

The Impact of the “Unipolar Moment” on US Foreign Policies in the Mid-East

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/13/the-impact-of-the-unipolar-moment-on-us-foreign-policies-in-the-mid-east/>

YASEMIN OEZEL, SEP 13 2015

After the end of the Second World War, the previous multi-polar system was substituted with a bipolar one. The United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) dominated the world system for four decades. The Cold War was the rivalry of two opposite great powers with strong economic, military, political and social influence throughout the world (Varisco 2013). This was further strengthened by the realist assumption that in international politics sovereign states balance each other's power (Nye Jr. 1992: p. 84).

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, much debate on future world politics arose. Mearsheimer predicted a multipolar system as it was in the 1930s (Welsh 2013). Fukuyama foresaw a spread of liberal democracies throughout the world and Huntington presented his self-fulfilling prophecy, namely the “clash of civilizations” (Korany in Fawcett 2005: p. 61). He argued that international politics would now be centered by the interplay of West and non-Western civilizations and thus lead to conflict. In contrast to these assumptions and theories, Krauthammer developed a theory which he called the unipolar moment. He argued that the United States emerged as the only great power from the Cold War and were not part of a new unipolar international system (Varisco 2013). Especially when looking at US foreign policy in West Asia and North Africa, it becomes clear that Krauthammer's theory has had a huge impact.

The following paper examines to which extent Krauthammer's theory is applicable in US foreign policies in the region. In analyzing US foreign policies in Iraq with a focus on the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and comparing these to the current Civil War in Syria, it will be illustrated that there has been a shift in America's foreign policy but also that it never was unipolar. Globalization has led to an interconnected international system and although the US dominates world politics, it cannot do so without the consent of other international players. Today, the US has experienced an increasing emergence of its limitations of power throughout the world (Walford 2013). Not only the economic crisis and China's rising economy, but also Russia's rising influence and the military “imperial overstretch” in the Iraq war (Crowley 2013) have challenged the unipolar nature of the United States. This account will be preceded by an explanation of the unipolar moment establishing a theoretical framework. Finally, I will argue that there never has been a ‘unipolar moment’. If anything, the contemporary system, starting from the end of the Cold War, can rather be called an “U.S.-led [...] political order that has no name or historical antecedent.” (Ikenberry 2004: p.154)

Theoretical Framework

The Cold War and Krauthammer's ‘Unipolar Moment’

As mentioned above, the Cold War, which lasted from the end of World War II in 1945 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, dominated world politics (Sayigh & Shlaim 1997: p. 1). Apart from the bipolar international system during the Cold War, two other features are of significance, namely nuclear weapons and ideology. The emergence of nuclear weapons led to an ideological confrontation between the East and the West, between communism and capitalism (ibid). Due to strategic importance and oil resources, West Asia and North Africa were deeply influenced by the rivalries of the two superpowers (ibid: p. 2). Not only military power, nuclear and conventional, but also diplomatic advantage, political influence and economic advantage were strived for by the Soviet Union and the

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United States (Halliday in Sayigh & Shlaim 1997: p. 6) and played out on Middle East soil. Thus, many countries that were able to balance the Cold War superpower rivalry in the Middle East feared the out-coming unipolarity of the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Korany in Fawcett 2005: p. 60). However, in order to grasp the concept of this fear and its consequences one has to look at Krauthammer’s ‘The Unipolar Moment’ to determine the commonly accepted notion of singular US influence and power after the end of the Cold War. Thus, the unipolar moment of Krauthammer was rather an accepted ideology and therefore similar to Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ a self-fulfilling prophecy.

According to Krauthammer, the US had to assimilate to the post-Cold War environment and take up the role that was of common consent throughout the world (Krauthammer 1990/91: p. 23). In 1991, he highlights that the US emerged to be the center of world power as unchallenged superpower (ibid). Nevertheless, he recognizes that there are so-called ‘second-rank powers’, such as Germany, Britain, France and Japan, which might eventually lead to multipolarity in time, but the post-Cold War environment is a unipolar international system which will last for decades (ibid: p. 24). Furthermore, he states that the United Nations is merely a formal institution which is a “guarantor of nothing” and “can hardly be said to exist” which consequently and necessarily puts the US into the role of establishing security across the globe (p. 25). Although Krauthammer accepts that this US hegemony cannot endure indefinitely (Layne 2006: p. 37) and coins the unipolar nature of the US, he further illustrates that it is “more accurate to say the United States and behind it the West” when it comes to active foreign policies, e.g. the reflagging of Kuwaiti vessels in 1987 (Krauthammer 1990/91: p. 24). According to Krauthammer, the Western allies only follow US foreign policies, e.g. Operation Desert Storm, because the US does lead (1990/91: p. 24). He illustrates that US unipolarity is determined by its strong military, economic, diplomatic and political power which is further highlighted across the globe by Iraq’s lack of acceptance of America’s role as it successfully challenged Iraqi regional hegemony (ibid: p. 25).

