

Limits of the U.S. Power in the Current Global World

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Abstract

In a little over a decade, geopolitics has moved to the “Multipolar Era”, and has entered the twenty-first century, which is likely to see the distribution of economic and political power and eventually military capabilities spread across a broader range of national “actors.” U.S. global role has consequently started decreasing in various areas, and America’s capacity to influence choices made by Russia, China, India, Japan and others countries of different regions has been reduced. The rising powers are charting their own courses.

The article deeply analyses the limits of U.S. power and its role in global world, starting with the brief historical review and developing into the discussion of the current period. It gives information regarding the U.S. relations and importance with different countries, while emphasizing the global view of the U.S. role in the world.

The paper discusses the effectiveness of today’s America and shows reasons for prompting declination of the U.S. power in the current world affairs, while at the same time, reveals another side of the U.S. power still being a leading country in the world, analyzed well in conclusion.

Keywords: soft power, hard power, multipolar era, unipolar era, exceptionalism

In the 21st century the United States hegemony is challenged in world politics. This has been due to a wide range of factors including costly military interventions overseas, in addition to serious economic issues at home, and the “rising powers” of the world. In the twentieth century the United States had gone beyond its superpower status and extended to the economy, currency, military areas, life-style, language, etc. But, gradually, global interdependence has increased and challenged the leading role of America.

Historical Overview of U.S. Role in the World

The U.S. has been the lone global superpower for years. By the 1870s, its national economy was the world’s largest. The Spanish-American War (1898) and World War I confirmed the country’s status as a military power. It emerged from World War II as the first country with nuclear weapons and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The U.S. and Russia were fortunate enough to find themselves in the position of global superpowers because the major European powers nearly destroyed themselves during World War II. In the post World War II era, the United States (with its financial strength) managed to secure a major share of global manufacturing market share, reaching a golden age in the 1950s and 60s which marked the peak of its standing in the world. The United States experienced a brief, unipolar moment in the years following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This was a period when the United States exercised effective state-

craft using all elements of its power, including diplomacy, to facilitate the reunification of Germany and build a coalition to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. Nowadays, we can see that the U.S. global power is hesitant; the U.S. was very powerful and influential country but gradually it lost the superpower status in the world affairs. The U.S.’s unipolar moment has passed, which is not the same as saying that the United States does not retain the capacity to act unilaterally, certainly it can, but its linked to various challenges currently.

America’s emergence as the world’s most powerful state was connected to the G. W. Bush’s leadership with three central missions such as:

1. “To manage, steer and shape central power relationships in a world of shifting geopolitical balances and intensifying national aspirations so that a more cooperative global system can emerge.
2. To contain or terminate conflicts, prevent terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and promote collective peacekeeping in regions torn by civil strife so that global violence recedes rather than spreads.
3. To address more effectively the increasingly intolerable inequalities in the human condition, in keeping with the novel of an emerging “global conscience,” and to prompt a common response to the new environmental and ecological threats to global well-being”. (Brzezinski, 2007)

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That scope of U.S. foreign policy gradually increased the challenges for the country. The world of Islam is increasingly driven by widespread anti-Americanism, and other states that see themselves as competitors to America will be tempted to take the advantage. Oil producers in Persian Gulf region, seeking political stability and reliable consumers, may gravitate toward China, according to Brzezinski. (Brzezinski, 2007)

Lieutenant General (Ret.) William Odom has referred to the U.S. military presence as “America’s Inadvertent Empire,” a consequence of America’s overseas alliance and base structure, significant overseas investments and trade, and U.S. dependence on imported energy, together with potential threats to all these interests from state and non-state actors. (Thomas R. Pickering, 2008). The overseas base structure gave the United States unique capabilities. But, the U.S. military presence also generated negative local reactions.

