

# DO WE STILL WANT AN AMERICAN HEGEMONY?

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## Abstract

*We are not just in an economic crisis. We are witnessing a global identity crisis that challenges the very nature of the international system. And the current system seems to be made after the image and likeness of the United States of America: The Global Hegemony.*

*This paper aims to analyze the current international system in terms of challenging the U.S. hegemony; the conclusion being favorable to the status-quo.*

*In the first part of this paper, I will make an analysis of the last 20 years of American hegemony. My investigation is based on the concepts of the realistic and liberal theories. Then, based on the imperial overexpansion theory and on the critical theory, I will review the key moments of the American hegemony challenge. The analysis will emphasize the military conflicts in which U.S. were involved since the end of the Cold War and their un-civilizing influence on the international relations.*

*In the last part I will try to evoke the risks of overturning the existing world order, making a parallel with the period before the Second World War. Thus, because of the weakening of the U.S. and the challenges they face, the present economic crisis could find justification for the totalitarian regimes and for the nationalist effervescence which marked the period of the Great Depression of 1932 and the Second World War.*

*In conclusion, I will try to argue a favorable response for the title of this paper.*

## Introduction

The first evidence that the U.S. has become a regional hegemony was winning the Spanish – American War in 1898, gaining control over Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico Islands and Guam. The U.S. already had the strongest economy in the world and obtained clear hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Since the nineteenth century, the U.S. has had the belief that it has a divine destiny to bring moral dignity, equality and freedom to the world. After the Second World War, with victory against Germany and Japan, and amid the breakdown of Great Britain and Russia, the U.S. is in the position for claiming global hegemony. In the past 100 years the U.S. has consistently had the highest GDP and is undoubtedly the greatest military power on land, sea and air. It also became a cultural and technological leader. It concluded the most bilateral and international treaties and is the main initiator of political and economic international organization – with the greatest financial contribution. It is a proponent of democracy, political freedom and constitutional rights guaranteed.

### End of the Cold War

After 1990, people lived a moment of definite American hegemony. So definite, that some voices were quick to announce the „end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992). Liberalism rant by Fukuyama’s voice the triumph of „ideal state”. The collapse of the Soviet Union has shown that liberal democracy, whose flag is USA, has no serious ideological competitor (Scott Burchill, 2008, page 72). And above all, this was a peaceful transition, as liberal doctrines have always preached that it should be. And victory was not one that can be demonstrated in realist terms of power. The military forces of the two superpowers, did not come to confrontation.

It thus fulfilling the wishes of interwar idealists, who have put their peace hopes in the League of Nations. And which after the painful experience of the First World War, with the help of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, founded the first formal structure of a community of nations. An

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organization to manage relations between states and respond to the need for harmonization of the interests, like the world seen by the liberal internationalists.

Unlike that time, when the U.S. senate had chosen not to ratify the League of Nations Convention, the end of the Cold War is a peak moment of U.S. liberal foreign policy. The vast majority of political and economic global organization operated under American protection. The headquarters of the United Nations is in New York and the main contributor to the organization's budget is US. At U.S. initiative was elaborated in the Geneva Conference in October 1949, attended by 23 countries, a multilateral trade agreement known as GATT (General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade), which in 1995 became the WTO (World Trade Organization). Because of the GATT negotiations, tariffs and other trade barriers were reduced, which contributed to acceleration of international trade and the adoption for the first time, of the government's economic growth strategy under an open market.

U.S. victory in the Cold War, is a liberal victory, in which the free trade economy has proven it promotes best „welfare for all through a more efficient allocation of scarce resources in society” (Scott Burchill, 2008, pag71). Soviet Union has failed to resist the liberal internationalist pressure and accepted democracy in its country and sphere of influence.

But here comes Josh Mearsheimer, who tell us that the end of the Cold War is the best proof of permanent uncertainty that surrounds U.S. and the extra need for security to ensure survival. It confirms the anarchy of the international environment in which all states rationally pursue their own interests. And the U.S. has followed the percepts of offensive realism. You never know how much power is needed, so the best way to ensure your survival is to try to achieve hegemony, what the U.S. did, and eliminate any possibility of another power to challenge you, which happened again at the end of the Cold War by unraveling USSR.