In short, the unipolar moment is the rise of the US to sole superpower of the world after the end of the Cold War. Economic, military superiority as well as political influence throughout the world was coined to be the unipolar moment of the United States in the world system since there was no other challenging superpower and according to Krauthammer in 1991 no other superpower was to emerge in the near future. It is of significance, however, that Krauthammer highlighted that the US will not be able to retain unipolarity if it will ‘run its economy into the ground’ (p. 26). In explaining that the only challenge to America’s unipolarity is itself: “its low tax ideology of the 1980s, coupled with America’s insatiable desire for yet higher standards of living without paying any of the cost” (Krauthammer 1990/91: p. 27), he does not foresee the upcoming economic crisis and does not take into account the influence of globalization. Even in 2002, after the attacks of 9/11 and the rise of China’s economic power, Krauthammer optimistically labels the United States as unipolar in his revision of his theory (Krauthammer 2002/3: p. 5). However, in this case, he argues by exclusive means, “if today’s American primacy does not constitute unipolarity, then nothing ever will” (ibid: p. 6). In his opinion, the military spending of the US, “which exceeds that of the next *twenty* countries combined” as well as the inferiority of China’s economic strength are the main reasons unipolarity is sustained. Hence, Krauthammer’s view has shifted. Instead of a combination of economic and political superiority supported by the West, solely military power is at the center of his criteria for unipolarity. Nonetheless, his revision cannot be taken into account as military power as such does not constitute credibility. Political and economic power have to be a given for a country to be called a superpower, otherwise there would be no threat to the ‘illusion’ of American unipolarity and no notion of an eventual multipolar system in the contemporary world.

In the following, I will illustrate that the interconnectedness of the contemporary globalized world does not allow and never did allow a unipolar international system to last more than a decade (Haass 2008: p. 48). Although the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is conventionally accepted as an act of America’s unipolarity, it will be illustrated that the invasion was only possible due to the acceptance of Western allies and the participation of countries in West Asia. In contrast to Krauthammer, I will argue that Western allies and allies in the Middle East do not have to follow and can obstruct US foreign policies in today’s globalized system (Haass 2008: p. 51). Whereas there seemed to be a common acceptance of the necessity of regime change in Iraq, the so-called superpower cannot invade contemporary Syria by itself due to the lack of ‘following’ allies and opposing powers such as Russia and Iran.

US Foreign Policies in Iraq: Then and Now

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union and with the experience of America's role after the Second World War in mind, it was commonly acknowledged that the United States was the sole superpower in the world, acting as “global policemen” (Qassem 2013). “It was the leading country of the world, a lonely superpower ‘able to impose its will on another countries’” (Varisco 2013). The attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, however, unveiled the vulnerability of the US superpower. The subsequent action of the United States caused its unipolar moment in decline though it still remains the most powerful country (Crowley 2013). In launching three wars, namely the war in Afghanistan to promote liberal democracy, the ‘war on terrorism’ throughout the globe as well as the invasion and occupation of Iraq to promote regime change and to neutralize weapons of mass destruction (Korany in Fawcett 2005: p. 298), the United States revealed their military, conventional and intelligence, superiority, “no one is stronger than the United States of America” (Qassem 2013). The 2003 war to Iraq waged without the United Nations (UN) Security Council consensus is perceived as the abuse of power by the George W. Bush administration in acting outside the laws of the international community (Varisco 2013) and the outcome of the long and costly war in Iraq (Walford 2013) led to loss of credibility of America's foreign policy (Fawcett 2005: p. 298). Nevertheless, one has to acknowledge that the security threat discourse of the G.W. Bush Administration to justify the invasion in Iraq resulted in support from so-called secondary powers, e.g. Germany and Great Britain, and was tolerated by other powers, e.g. Russia and China. Although the US did betray the UN Security Council, it would have been unable to act without the co-operation with Western allies. Thus, even if the US were to be a unipolar superpower, it cannot act unipolar in a globalized system. The resulting economic crisis, the rise of China's economy also challenged the US superpower (Walford 2013). It therefore can be argued that the transnational terrorism of Al-Qaida has managed to decrease US unipolarity since it led to the self-destruction of the United States by economically ruining the country through military spending and therefore limiting its soft power capabilities. Furthermore, this transnational terrorism can be seen as a backfire of previous US engagements in the region during the Gulf Wars.

In sum, the invasion in Iraq could not have been possible without the support of Western allies. Thus, if the US were the sole superpower in a unipolar world system, George W. Bush would not have been required to include his allies in his speech on the Iraqi invasion:

“The United States, with other countries, will work to advance liberty and peace in that region. [...] Free nations have a duty to defend our people by uniting against the violent. And tonight, as we have done before, America and our allies accept that responsibility” (Bush 2003).