The U.S. Role from “Unipolar” to “Multipolar” Era

Some scholars argue that U.S. preeminence is simply the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and that this “unipolar moment” will be brief. Others argue that America’s power is so great that it will last for decades, and the unipolar moment can become a unipolar era.

In a little over a decade, geopolitics has moved from the bipolar era of the Cold War, through America’s “unipolar moment”, and has entered the twenty-first century, which is likely to see the distribution of economic and political power and eventually military capabilities spread across a broader range of national “actors.” The United States retains essential military and economic power but is facing international, national, and individual ‘pushback’, and avoidance. Thus, gradually, the U.S. global influence wanes. At present, main “challenges” come from China, India, and Russia - using its “pipeline diplomacy” in dealing with its neighbors - with other states waiting in the wings, including a relatively new category of state – petrodollar-enhanced nations such as Iran and Venezuela. Russia, India, and China may provide a counterweight to the global influence of America. China with its huge people, a strongly growing economy will almost certainly be trying to push its interests.

Specific policies, including U.S. opposition to the Kyoto Global Climate Agreement,¹ perceived unconditional support of Israeli positions on Palestine, and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have all helped fuel broad international criticism of America. (Thomas R. Pickering, 2008). Majorities in many Muslim and Latin American countries as well as Russia and China view the United States as a threat to world peace and stability and also to their national aspirations.

Nowadays, many scholars argue that freedom has

been challenged and decreased, that might be connected to the U.S. will to participate and solve various problems in the world politics. Freedom House scores 194 countries and territories around the world on their levels of political rights and cultural liberties, assigning each a designation of free, partly free, or not free. Last year, Mexico and Ukraine dropped from free to partly free while Ethiopia and Djibouti fell to not free. In total, 25 countries showed significant declines in their scores last year while only 11 improved. (Keating, 2011)

The Middle East and North Africa region, showed the greatest overall decline last year. Particularly noteworthy were the results of Egypt’s deeply flawed parliamentary elections, continuing crackdowns on the opposition in Iran, new restrictions on civil liberties in Bahrain and Kuwait, and the growing power of armed extremists in Yemen and Lebanon. At the same time, Afghanistan declined in freedom this year, while Iraq remained stagnant in the “not free” category. (Keating, 2011).

Ukraine’s fall into the “partly free” category means that outside the Baltic countries, there are now no free countries left in the former Soviet Union, 20 years after the fall of Soviet communism. It should be noted that all three countries - Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan - are, despite their flaws, still classified as “partly free,” while nearly all their neighbors are still very much “not free.” Of course, Russia’s role in its neighbors’ democratic slide can’t be ignored. (Keating, 2011).

America’s capacity to influence choices made by Russia, China, India, Japan, and others has been decreased. The rising powers are charting their own courses. The complexity of U.S. diplomatic tasks has expanded tremendously in an era when major powers are “with them” on some important issues and “against them” on others.

The Middle East and Asia

This is a very diverse region - modern in some quarters and traditional in others. It is a place, where western materialistic, secular, and individual values and eastern religious and communal values clash most dramatically. (Thomas R. Pickering, 2008). U.S. policies in fighting terror and supporting Israel affected the United States influence in the world. Iran, empowered by oil wealth, further complicates the challenge. Iran may pose the greatest long-term regional challenge to the U.S. America’s “Iran challenge” is multifaceted; Iran has nuclear weapons ambitions, supports terrorism, and opposes Arab-Israeli peace. Iran can be considered as a major player in the growing Sunni/Shia divide in the Middle East which threatens U.S. interests in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. It is exerting influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf.

Beyond destabilizing the Middles East, the Iraq War had a further consequence, it made the success or failure of

U.S. policy in the Middle East and the test case of American global leadership. We should note that the loss of U.S. dominance in the region would have catastrophic consequences for America's position in Europe and the Far East.

