

Is U.S. Power in Decline?

Written by Thomas M Richter

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THOMAS M RICHTER, APR 27 2009

Sceptics of soft power proclaim that as long as the United States is strong enough, it can do what it wishes and thus “the world’s only superpower does not need permanent allies.”[1] Nevertheless in light of the difficulties in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the decline in the American economy following the fall of the loan market and “fewer genuine friends surrounding it”[2], one has to ask the question of whether or not US power is in decline. “We are now in the throes of yet another incipient discussion concerning America’s long-term standing in the world.”[3]

If this is the case it will have far reaching consequences for American foreign policy and the foreign policies of its key allies as well as for its potential key adversaries, such as China or Russia. In this paper I will argue that US power is indeed in decline and the in the next decade Europe, Russia and China will gain more influence and power over global affairs but the US is and will remain a key power within the world.

To fully answer the question set out above we need to firstly consider what the United States is; an empire, a hegemon or a hyper-power and secondly we need to define what is meant by power. Concerning the first point there is a lot of disagreement over whether or not the United States is an empire. I will argue that the United States is the hegemon within the International System but that it is not an Empire, not formally or informally as set out by Gallagher and Robinson in 1953.[4] While the United States possess clear pre-eminence in military capacity and exercises enormous power in political and economic terms, it does not control key players and regions of the globe by direct or indirect means. It can certainly influence these players and regions but only to a limited degree as can be seen in the run up to the Iraq war, where Europe did not join the US and in the ongoing conflict over Iranian nuclear weapons developments.

With the United States being the current hegemon the definition of power is important. In this paper power will be defined by the ability of influencing domestic and international issues or regions in relation to others by military, political, economic and social means. I adopt this wider view of power as seeing “power only in military terms is a fundamental error”. [5] Thus moving beyond a realist interpretation, where power is reduced only to the notion of military strength/capabilities. As Robert Cooper points out “today, peace and trade provide a better return than war and looting.”[6] Coming back to the question of US power decline we thus consider three main areas: Political/military, economic and general trends, including social factors.

Many neo-conservatives of the Bush administration insisted that the United States could not be challenged militarily and that it would stay the course in Iraq until victory was achieved. Now with a new US administration announcing that it would withdraw US forces from Iraq by August 2010 while at the same time deploying more troops to Afghanistan the limitations of US power become clear. While the withdrawal of US forces was an Obama campaign promise it is also a necessity born out off the need for more troops in Afghanistan as the United States is according to US Gen. David D. McKiernan “not winning the war against the resurgent Taliban”. [7]

There is even talk of military overstretch and the need for the United States to shift troops from Iraq to Afghanistan because it cannot support even more troops being deployed in active war areas. This clearly marks a decline in US power as both wars are taking more resources and time than anticipated. General (ret'd.) Barry McCaffrey even argues that “the [US] military is grossly under-resourced....It’s coming apart.”[8] The potential overstretch of the US military clearly represents a challenge to US power but it is only one of many indicators that US power in general is in

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decline, yet one should still recognise that the United States retains a large lead on other nations in terms of military capabilities.

The second political factor to be considered is the impact of the decline of the international system on the ability of America to project its power. Joseph Nye argues that the United States can achieve its goals better through soft power than the use of force[9], thus making the international post-World War II system vital in US foreign policy. The United States constructed the current international system with the United Nations and the Bretton-Woods Institutions at its centre and the United States in key leadership positions. NATO is a key example as it provided the "assurance of security to the countries of Western Europe, it removed the military from domestic politics and herded them into a multilateral world." [10] This role as the leader within the international system was reinforced during the Cold War and "American power did not destabilize world order, it helped create it." [11]

When the United States marked half of its key NATO allies as "old Europe" and tried to extort cooperation by "threats to act unilaterally" instead of persuasion or concessions [12] the foundations of the international system began to crumble. The question now was, why should we stick to the rules if the United States bends and breaks them whenever it wants to. Clearly some would argue for "what John Ruggie has called American 'exemptionalism'" [13] nevertheless most states would not agree and thus the impact of the United States ignoring the rules of the international system with the invasion of Iraq led to the application of the idea that every country can do so when it deems necessary.

So how does this undermine US power? The main point is that the United States has over the past sixty years exercised its power within the system and now, as Ikenberry points out, this power has "been exposed to the light of day." [14] The United States wants other nations to respect the international rules but seeks an exemption from them at the same time. This leads to countries seeking to counteract US power such as the North Korean nuclear weapons program or Iran's efforts for nuclear weapons.

Furthermore it also undermines its ability to negotiate with allies and non-allies as the other side can no longer be sure that the United States will abide by the agreed rules and thus such a strategy of ignoring the international rules leads to a security dilemma in which no one trusts anyone else.

Nye argues in his article 'The Decline of American Soft Power' that in the past the United States was able to reach its goals through the use of the international system. Therefore, when defining power in terms of the ability of influencing domestic and international issues or regions in relation to others by military, political, economic and social means, the weakening of the international system also leads to a weakening of US power.