#### **Iraq War 1990-1991**

And the right time to confirm hegemony had come for US, also military. Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. John Mearsheimer had published in New York Times a controversial article that claims a broad and rapid response of the U.S. military, leading to a decisive victory and all this with no more than 1.000 casualties among U.S. soldiers. Those predictions were contradicted by the vast majority of analysts which forecast a minimum four months war, with thousands of victims.

Mearsheimer's arguments were all rational, bound to the reality on the ground. Iraqi Army was poorly trained and equipped, unprepared to face U.S. military, both tactical and technological. And all predictions have been confirmed during the war.

And U.S. prove that it would not tolerate open defiance of its demands, threats to its interests in political stability and the continuous delivery of oil from the Gulf, or broader attempts to overturn the 'international order.' As the dominant power in the international system, the U.S. would act to protect the stability of the system, and also to ensure perpetuation of its own pre-eminence. The Gulf War prove both America's dominance of the international system and its resulting relative freedom in enforcing its interests, consistent with the tenets of Realist IR theory.

Neither have the liberals hesitated to believe the war in Iraq was the first military intervention in history in accordance with liberal theories and a demonstration of their validity. The invasion of Kuwait was immediately followed by a rapid UN reaction, which tried through diplomatic means to push for restoring the rule of international law. United States had not acted unilaterally, when it was clear that an intervention would be based on American forces and technology. U.S. managed to create a coalition of states that have acted after eliminating all other possibilities under a clear UN mandate, while respecting international law in the field and exceeding the Kuwait boundaries, after Iraqi troops defeat. 28 states, including powerful muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, joined in a coalition with a legal mandate for intervention, was the U.S. argument that they were a liberal hegemon which takes into account the importance of multilateralism and international institutions.

US President, George H.W. Bush, on January 16, 1991, two hours after the rescue of Kuwait, speaking in the language of liberalism and emphasizing a new world characterized by the principles of international law, the UN, and peacekeeping: "This is an historic moment... We have before U.S. the opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order, a world where the rule of law, not the law of the jungle, governs the conduct of nations".

Although realists claim that military force is the ultimate form of power, liberals find this claim problematic. They argue instead that, the use of force is always influenced by other political factors, and moreover, must always be employed in tandem with other forms such as diplomacy, economic influence, and media influence. For liberals, pure force is a less efficient means of achieving one's will than persuasion and politics.

Prior to, during, and since the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Kurds and Shiites of Iraq have suffered huge repression from the Iraqi regime. Immediately after Operation Desert Storm, UN Resolution 688 established "no fly zones" for Iraqi forces along with "safe havens" to protect the Kurds. Viewed through a liberal way, the establishment of these safe havens may constitute a case of humanitarian intervention.

### NATO

North Atlantic Treaty Organization as a political-military alliance was created by the U.S. with a clear intention to counterbalance Soviet power on the European continent. After the collapse of the Soviet Union there voices that questioned the need to maintain this military alliance.

But the end of the Cold War gave new opportunities to both NATO and the European Union to spread East, and bring the economic, political and security advantage to a wider area. NATO took in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999, and another 7 new members in 2004. This is a great step forward for peace and security in liberal terms.

But both Kenneth Waltz and also John Mearsheimer, have not shared the liberal post-Cold War optimism, arguing that the collapse of bipolarity in the early 1990s was a cause for real concern. Both deplore the equilibrium of nuclear forces which maintained the balance of power in the world for more than four decades, considering unipolarity unstable and prone to lead to a major war. This is because even the U.S. does not have enough power to truly be a hegemon, not have sufficient resources to impose worldwide, as to enjoy, security. Furthermore Stopping Power Of Watter (SPOW), will prevent any power to become a truly global hegemon.