In 1945, the United States was the strongest nation in the world when Europe and Japan allied with the Americans because the Soviet Union, posed a greater military threat with its geographical proximity and revolutionary ambitions. Nowadays, Iraq and Iran both dislike the United States and might be expected to work together to balance American power. In addition, with the destruction and subsequent chaos of Iraq, this power vacuum has left Iran as the predominant power in the region. Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shiite militias support Iran that further destabilizes the region, the opposite of what our intentions were in 2003. Now, Iran's nuclear program is important and nuclear Pakistan should not be forgotten as well. (Johnson, 2012).

Pakistan matters for the United States because it has nuclear weapons and is a safe haven for terrorists. The resurgence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, operating from Pakistan and fueled with drug money from Afghanistan's poppy production, confronted NATO and the United States.

U.S. policies are widely disliked by the Islamic world. According to the Pew Research Center, 86 percent of Palestinians, 83 percent of Turks, 78 percent of Egyptians, 68 percent of Pakistanis, and 66 percent of Indonesians have an unfavorable view of the United States. The United States has a particular problem among Arab Muslims (roughly 18 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims). (Thomas R. Pickering, 2008). Among Arabs, the United States is broadly viewed as an occupier of Muslim land and the major source of Muslim humiliation. The continuing failure of Palestinians and Israelis to make peace with each other is blamed on America's "unconditional" support of Israel and for America's not acting in an unbiased way. The American "ideal" retains appeal, but many in the Islamic world feel that a wide gap has opened between this ideal and U.S. policy practice.

China

Nowadays, China and Russia are demanding more "say" in world affairs and are exhibiting a diminishing interest in playing by U.S.-preferred rules. Each country poses complex challenges for the United States.

China's future is one of the greatest variables in world affairs today. China's economic requirements and exports are having essential effects on the world economy. China's "soft power" diplomacy is spreading its influence regionally and is contributing positively on issues ranging from the North Korean nuclear program to Darfur. Everyone assumes that China is going to overtake the US in the next 20-30 years. It is true that China has the largest economy

in terms of real GDP. China is also modernizing its military and becoming a leader in the technical sectors.

Russia

Russia, stretching from Asia to Europe and partly having its political influence in most regions it borders, cannot be isolated. It can be considered one of the main challenges for U.S. It is assumed that Russia uses its "pipe-line diplomacy" in its foreign policy to manipulate and increase its influence over the world. The willingness of Russian authorities to wield oil and gas weapons against neighbors cannot be ignored.

When President Obama took office, in 2009, relations between Moscow and Washington were poor. It appeared that much of the cultivated cooperation – including the regulation of nuclear weapon - had been eroded due to so many diplomatic disputes. Obama's goal of re-setting US/Russian cooperation is complicated. It is true that today the overall discourse between the US and Russia is more conciliatory, but recently Russia announced a new sale of military aircraft to Syria and even warned the West/US that Russia will not tolerate military intervention in Iran or Syria. Russia profits in Syria and Iran with its weapon trade and oil reserves should not be ignored. (Weir, 2012).

However, Russia remains an important country for the USA: Russia is self sufficient in energy and minerals and has nuclear weapons. (Johnson, 2012). Of particular importance, Russia has much fresh water with its food and energy resources so Russia will be able to take advantage of this situation. Other reasons why Russia is essential for US / Russian cooperation can be considered that Russia is the world's largest territorial country, on the Eurasian boundary separating Western and Islamic civilizations. America needs Russian support to fight the war on terror which is essential to US national security.

Latin America

In a continuation of Cold War-era thinking, America for over a decade has reactively sought simply to avoid losing ground in Latin America, but the elements of the Monroe Doctrine—that America would prevent any foreign power from influencing Latin America, intervene at will to protect its interests, and manipulate each nation's economic affairs—are all candles being slowly extinguished according to P. Khanna. In the early twenty-first century, three models emerged from within the region for relating to the United States: Venezuela's rejection of American regional dominance and a vision of a self-bootstrapping continent of socialist greatness; Colombia's friendly relations with the United States, built on common economic and security interests; and Brazil's pragmatic and selective cooperation with America, complemented by greater

diplomatic assertiveness. As the region increasingly shapes itself, American influence will not persist by inertia alone. (Khanna, 2009).