The break from international rules also leads to the breakdown of dialogue between partners and adversaries. During the Cold War the United States had constant contact with the Soviet Union but today the notion of talking to countries such as Iran or North Korea are extremely controversial, to say the least. This lack of communication leads to tensions that during the Cold War were mitigated by the constant interaction of Washington and Moscow and while a new Administration under Barack Obama promised to start talking to Iran, it is unlikely to resolve the tensions that have built up over the past three decades.

The final political factor that needs to be considered is the rise of China and the re-emergence of Russia as a new power within the international system. China in light of its rapid economic growth and its military spending growing, with "an average of 9.7 percent yearly" [15] China is clearly seeking a new role within the international system. The same goes for Russia, which is reflected in the confrontation over gas prices earlier this year [16] and the ongoing dispute with the United States about a Missile Defence Shield in Eastern Europe. Both Russia and China are growing influences and while not directly threatening US power it clearly limits the options available to the United States in dealing with countries like Iran, North Korea or even in questions of NATO expansion.

Having considered some political/military factors that directly impact US power within the world we further need to consider the economic and social factors. While the United States is still the world's leading economy, its slowing down with the pace of growth averaged only 1¼ percent in the last three quarters of 2008 according to the IMF [17]

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compared to China's "10½ percent (year over year) in the first half of 2008"[18].

With the financial crisis the US government furthermore has to invest billions of dollars into supporting the economic system leading to a drastic rise in state debt and thus raising questions about future spending plans, as laid out during the Presidential campaign in 2008. The decline in the economy is also reflected in the rise of unemployment in the US having reached a "25-year high"[19] as well as the high costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan putting further financial stain on the US economy and thus representing what Ikenberry called "the 'long tail' of burdens and commitments that come with every major military action."[20]

Thus the difficulties of the US economy, with unemployment predicted to increase to 6.9 percent[21], will have profound effects in the short and long-term for the US's ability to influence the world economy and on the projection of military and political power as the US struggles and other countries, like China, Russia and India, enjoy continuing high growth[22].

Finally, to answer the question of whether or not US power is in decline we need to consider social factors and here it is important to include the perception that the US has of itself. Ever since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, there has been a rise in anti-American sentiments around the world, but especially within the Muslim world.[23] Nevertheless this decline in US prestige has also taken place within Europe, and thus amongst some of the US's key allies leading to further political tensions between the EU and America, especially in light of events such as the "old Europe" remarks made by Secretary Rumsfeld in 2003[24] and "Newspapers that once proclaimed, 'We are all Americans,' now express distrust towards America."[25]

Yet the strongest social indicator for a decline in US power is the own perception by US citizens that "less than one-third of all voters said they thought that 'life would be better for the next generation'"[26]. The generally negative attitude towards the future was also reflected in the reassurance work performed by President Obama in his recent address to Congress when he stated that "We will rebuild, we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before."[27]

Ultimately, the biggest indicators that US power is in decline are comments made in the National Intelligence Council (NIC) report entitled "Global Trends 2025: A transformed World". In this assessment of the current trends the US intelligence services clearly state that "By 2025 the US will find itself as one of a number of important actors on the world stage"[28], thus implying that we will see the strengthening of other major powers. Additionally, the US in light of a "shrinking economic and military capacities may [have to accept] a difficult set of tradeoffs between domestic versus foreign policy priorities."[29] Therefore the report acknowledges a decline in US power.

Thus, having considered political, military, economic and social factors influencing US power the conclusion is that while the United States currently is and for the foreseeable future will remain the dominant power of the international system we can see a clear decline in US power on both a political-military and economic scale. Former supporters of the US empire theory, such as Neil Ferguson now argue that "weighed down by doubts about its original imperial role, not to mention unbalanced domestic finances, the lifespan of the US empire is...finite."[30]

As pointed out above, much of US post-World War II power relied on the support for the international system that had been established with the United Nations as well as international law in general. The system has been steadily dismantled by American unilateral action and ignorance of the rules in the past years. This led to a loss of cooperation with allies, such as France and Germany, and an increased hostility towards the US by countries such as Iran and North Korea who now fear 'regime change' and therefore aim to undermine US power worldwide.

I have argued above that power is defined in terms of the ability to influence domestic and international issues or regions in relation to others by military, political, economic and social means. If we apply this concept to US power projection we see that its military power remains unrivalled and thus in realist terms, where only power counts, the US remains the hegemon of the international system. Nevertheless as Robert Cooper points out that there are limits to the usefulness of military power in today's age.[31]

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Today, political and economic powers are becoming more and more important and on both fronts the US is losing ground to Europe, China and Russia. If there is a fundamental change in US policy towards working through international institutions and to re-establish the acceptance of the principle that “the rule of law creates the trust that enables markets to function”[32] the United States can regain a stronger role within the world.

The National Intelligence Council acknowledged that within the next 15 years there would be “an historic transfer of relative wealth and economic power from West to East....By 2025, the international system will be a **global multipolar one.**”[33]

American power is decline because it tried to impose a new set of rules on the global game and triggered antagonism and resentment in a divided and transforming world, leaving the US weaker than before. Thus the real question to ask is not whether US power is in decline but “how successfully the United States will adjust to the process.”[34]

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