This explains the attitude of maintaining and increasing U.S. military and financial support of NATO, and even its extension to the Soviet bloc countries. On the long-term, maintaining the alliance had the desired effect in terms of American security and its ability to defend and enforce the offensive policy. The alliance played a key role in controlling the conflicts in the Balkans. Because Europe has shown that it doesn't have the needed cohesion to act decisively.

And the Balkan Wars prove that realists are right again. The war in Bosnia and Hertegovina was unable to be stopped, despite intervention of UN peacekeeping forces UNPROFOR and Russian mediation attempts. Only decisive U.S. intervention forced the warring parties to sit at the negotiating table and sign the Dayton Peace Agreement in November 1995. U.S. ultimatum and NATO presence in the area were apparently stronger than Security Council indecision and powerless peacekeeping forces deployed by the UN.

Also, by maintaining NATO, the U.S. could invoke, for the first time in the alliances history, the article which requires that any attack on one member state to be considered as an attack against the entire alliance. And that happened in September 13, 2001, two days after the terrorist attacks.

Realistic conclusion of this post-Cold War era, would be that balance is maintained not by the signed treaties, but by threat of a hegemon, in a unipolar system in which power belong to the United States of America.

**Challenging U.S. hegemony**

All accusations against the United States, are reduced to one, they were wrapped in liberal doctrine while they have always had a realistic attitude. And this, can be best observed by looking at modern forms of humanitarian intervention. The United Nations recognizes the sovereign right of all independent states, but also intervention right in certain cases when there is an acute humanitarian crisis. It is particularly difficult to reconcile both international standards.

**War in Kosovo**

In 1999 we have the first seriously challenged humanitarian intervention in the world, a key moment of the charges of U.S. aggression and imperialism. Charges were aroused precisely by the humanitarian justification of the NATO bombing campaign. Which has never been agreed by the UN Security Council. Because the permanent members who had relations with Yugoslavia, especially China and Russia, opposed any resolution authorizing the military intervention. And it could not be argued as intervention coming from a liberal hegemon.

NATO claim security interests of alliance members to justify the intervention, and crossed over the Security Council, citing an international humanitarian emergency, but the realistic American attitude was visible. Thus wrote the history of the first military NATO intervention. The War in Kosovo, was a campaign of 11 weeks, longer than hoped and with significant casualties and material costs. It was the milestone of challenging American interventionism in the modern era, and the first sign that the U.S. will fall into the sin of all great powers, imperialistic over extension.

**War against terrorism**

The liberals were wrong once again proclaiming that political and economic development ends with liberal democracy and its victory is complete with the end of the Cold War. The challenges come not only from communism. Fukuyama did not take into account national and cultural differences. How, otherwise, could the realists, who saw states with „religions, ideologies and different economic systems; as similar in their actions relating to national power”, not have been taken into account either (Morgenthau H.J. 2007, p46). They reduced everything to the interests of actors and to objective rules of the international anarchical system.

Because of September 11 and the War Against Terrorism, a recent wave of anti-western islamic terrorism emerged as a significant obstacle on the path of globalization, which put the U.S. in a series of intellectual and political dilemmas for which they were not prepared.

The Bush Doctrine has changed American foreign policy from containment of the Soviet Union during 1947-1990 to the preemption policy (Iraq War), and the prevention policy (Afghanistan War): „promise of massive retaliation against nations means nothing for terrorist networks ... containment is not possible when crazy dictators, possess weapon of mass destruction ... we can not trust the word of tyrants who solemnly sign nonproliferation treaties and then systematically violate them” (Bush G.W., 2002)

But the Bush doctrine has led to a more subtle and dangerous anti-Americanism. The view that the U.S. is an aggressive power which mix in the affairs of other states, has been promoted. „Targeting terror cells proved to be more difficult than traditional containment and deterrence of the states.” (Joshua S. Goldstein, 2009, p.144).

Offensive realists urge was: reorientation to the old politics of power which still operates in this world. „Power is the international system currency, and the United States should use it as it believes” (Mearsheimer J, The New York Times , 2002). And this advice was followed in the first term of U.S. President George Bush.