Gradually, the United States' dominant influence in Latin America has decreased. Countries in the region have grown stronger and expanded relations with others, including China and India. U.S. attention has also focused elsewhere in recent years, particularly on challenges in the Middle East. The linkage in Latin America between the rise of democracy and anti-American sentiments has developed. Recently, mass political activism in Latin America has taken the form of populist democracy, with the United States as a target of social, economic, and political grievances. (Brzezinski, 2007). The result is a region shaping its future far more than it shaped its past.

Africa

Africa's economic prospects are improving. But disastrous policies in Zimbabwe, conflict in Somalia and Sudan, instability in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, and corruption in Nigeria, processes in Libya are obstacles for more hopeful regional future.

The Obama Administration has publically emphasized South Africa's important leadership role, both regionally and globally. The United States supports South Africa's efforts to deliver foreign assistance to other African countries through a \$1.3 million Trilateral Assistance Program.² During Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to South Africa in August 2009, she pledged to "deepen and broaden the engagement with South Africa" and noted that the two governments had agreed to reengage in a "high-level, bilateral, strategic dialogue." That dialogue was launched in April 2010. The working-level meetings focused on law enforcement, trade, transportation, human rights, health, and agriculture. Prior to the December talks, according to the State Department, U.S.-South Africa cooperation had already resulted in progress on renewable energy, nuclear power, AIDS and other health programs, and defense cooperation. (Ploch, 2011). Developing various programs mentioned above would help U.S. to strengthen its soft power and influence in various countries.

South Caucasus

The South Caucasus is located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, neighboring Central Asia to the east, the Middle East to the south, and Eastern Europe to the west, connecting Europe to Asia. The U.S. foreign policy towards this region matters geopolitically, economically and strategically. The main interests of U.S. in the region can be divided as the following: energy resources and safe transit; supporting the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and security of the region; anti-terrorism coalition formation

against Islamic fundamentalism, and influencing Iran; imposing soft power, building national society and developing democratic leadership.

September 11, 2001 events made the South Caucasus an important building block for the global war on terrorism. The chief immediate role of the South Caucasus for the United States is as a point of access to Central Asia. But, the U.S., preoccupied with Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq, as well as the global war on terrorism, has neither the attention span nor resources to deploy sufficient diplomatic power and foreign assistance to avert proxy conflicts in the region. Instead, the Obama administration will employ diplomacy and seek help from European allies and Turkey to resolve future conflicts in the region.

The conduct of American foreign policy will become more complicated in the future, with more substantial "players" in the mix. A cohesive European Union has the potential to be a "player" in future, for example. In addition, America and Europe together could be the decisive force for good in the world. Separately, and especially if feuding, they guarantee stalemate and greater disorder, emphasizes Brzezinski. (Brzezinski, 2007).

According to Joseph Nye, much of Africa and the Middle East remains locked in preindustrial agricultural societies with weak institutions and authoritarian rulers. And other countries, such as China, India, and Brazil, are industrial economies analogous to parts of the West in the mid-twentieth century. In such world, all three sources of power-military, economic, and soft - remain relevant. Power in the twenty-first century will rest on a mix of hard and soft resources. No country is better capable than the United States in all three dimensions - military, economic, and soft power. (Nye, Winter, 2002-2003). President Obama is right to be concerned that projection of hard power may come with corresponding costs - to America's image and its fiscal well-being. What he neglects is the price of failing to lead. Indeed, it appears that the president's aim is to withdraw from the world - to subcontract foreign policy where possible and to ignore challenges if manageable.

