primary agenda of the invasion. In this script Iraq is a large air base with oil underneath. The policy of sending forces to protect the oil ministry where the maps and plans of the oil fields are kept, but not to protect other ministries, hospitals or the national museum, matches these priorities. So do the Abu Ghraib, Nama air base and Guantánamo prison regimes, using Special Forces and private security firms as mainstays of the occupation force and a ‘free press’ disseminating US propaganda.

The Iraq war drives home the fact that over time Americans have become increasingly capable of protecting their own soldiers but not Iraqi forces and civilians. The rules of engagement for US forces show little regard for Iraqi lives. In Haditha in November 2005 US marines, after losing one of their men to a roadside bomb, burst into houses in the neighbourhood and indiscriminately killed 25 civilians including women and children. The deaths were first attributed to insurgents and the truth came out only much later thanks to a *Time* correspondent who interviewed local witnesses. Raids in Iraq and Afghanistan have involved numerous episodes where US forces claimed to target and hit terrorists while locals mourn the death of relatives gathered in family celebrations. The obliteration of Fallujah was prompted by retaliation for the death of two private Blackwater paramilitaries.

The almost total US silence on Iraqi casualties, not reported, not counted, rarely mentioned, in contrast to daily reported and mourned ‘Fallen Heroes’ on the American side, gives this period a stark emotional undertone. While the Abu Ghraib episode and the Guantánamo Bay regime continue to have a deep emotional impact world-wide, the attorney who authorised these war crimes was promoted to the position of US Attorney General.

A striking and tragic feature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the extraordinarily high numbers of civilian casualties. In Iraq the casualties of 12 years of sanctions and the war may add up to a quarter of a million civilians. To this can be added the ruthless US detention regimes of Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay and Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. Should we view this as ‘just so’ circumstances (‘stuff happens’) or do they betray

fundamental characteristics of the American project? They show features of guerrilla war and urban war in which combatants shelter among civilians. The French war in Algeria displayed similar cruelties (American GIs use *The Battle of Algiers* as a training film). Collective punishment of civilians in retaliation for hostile actions was a feature of the Nazi occupation in Europe and has been part of Israeli operations in Lebanon and Palestine, as in the obliteration of Jenin. British forces in southern Iraq have probably engaged in similar conduct to the Americans, so for all these reasons we shouldn't exaggerate the degree to which this is an American problem. In the American case several features have contributed to this situation: the US attempt to gain power on a distant continent, the tendency to view countries as strategic real estate and the cultural narcissism of the American bubble.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are part of a wider strategic project. This goes back to the Carter doctrine that declared the Persian Gulf to be in the vital US national security interest. It involves long-term US involvement in Iraq (supporting Saddam in the war against Iran), Afghanistan (by one account the USA lured the Soviets into the 'Afghan trap') and Pakistan, the Gulf war, and an abiding strategic interest in the Caspian basin. The US presence in the Central Asian republics is part of this configuration and so is pressure on Iran and Syria. With Afghanistan and Central Asia, Iraq and the Gulf form a strategic triangle. Brzezinski's *The Grand Chess Game* put it in stark language: 'He who controls Eurasia controls the world' (1997: xiv).

However, seeking land power on a distant continent is a chancy project. By definition the supply lines are long. Because of a lack of geographical contiguity and shared history, cultural affinities are slim or non-existent. The USA's main ally in this project, Israel, is itself isolated in the region. Not just the countries under attack but neighbouring states feel threatened and their regional networks and energy supply lines come under pressure, hence creating an incentive to seek alternative security and energy networks. Thus, if the central gambit of US designs to 'prolong the unipolar moment' is gaining control of Eurasia, this is a high-risk project. Besides, US forces have traditionally failed in overseas ground combat. The US military has been successful in airborne operations and interventions, using 'overwhelming force' followed by quick withdrawal, but not in sustained ground operations; the Vietnam War is a case in point (Todd, 2004). The My Lai episode in Vietnam is multiplied by many others in Iraq.

The USA tries to compensate for these weaknesses through an ideological offensive of 'bringing democracy to the Middle East', which in effect seeks to convert lack of cultural affinity into an asset. US Orientalism is an attempt to extend the American bubble over the Middle East like a vast tent. Courtesy of Bernard Lewis, Fouad Ajami and many others, it places Islam on the margins of modernity, devalorises Middle Eastern culture and casts the USA in the role of bringing the region freedom, democracy, modernity and security (Qureshi & Sells, 2003). This approach has several problems: it ignores the interdependence of US influence and authoritarianism in the Middle East (as in Saudi Arabia and Egypt), ignores the area experts who counsel that democracy at this stage will bring Islamists to power and ignores

the clash between ends and means in US policy. Propaganda outfits such as the Rendon Group and the Lincoln Group seek to bridge the gap and influence Middle East opinion from offices in Virginia. Public diplomacy Madison Avenue-style, with Charlotte Beers followed by Karen Hughes as top public diplomat (Steger, 2005), demonstrates a lack of cultural affinity and is counteracted by Al Jazeera and other Arab satellite TV channels. The US approach in the Middle East suffers from the same 'cultural unilateralism' that characterises the American bubble:

it is always an American version of otherness that is encountered in the United States. You will not necessarily learn anything about the culture and history of Vietnam by working alongside a Vietnamese doctor in the teaching hospital at Stanford . . . Foreign films account for less than 1 percent of the American film market, and the figures are similarly low for books and news from abroad. The impressive integrative power of American society seems to generate a kind of obliviousness to the world, a multicultural unilateralism. (Schneider, 2004)

### **Does empire matter?**

Let's draw up a balance sheet on whether empire matters. It does *not* matter in that imbalances in the USA are large and belligerence aggravates them. Economic trends include the structural decline of manufacturing and growing deficits; political ramifications include loss of legitimacy. From a global viewpoint the 21st century faces problems of poverty and ecological challenges, in relation to which empire is counterproductive.