Liberal advice, aimed at reorientation of policy towards international cooperation. It acknowledges the superior power of America but it showed the risk of turning the U.S. into an unpopular and alone power. And in the second term in the White House, Bush nuanced U.S. position in this direction, as a tacit acknowledgment of failure.

For adherents of critical theory, the events that followed the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, including this „unfinished war”, were liable to bring this concept to the attention of those concerned to understand the central features of contemporary society. Critical theorists have sustained the idea that action taken by Washington and London against terrorism will induce rather ”de-civilizing forces in international relations” (Richard Devetak, 2008, p.155). And this because the most important aspect was overlooked: analysis of fundamental social structures which result in such abuses. Knowledge is always conditioned by material and historical context. Critical theorists recognize the political nature of the claims about knowledge, and more, states that any theory always serves someone and a specific purpose (Richard Devetak, 2008, p.159). Thus classical theories of international relations are not just about politics, but they themselves have a political character.

Perhaps the best description of this reality is made by Peter Mansoor, U.S. Army colonel and brigade commander in the Iraqi War. „When U.S. forces invaded Iraq in 2003, soldiers were not interested in the cultural impact operations. American leaders believed that an assault would be followed quickly by a stabilization only slightly more difficult than in Kosovo. I quickly discovered not only that this assumption was incorrect but also that sectarian and ethnic identities, the role of tribes in Iraqi society, and the U.S. Army's own internal culture would weigh heavily on the course of the conflict, influence our approach to waging the war, and impact our interactions with our coalition allies” ( Foreign Affairs – January 2011). And all this are not the words of a critical theorist but from a U.S. Military employee. We can see in a few phrases, a shift of thinking from a realism to critical, in terms of concepts of international relations theories.

Looking back on a decade of war between America and Al Qaeda, literally the longest U.S. war in history (Daniel Byman, 2011), conducted in recent years in the context of a major economic crisis, we can not avoid thinking of what the historian Paul Kennedy has said since the 80s. Imperial over expansion is the main cause of all empires decline, which sooner or later will also hit America.

Iraq not only means that the U.S. will need at least a generation to recover from this war, but first of all, that the U.S. does not have enough military and political means to continue this adventure; Afghanistan also. Even if by such action of force, the U.S. is trying to preserve its hegemony, the decline is visible in the growth of reserved or even hostile attitude towards the U.S. and in record budget deficits. Amid risky monetary and fiscal policies and a high government spending, U.S. starts the global economic crisis, stressing hegemonic decline. The latter have benefited countries such as China, which is the best example of a state taking advantage of U.S. decline, in a zero sum game.

### **The risks of overthrowing the current world order**

The current world order means U.S. hegemony. And this translates in to the present also by a set of standardized and subtle practices identified with a particular state. U.S. hegemony means projection and movement of an exemplary pattern, which works as an ideal regulator (Richard Devetak, 2008, p.197). But now a growing number of conservative political leaders from Asia, have argued that there is an “Asian model of political organization and social education, which includes the principles of harmony, hierarchy and consensus (Scott Burchill, 2008, p.85). But all these regimes do not enjoy democratic legitimacy.

Islamic terrorism is not just a concern for internal security of the U.S. It looks back upon an ideology and an islamic culture that makes states immune to ideas of liberal democracy. However incoherent in terms of politics, islamic terrorism is deeply anti-secular and a critic of liberal doctrine.

Amid increasing islamic terrorism, even the strongest democrats allowed the state to accumulate more power. State sovereignty, which the liberals have thought was eroded by globalization, has returned to the foreground with the revival of national security. This has taken various forms, ranging from restrictions of civil liberties, to increase in the power of intelligence services and surveillance of the population. Realistic rational precepts have prevailed over liberal partisans.