Global View of the U.S. Role in the World

The global view of the United States' role in world affairs has significantly deteriorated over the last several years according to the BBC World Service poll of more than 26,000 people across 25 different countries. Across all 25 countries polled, one citizen in two (49%) says the US is playing a mainly negative role in the world. Among the 25 countries polled, the most common view in 18 of them is that the United States is having a mainly negative influence, in five the most common view is that the US is having a positive influence, and in two views are evenly divided. In 23 of 25 countries the most common view is

that it “provokes more conflict than it prevents.”³³ (BBC World Service POLL, 2007).

This poll underscores conclusions that anti-Americanism arose partly because of the US hard power, its military presence abroad. Spreading American democracy is misviewed, especially in Muslim countries, consequently, increasing the feelings of anti-Americanism. The U.S. undoubtedly has an “image-problem”.

U.S. needs to decrease its hard power, in a poll published in the spring of 2007 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs; publics in 8 foreign countries were asked the question “do you think the United States has the responsibility to play the role of ‘world policeman’, that is, to fight violations of international law and aggression wherever they occur?” The answer, in 7 of the 8 countries, was no, with that response supplied by 79% of Australians, 70% of Armenians, 69% of Ukrainians and Indonesians, and 60% of South Koreans. (Starobin, 2009). The survey was taken in the midst of the U.S. war in Iraq and no doubt was partly a reflection of that war’s global unpopularity.

Decrease in America’s Effectiveness?

One of the first and foremost reasons U.S. power is declining is due to costly foreign entanglements. Many Americans believe that the U.S. power weakened its economy by overspending in its responses to the 9/11 attacks - the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iraq was one of the most worthy which had a negative effect on US geopolitical prestige abroad and had cost the United States much in terms of both blood and money. Iraq and Afghanistan wars have Iraq and Afghanistan wars affected America’s global role and complicated America’s standing with many of its allies as well as the political situations of the regions. Such entanglements whether necessary or not have begun to take their toll on the U.S. both militarily and economically. Declaring war on terrorism made the Islamic radicals, Al Qaeda public enemy number one. It is also emphasized in the “clash of civilizations” argument that invading Iraq with the support of the UK, Poland, Italy, Spain, and Australia is not exactly a way to win over the hearts and minds of the world. (Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, 1996). So, currently, American presence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan further aggravates the Muslim world.

Paul Starobin mentions in his book that there are two main features to the U.S. decline. One of the features – the economic and military rise of new powers like China. (Starobin, 2009). More examples about decreasing America’s effectiveness come from Libya and the Arab Spring. America appeared unwilling to so much as opine regarding the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that exploded in late 2010. Even so, both the British and French governments grumbled publicly that the United States was failing to support NATO’s efforts in Libya. Regarding with Syria,

even some supporters of the president - including the New York Times editorial board – have criticized Mr. Obama’s unwillingness to take a stand against the Syrian dictator. (Huntsman, 2011)

The United States of America while occupied in conflicts overseas faced many difficult economic challenges at home, due to issues such as increased defense spending in order to meet the rising cost of fighting conflicts abroad. And, as discussed above, another reason that could be argued that the US is declining in terms of influence in world affairs is the challenge posed by nations coming to prominence on the world stage, China, India, Russia and the European Union. However, it isn’t only so much the rise of these nations on the world stage that threatens the United States as it has existed in a multi polar world before, but more of a lack to adjust to changing geopolitical circumstances and the decline in the ability to meet new challenges. China is heavily competing to gain geopolitical influence in regions of the world where the U.S. influence is retreating, namely Africa and Latin America.

America needs more economic engagement with the world, end nation-building processes abroad with the hard power, engage allies and fix economic core to renew American “exceptionalism”. Europe is now increasingly alienated. Russia and China are both more assertive and more in step. Latin American democracy is becoming populist and anti-American. The Middle East is fragmenting and on the brink of explosion. The world of Islam is inflamed by rising religious passion and anti-imperialist nationalisms. Throughout the world, public opinion polls show that U.S. policy is widely feared and even despised. (Brzezinski, 2007). It follows that President Barack Obama has to mount an effort to restore America’s legitimacy as the major guarantor of global security and re-identify America with a common response to intensifying social dilemmas in a world that is now politically awakened and not susceptible to imperial domination.

