

# USA: Status Quo or Revisionist Power?

Written by anon

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ANON, OCT 7 2010

In the modern international order, it goes without saying that, although the United States holds a stronghold emplacement as the last remaining superpower, it focuses its foreign policy more on the preservation of the world order, as opposed to changing it. This paper will aim to explain that the United States has continuously curved its foreign policy to meet the expectations of how a developed superpower should act. Foremost, the definition of 'status quo,' in relation to the international system, must be explicated and examined through examples in order to show how international relations is actually a system based on the acceptance of norms.[1] It will then be shown that the United States' commitment to world-wide balance of power has helped implement international norms such as sovereignty and worldwide cooperation. Hence it will be explained that even though the United States has been accused of changing the world order, the country's declining influence and mandatory devotion to the status quo will prove that the country cannot simply afford to take on a revisionist policy in modern day. In essence, it will be shown the communally accepted idea of the United States as a country going against international society to progressively lead the world is utterly erroneous.

Contrary to the realist perspective that the international community is in a state of complete anarchy, there is a definite existence of cooperation when it comes to preserving the accepted order, or the 'status quo.' [2] According to political scientist Randall Schweller, 'Status-quo states are content to preserve the essential characteristics of the existing international order and the general distribution of power.' [3] Similar to a people accepting a way of life, these status quo states obviously must accept and emplace shared norms in order to ensure the survival of the system.

For example, a country's involvement in key global institutions is essentially accepting the status quo since nearly all countries find working collectively the best way to solve disputes in the international order. China's pragmatic participation within the World Trade Organization (WTO), its multilateral efforts in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and its decreasingly passive behavior in the United Nations are all excellent examples of a country's desire to maintain the international order of cooperation.[4] Another example is Iran's respect for the globally accepted Westphalian system when it was the first neighboring country to denounce Iraq's invasion into the small state of Kuwait.[5] Essentially, status quo countries will promote and ensure the current state of the international system through amending their foreign policies.

As the top superpower in the world, the United States of America would obviously be the idealistic model for a status quo state since it bases its foreign policy off of liberal ideals. With its foreign policy dedicated to maintaining the current order and ensuring its place at the top of the international system, the United States has been constantly active in ensuring the existence of modern internationally accepted norms. One of the major policies that the world has witnessed the United States implement has been its active preservation of the international balance of power. For example, Saddam Hussein's ordered invasion of Kuwait had upset the balance of power in the Middle East. It essentially threatened the United States' list of allies, its supply of oil, and gave the superpower a potential military threat that would upset the balance of power in the Middle East; thus, risking the United States' place in the international community if allies and resources were both lost. [6]

The United States' decision (under the presidency of George H.W. Bush) to intervene in Iraq was not considered by the international community to go against the international status quo. Since Iraq violated the Westphalia Treaty and had obviously infringed on Kuwait's sovereignty, the United States had gained convenient support from 'status quo

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states' to go against the norm of interfering in internal affairs.[7] After the Gulf War had been a successful victory made by the US and its allies, the United States proved its dedication to the international balance of power by not going further and swiftly pulling out of Iraq; though in the end, leaving Saddam Hussein as a political prisoner within his own borders due to the numerous sanctions put on the country.[8] Obviously, the Gulf War is a perfect example of the United States protecting the balance of power through not only ensuring the status quo be maintained in Middle East but also protecting its placement in the global order as well. Thus as the savior of the Gulf War, the United States reserved its seat as the 'world policeman' and furthered its status quo as a developed nation dedicated to preserving post-Cold War global-détente.

Furthermore, the United States' commitment to ensuring peaceful international cooperation is, again, another example of the states' commitment to a communal norm widely held throughout both the developed and undeveloped worlds. Its active involvement in organizations such as the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Association, World Trade Organization, Human Rights Commission, World Health Organization, Social Cultural Humanitarian Commission, North American Free Trade Association, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization has made the United States one of the most proactive and involved states in the world. The state itself promotes *cooperative internationalism* in its foreign policy which essentially supports active involvement in world affairs and open collaboration with those who wish to help solve global and national problems.[9]

In addition, as a result of the lack of legitimacy and influence that the United Nations has exerted over the years, the United States has been extremely hands-on in reassuring that the world's largest international institution is kept alive. The United Nations and other intergovernmental institutions do not possess the power to always successfully lead the community of member-states. 'Whatever the fluctuation in relative power of the United States...bears substantial responsibility to lead.'[10] For example, the United States' financial contribution that makes of nearly 25% of the United Nations' treasury as well as its strategic role as a permanent veto power in the Security Council both shows the United States' capability to promote the status quo. Nonetheless, the United States has at times acted as a role model for international cooperation. For example, the United States was praised by previous Secretary General Kofi Annan for a collaborated disarmament of thousands of nuclear warheads with Russia in order to make headway into permanently ridding the world of nuclear proliferation.[11]

Revisionism, on the other hand, is rather a state's dissatisfaction with the international order. Instead of acting to preserve the international order, a revisionist or 'revolutionary' state has a strong will to change the norms accepted by status quo nations. 'Revisionist states seek to undermine the established order for the purpose of increasing their power and prestige in the system.'[12] Contrary to thought, political scientist Randwall Schweller describes that just because a state appears to be discontented does not mean that it is a valid conclusion to say they are revisionist. Rather, revisionists will use military force to change, not preserve, the international status quo and extend their values.