Wikileaks disclosures gave a blow to U.S. diplomacy and American prestige. They also revealed corruption and organized crime in Tunisia, where this information has led to outbreak of the rebellion, which increased appreciably global threats. As if it is not enough, like the revolutions that broke out in parallel in the former communist countries in the 90s, Egypt was seized by revolutionary fever. Egypt was an authoritarian state, ruled for nearly 30 years by Hosni Mubarak, a recognized protégé of the U.S. Yemen is also preparing to street moves and no one can give a prognosis on the evolution of the Middle East. There is no certainty that the current uprising against authoritarian and corrupt regimes will not lead to even more dangerous dictatorship, at Islamic fundamentalism and complete removal from liberal democratic values. Or even worse, given the existing tensions related to Iran and North Korea, will not degenerate into an international conflict.

### **1918-1939 vs. 1991-Today**

By its consequences, the First World War, profoundly affected political, social and cultural life of the globe. The Ottoman Empire collapsed completely and was divided between the victorious powers of the Allies, after signing the Treaty of Sevres on August, 1920. Collapse led to the modern Middle East. New states have emerged on the political map of the world, old ones have disappeared or have changed the boundaries. International organizations were established, new political and economic ideas have earned a place in the world. Liberalism has proclaimed a new era of cooperation under the banner of the League of Nations, which will bring world peace after a devastating First World War.

Here is that even after the Cold War, liberals have proclaimed the decisive victory of peace and completeness of the “final form of human government” (Fukuyama, 1992). New states claimed independence, those detached from the former USSR and those formed by dividing the countries in the sphere of the red influence. International organization has soared, with the newly proclaimed European Union in front – the Maastricht Treaty in 1991.

Realists, however, demonstrated after the Second World War, that utopian interwar idealism was wrong, and this huge mistake has cost humanity tremendously. Today realists, are also afraid of a tough transition and a violent rearrangement of the geopolitical world map.

Upon hearing the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, which left Germany intact after the WWI, there were voices that warn: “this is not peace, it’s an armistice for 20 years” (Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch). Also the collapse of the communist USSR, has not led to a Russian democracy like the western countries hoped. It has not led to a calming of latent conflict. Furthermore, with the advent to power of Vladimir Putin and outbreak of the Georgian War, we have even more reasons for threats in this area.

The beginning of the Great Depression is usually associated with the collapse of the stock market on the so-called Black Tuesday October 29, 1929. The current global economic crisis took as a starting point the New York stock market crash in October 2008. Both were preceded by years of prosperity for Americans. If after the First World War, the U.S. chose isolationism, the end of the Cold War marked the official start of globalization and even Americanization. Both, however, have concluded in a major economic crisis that has spread progressively through the world. World trade levels fell rapidly, just as personal income, business revenue and profit decreased. Unemployment and inflation on the other hand will increase dramatically. Hundreds of banks will declare bankruptcy and will be needed a strong state intervention.

U.S. was the promoter of the “open doors” policy, which changed the whole world trade. But it also made countries more interdependent and vulnerable to crisis. Even these days, The World Economic Forum in Davos is more often dominated by questions, rather than answers. It is recognized that the current model of capital market was the source of excess. All for shareholders welfare, and this principle can not dominate the 21 century. Countries are no longer happy with the American financial system and stock market rules.

The Great Depression ended at different times in world countries. In most countries have been designed rehabilitation programs and most have gone through various political transformations that have pushed to the left or right political extreme. Liberal democracy-based societies have come weakly from the crisis, and the dictators like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini came to lead some of the most powerful states and will prepare the conditions for initiation in 1939 of the Second World War. Even now, economic crisis brought to power more authoritarian governments. If on the background of the Great Depression, nationalism led to the installation of communist and fascist, totalitarian regimes, current threats came especially from islamic countries and China, countries who can not justify in democratic terms their place in the domestic political scene. Alike, Europe now admits that it has failed in its multicultural attempt. The German and British Prime Ministers, as well as the President of France, was surprised the public opinion at the beginning of 2011, with statements that require the introduction of a “muscular liberalism”. Which should have as priority the integration, equality and rule of law. David Cameron said “We encouraged the cultures to live separate lives, away from each other and the rest of society”. And thus explain the terrorist attacks, who have generally been done by its own citizens, but with islamic religion and ethnicity.