Thus, the unipolar moment of US foreign policy is merely an illusion in the contemporary globalized world. Although the invasion in Iraq is seen as a main example of the unipolarity of the United States and as one of the main ‘impacts’ of the United States in the 21st century, one has to take into account other powerful countries which supported the United States due to the discourse after the 9/11 attacks where President G.W. Bush called for a Global War on Terror in which “you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Rossdale 2009). The United States might have initiated the invasion in Iraq but were not the sole superpower to invade Iraq merely the one held responsible for it.

It has been argued that President Barack Obama has strived to rebuild the trust in the Middle East which was lost during the Bush years (Gerges 2013: p. 300). Thus, it can be stated that America's unipolarity is a matter of democrat or republican presidency. Whereas it is commonly accepted that President G. W. Bush has exploited the unipolar moment in order to expand US influence in West Asia and North Africa, one may be of the opinion that Obama has rather aspired a shift from the unipolarity of the US: “Now more than ever, he said, diplomacy and engagement are critical to rebuilding ‘our alliances, repairing our relationships around the world, and actually making us more safe in the long term’” (ibid: p. 301). The costly ‘war on terror’, the global financial crisis and the US federal debt, might have resulted in President Obama's foreign policy wish of normality rather focusing on domestic policies rather than internal issues of other countries across the globe. Still, this seems to be caused by changes in the international system rather than actively pursued by President Obama. The US has reached the end of its impact in the region by raising suspicion due to the arbitrariness of US intervention (Gerges 2013: p. 312). President Obama has had no choice but to withdraw forces from Iraq due to the public opinion which turned against US military presence (ibid: p. 322). Furthermore, the US has lost Pro-US Arab allies in Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia due to the Arab Uprisings (ibid). These factors as well as the rise of Russia's economic and political power as well as strong ties between Iran and Syria have caused the decrease of US impact in the region, especially when it comes to

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intervening in Syria, which will be further explored in the following paragraph.

Foreign Policies In Syria: Then and Now

During the Cold War, Syria was involved with the Soviet Union. In 1986, Syria was even on the State Department list of countries lending support to international terrorism (Seale in Sayigh & Shlaim 1997: p. 73). Although Syria and US relations emerged after the attacks on 9/11 due to their mutual enemy Al-Qaeda, it did not last long since Syria grew fearful of the US after its invasion in Iraq (Wallsh 2013: p. 113). It has even been suggested by Richard Perle that Syria was next on the ‘hit list’ (ibid). Thus, it is even more significant that the US did not intervene in the Syrian Civil War since this highlights that there is no unipolar international system but a nonpolar international system with numerous meaningful powerful actors.

The Civil War or Crisis in Syria was triggered by uprisings against the regime calling for the resignation of Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 which were met with violence and the refusal of Bashar al-Assad to step down. Moreover, the funding of several different opposition camps by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey which consequently tried to play each other out as well as the support of Assad by Iran and Russia has led to a complex situation. Contrary to any expectation of the US superpower, the US did not intervene in Syria as it did with Iraq or Libya. This suggests that American global leadership has further declined and there is more than one great power present (Murray 2012). Whereas the US was previously unchallenged in influencing United Nations resolutions, Russia as well as China have developed enough power to challenge US foreign policy to take action against the Assad regime by defying America openly in vetoing three times at the Security Council (Qassem 2013). As mentioned above, this reveals that the US is not and never has been unipolar but a superpower interacting with many ‘secondary’ powers.

Conclusion

Although it might be tempting to live in a unipolar system from the US perspective, globalization has led to a nonpolar international system characterized by numerous centers with meaningful power (Haass 2008: p. 44). In the globalized contemporary system of nation-states and in this post-imperial age with an open world market of interwoven economies as well as international intergovernmental institutions, such as the UN or the NATO, one single nation cannot claim global political power (Shaw 2002: p. 331). The U.S. cannot act as unipolar since it relies on the consent and participation of allies if it intends to exercise political power beyond its own borders. Thus its impact into the region is limited to the participation of other countries as well. Even in the case of the intervention of Iraq of 2003, where US supremacy was much more present than today, did the Bush administration rely on the participation of its allies. The notion of the unipolar moment of the US is even more challenged when it comes to the civil war in Syria since sole US impact is non-existent and would be if it were unipolar. The international intergovernmental institutions, such as the UN Security Council, which Krauthammer did not acknowledge in his theory are in the end the limitations to the US superpower. The loss of credibility of US foreign policies after the Iraq intervention, the rise of Russia’s economic and political power as well as China’s rising economy are mere factors which challenge US supremacy and in the case of Syria block military action against the Assad regime.

All in all, Krauthammer’s ‘unipolar moment’ never existed. It was rather a US-led political order in an interconnected globalized world (Ikenberry 2004: p. 154). Therefore, it was not US unipolarity which impacted West Asia and North Africa but an interplay of the US, its allies and – in the contemporary world system – its opponents.

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Date written: February 2014