Many revisionist/revolutionary powers can be observed to be located in the third world in which hatred and irrationality are able to sway a government's foreign policy. Take Iran for example. Its hatred for the Israeli nation and its animosity for those states that support the newly formed state have led Iran to acquire more military power in order to change the structure of the international community. On the other hand, there are some revisionist states that look to nuclear proliferation to see that the international status quo is altered.[13] The conflict between Pakistan and India is a perfect example when revisionist states look out for the security of their state alone. Neither country had signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty proposed by the United States which had been signed by 173 members of the international community. As a result both countries have acquired large arsenals of nuclear warheads and inter-continental ballistic missiles; thus proposing a serious threat to the security of the world and essentially the status quo.[14]

Many have accused the United States of acting as a revolutionary power due to the lack of constraints put on them by the world order and the fact that the country does not follow the same rules as other states. "The United States has lost a great deal of legitimacy in the world through its actions, particularly recently [in Iraq], and that this loss of legitimacy is closely tied to a significant loss of influence in the world." [15] For example, the United States' invasion of the countries of Afghanistan and Iraq is seen as American imperialism at its best. Implementing democracy and

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American values on the two countries has been criticized as essentially “re-colonizing” the Middle East and going against the ‘Westphalian’ values that many status quo states cherish and honor. Unfortunately, this is one case in which the United States overstepped its bounds and infringed on the rights of other countries through the means of both hard and soft power.

On the contrary, although the United States’ actions went unchecked and at times against the voice of the international community, the superpower has never had a record of invading or violating the rights of a state in order to solely spread their own values. In the case of Afghanistan, the threat of the Taliban to the status quo gave the United States a just, well backed and respected cause to invade. The Taliban’s tyranny over its own people, its desire to implement its own morals on other countries, and its connections with the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on the United States allowed the superpower to invade with support by those who wished to preserve the status quo against revolutionary powers.

While in Iraq, the United States blamed Saddam Hussein for causing an imbalance of power in the Middle East through claiming that the country contained weapons of mass destruction. While on the other hand, despite an illegitimate claim, the United States’ presence in Iraq is not completely against the international order. ‘The ex post facto imprimatur of UN approval is invaluable for an effective operation...in the current Iraq war, where the legal basis for US forces in Iraq is a Security Council resolution.’[16] Thus, it has been observed that although the United States may not always have public support, let alone legitimate cause, when acting in the international sphere the United States has shown that its intentions are for the preservation of the international society.

It is the fact that the United States of America holds the same fundamental beliefs with the majority of the world that makes it a status quo power. Without question, the American foreign policy’s attention and respect for sovereignty and global cooperation make it a more approachable superpower to the international community. Although the United States’ irrational, and at times, imperialistic actions are seen to be out of the desire to spread American ideals, the superpower in reality is more concerned about the preservation of the global order. According to political scientist Hans Binnendijk, ‘a foundation of security and stability will be needed in order for progress to be achieved and, conversely, progress will be needed to preserve peace and order.’[17] The fact that the United States is concerned over not only the security and peace of the world but the betterment of mankind is precisely the reason why the United States is allowed to call itself a status quo power.

[1] Nicholas Taylor, “China as Status Quo or Revisionist Power?” in *Security Challenges* (2007), Volume 3: <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol3no1Taylor.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2009) pg 29-31

[2] Nicholas Taylor, “China as Status Quo or Revisionist Power?” in *Security Challenges* (2007), Volume 3: <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol3no1Taylor.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2009) pg 29-31

[3] Nicholas Taylor, “China as Status Quo or Revisionist Power?” in *Security Challenges* (2007), Volume 3: <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol3no1Taylor.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2009) pg 29-30

[4] Nicholas Taylor, “China as Status Quo or Revisionist Power?” in *Security Challenges* (2007), Volume 3: <http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol3no1Taylor.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2009) pg 29-30

[5] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order & Imperial Ambition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), pg 235-237

[6] Eugene R. Wittkopf, Charles W. Kegley Jr., and James M. Scott, *American Foreign Policy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), pg 149-155

[7] Rod Hague and Martin Harrop, *Comparative Government and Politics*, 7th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pg 17

[8] Eugene R. Wittkopf, Charles W. Kegley Jr., and James M. Scott, *American Foreign Policy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003), pg 149-155

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[9] James Traub, *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power* (New York: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2006), 180-181

[10] "After the Unipolar Moment: Should the US be a Status Quo Power or a Revolutionary Power," [www.StanleyFoundation.org](http://www.StanleyFoundation.org), [www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf) (accessed April 17, 2009). Pg 1-5

[11] James Traub, *The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power* (New York: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2006) pg 318

[12] Nicholas Taylor, "China as Status Quo or Revisionist Power?" in *Security Challenges* (2007), Volume 3:<http://www.securitychallenges.org.au/ArticlePDFs/vol3no1Taylor.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2009). 29-32

[13] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Order & Imperial Ambition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), pg 189

[14] Paul R. Viotti, *American Foreign Policy and National Security* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Inc., 2005), pg 126

[15] "After the Unipolar Moment: Should the US be a Status Quo Power or a Revolutionary Power," [www.StanleyFoundation.org](http://www.StanleyFoundation.org), [www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf) (accessed April 17, 2009). Pg 1-5

[16] "After the Unipolar Moment: Should the US be a Status Quo Power or a Revolutionary Power," [www.StanleyFoundation.org](http://www.StanleyFoundation.org), [www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf) (accessed April 17, 2009). Pg 1-5

[17] "After the Unipolar Moment: Should the US be a Status Quo Power or a Revolutionary Power," [www.StanleyFoundation.org](http://www.StanleyFoundation.org), [www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/UnipolarStatusQuoPDB.pdf) (accessed April 17, 2009). Pg 3

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