Yet empire does matter if security ranks above other concerns and if military power is viewed as a productive change agent. It does matter in that US hegemonic expansion stimulates regrouping on the part of social forces and countries that increasingly work *around* the USA, so in effect empire accelerates global realignments. Besides, the bloodletting in Iraq and Afghanistan, lasting stalemate in the Middle East and growing US authoritarianism lend a dark and tragic edge to contemporary globalisation.

Let us review the main domestic consequences of the American rendezvous with power in brief outline. These include the opportunity costs of empire, ie what the US government could have done *instead* of focusing on grand strategy and unipolarity. Economic consequences include the overall neglect of economic policy and the structural loss of US manufacturing capacity, as argued by Prestowitz (2005) and others. Together with the neglect of education this results in a loss of US competitiveness and loss of jobs. That the largest US company is a retail company that sells Chinese goods and runs on Indian software is a telling sign. Not all of this can be attributed to investment in empire: the absence of industrial policy is an expression of US free enterprise. At any rate, it leads to import dependence, an irreversibly growing trade deficit, along with massive current account deficits, pressure on the dollar and its weakening status as world reserve currency.

The armed forces as an avenue of social mobility (the country's main affirmative action programme) and centrepiece of public culture is gradually

transforming US culture into a garrison culture that is out of sync with world trends, politically, economically and culturally. Valuing brawn over brain runs counter to global trends. US domestic trends involve a triple authoritarianism—in corporations as hierarchical institutions (particularly so in times of retrenchment and downsizing), in politics because of post-9/11 securitisation and the general inclination towards presidentialism and mammoth bureaucracies, and as part of militarism. With the growing influence of militarism in American culture grows the influence of military authoritarianism, the ‘Hua culture’ (Baker, 2003; O’Brien, 2004). The American rendezvous with power comes with institutional ineptitude, witness the Hurricane Katrina episode and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Foreign ramifications include the following. The US preoccupation with strategic primacy leaves the terrain to industrial newcomers and thus leaves economic space for industrial development in the semi-periphery, as was the case during the interwar years in the first half of the 20th century when the great powers were distracted by rivalry and war. For some time growth rates in the global South have been significantly higher than in the North. With this comes what UNCTAD calls ‘a new geography of trade’ (Whelan, 2004) and new patterns of South–South relations around trade, energy and security. Since most goods sold in the USA are made in Asia or China, what remains of the material side of the American Dream? Why not (for other countries) obtain goods from Asian producers directly?

The erosion of US legitimacy and the perception that US policies are self-centred leads countries to pursue alternative security arrangements. Thus South Korea quietly resumes its sunshine policy towards North Korea. The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation is active in Central Asia.

The failure of the (post-)Washington Consensus in the 1997 Asian crisis, IMF mismanagement of the Asian and Argentine crises, and the structural weaknesses of the US economy are leading countries to explore alternatives such as the Southern consensus, the Beijing consensus, the Latin American alternative, co-operation with Venezuela, etc. China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa are emerging as alternative hubs for new combinations in trade, energy and security.

In social science prediction is not a good career move. The moving parts are too many and anticipations lead to adjustments of social behaviour. Judgements of trends and potentials, many of which are imponderable, in effect appeal to intellectual and ideological *parti pris*. Nevertheless, Paul Kennedy notes, ‘we can no more stop the rise of Asia than we can stop the winter snows and the summer heat’ (2001: 78). Variables in the rise of Asia are technologies and levels of development, demographics and the composition of the population, and levels of education, geography and culture. These are generally not variables that are amenable to geopolitical intervention.

States reposition at a minimum to avoid being drawn into the vortex of instability that the USA is creating. This is gradually producing what is becoming ‘the dispensable nation’. According to Michael Lind (2005), ‘A new world order is indeed emerging—but its architecture is being drafted in

Asia and Europe, at meetings to which Americans have not been invited... Today the evidence of foreign co-operation to reduce American primacy is everywhere—from the increasing importance of regional trade blocs that exclude the United States to international space projects and military exercises in which the United States is conspicuous by its absence’.

There are broadly three types of realignment: retrenchment, and reformist and revolutionary realignments. Retrenchment describes the kind of repositioning that protects national or corporate interests, such as central banks and investors reducing their dollar holdings. Reformist repositioning seeks to effect changes that contain future risk and enhance future opportunities, which is happening in relation to finance, energy, trade and security. Countries seek alternative energy supplies or routes, as in China’s deals with Venezuela, Canada, Iran, the Persian Gulf and Russia. A signal of global change was the walkout from the WTO talks in Cancún in late 2004 by the G22 led by Brazil, South Africa, India and China. This was followed by the failure of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) talks in Miami. In trade alternative outlets in regional, domestic and non-traditional markets are taking shape, as in ASEAN+3, EU enlargement and new trade links such as between Brazil and China. The third type of realignment is revolutionary in seeking the overthrow of neoliberal capitalism and US hegemony. At present this position is advocated only by Venezuela and, among non-state actors, many in the global justice movement. The position of groups such as Al-Qaeda is reformist and defensive of positions in the Middle East and Islamic world rather than revolutionary.

The overall picture is mixed in that some countries have an interest in continuing US hegemony of a kind. Asian exporters continue to depend on the US market and continue their vendor financing and others continue to view the US specialisation in armed force as a saving on their defence budgets.

In seeking to control globalisation the USA has not factored in the opportunity costs of unipolarity. According to Krauthammer the USA ‘has been designated custodian of the international system’ by virtue of its enormous margin of military superiority.

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