This crisis proved to be a system of power redistribution. Amid economic crisis, China has managed to reach the second world economy, displacing Japan. More, keeping this cadence of growth will threaten the U.S. itself. All this power is already beginning to be felt in the international relations. China has in recent years, consistently had the largest delegation participating in any global event: World Economic Forum in Davos, International Climate Conference in Cancun, etc. China helps countries with authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela and Cuba, engages in the exploitation of African resources and buy bonds issued by the European countries which are still in economic crisis. Despite reassuring statements of Chinese leaders, that it’s just a peaceful developing country, its actions often lead us to think to a dangerous predator. China has managed to get into the spotlight because of authoritarian domestic policies combined with the unprecedented long term economic growth. In recent years, China has also tried to become a major military power. It is the only country outside the U.S., who owns an “invisible” plane, and is the country with the second largest military budget (87 billion USD in 2010), tailing the U.S.

On the other hand, Russia claim its place on the international stage, place lost in 1990, under a power that it’s not afraid to show in the most realistic way: the war in Georgia, maintaining armed forces in Transnistria, blackmail gas supplies, missile installation threats in the islands under dispute with Japan etc.

**League of Nations** – the organization designed to introduce the principle of collective security after the First World War, had to face very similar crisis to those of today’s U.N. The League was undermined by the bellicosity of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Mussolini’s Italy. A series of international crises strained the League to its limits, the earliest being the invasion of Manchuria by Japan and the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-36 in which Italy invaded Abyssinia, one of the only free African nations at that time. The Abyssinian war showed Hitler how weak the League was and encouraged his participation in the Spanish Civil War. He also remilitarized the Rhineland in flagrant disregard of the Treaty of Versailles. This was the first in a series of provocative acts culminating in the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the beginning of the Second World War.

In 2003, the war against Iraq has divided the world into two camps, and above all it was a time when U.S. decided to go to war without the approval of the Security Council. Dramatically weakening U.N. authority and coherence of the European Union. Russia attacked Georgia in 2008, and international organization proves to be powerless despite global protests.

Nevertheless, the League did witness one effort to go beyond mere cooperation between governments. This was the proposal for European unity, made by the French statesman Aristide Briand. In 1925 he had declared his ambition to establish “a United States of Europe,” and on Sept.

9, 1929, he made a speech to the then 27 European members of the League in which he proposed a federal union. The general response was at best skeptical and at worst politely hostile.

In 2005, the European Union failed to adopt a draft constitution that would have been a unique occasion to reach the European political purpose. Even after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, European states are reluctant. Defence and also foreign policy are still prerogative of national governments. Even newly created External Action Service led by the High Representative Catherine Ashton, who really wanted to be a European Foreign Minister, a unique voice for Europe, proves to be a failure in these days.

If we draw a parallel between the interwar period and today, we discover those similarities that should give us a pause for thought in view of avoiding a global confrontation.

## Conclusions

We are not just in an economic crisis. We are witnessing a global identity crisis that challenges the very nature of the international system. And the current system seems to be made after the image and likeness of the United States of America, the Global Hegemon. Throughout history no passing power from one cycle to another was easy nor peaceful. Now more than ever, risks are measured in terms of technological progress. The dangers are not the same, because the destructive forces of modern weapons are at a lethal level, hard to imagine.

Given the real power: economic, technological, military and ideological; the U.S. hegemony was rather peaceful and providing hope for human evolution. Despite the political mistake that have eroded confidence in the American Dream, U.S. hegemony is desirable if we consider the alternative.

Through the followed policy as a global power, the U.S. is responsible for peace, stability and prosperity of humanity after the Second World War, especially for countries who have embraced democracy and the American way.

In these days we are witnessing a crucial moment in rewriting the world order agenda: The visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao in America. The discourse is one that gives hope for the prospects of global stability. Beyond liberal message, this speech is a symbol of possible reconciliation U.S. – China, and entry into a new phase of international cooperation. Notify the major powers were seated at the negotiating table, a new club of power which would ensure global stability and the transition to a postindustrial civilization.

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