Effects of the U.S. Power

In my opinion, American predominance may last well in future in case the United States uses power wisely. We should take into consideration what a country needs to be a powerful and be able to influence the other countries of the world. Joseph S. Nye explains well the effect of the power that is the ability to obtain outcomes and change the behavior of others to make this happen. The ability to obtain the outcomes one wants is often associated with the possession of large amounts of elements such as population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force, and political stability. (Nye, Winter, 2002-2003). The role of force and security should not be ignored as well. Military force plays an important role among advanced nations. For example, most countries in East Asia welcomed the pres-

ence of American troops as an insurance policy against uncertain neighbors.

Military power remains crucial in certain situations, but the United States should also pay attention to its soft power. Military power and economic power are both examples of hard power that can be used to persuade others to change their position. There is also an indirect way to exercise power. A country may become attractive in world politics and get other countries to follow it, admiring its values, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. Soft power rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with the power resources such as an attractive culture, ideology, and institutions. As Hubert Vedrine says, Americans are so powerful because they can “inspire the dreams and desires of others, thanks to the mastery of global images through film and television and because, for these same reasons, large numbers of students from other countries come to the United States to finish their studies.” Soft power is an important reality. (Nye, Winter, 2002-2003). The U.S. can be considered as one of the most attractive country of the world.

It is assumed that U.S. is still a leading superpower, but the American policy has been changed from hard to soft power. In addition to being an economic power, China has a huge land mass and population but we should be asking ourselves what exactly makes a superpower. The values of democracy, personal freedom, up-ward mobility, and openness that are often expressed in American popular culture, higher education, and foreign policy contribute to American power in many areas, and all that makes American policy still leading in many areas. (Johnson, 2012). As mentioned above, education also plays important role in American policy. For example, American universities attract the best students from around the world. American culture is also dominant. McDonalds is everywhere in the world, exporting American food and idea. If the culture and ideology are attractive, others are more willingly to follow.

So, the USA can be considered as the only country with the moral, military and economic powers willing and able to provide global leadership and maintain economic stability, “global stability only benefits the USA so it is in our interests to promote it”, underlines Professor Sandra. (Johnson, 2012).

Conclusion

Today, the United States is distracted but not disarmed or impoverished. I think that there is no logical or persuasive successor on the horizon, whether a single state, a concert of powers, or a multilateral organization with enough authority and its capabilities to change the U.S. Other ma-

ior powers have limited leadership capacities outside of their own regions. Europe still lacks the political unity and will to be a global power. European nations, either individually or collectively, have made important contributions to addressing global concerns but they lack global reach and authority. Russia and China have too often hindered rather than developed conflict resolution efforts. India has yet to prove that it can sustain unity and democracy if its religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity becomes politically charged. Consequently, no other power is capable of playing the role that America potentially can and should play.

International relations realists such as John Mersheimer and Stephen Walt have urged that the United States become an “off-shore balancer” in the style of Great Britain in earlier centuries. (Thomas R. Pickering, 2008). In my opinion the American role in the world is essential, as Europe grapples with expanding European Union responsibilities which is not yet ready as it has its own problems and lacks authority. Although America’s role is shrinking, nonetheless, its role in reforms of international institutions; consideration of global challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and proliferation, remains essential. American power is important for the stability and governance in this global information age.

I think that American influence will remain strong but at the same time, the US will not be able to dominate the whole world. “Having the ability to influence requires cooperation that is somehow challenged nowadays”. (Johnson, 2012). Working with partners in the pursuit of mutual interests means leveraging American power and enhancing the perceived legitimacy of these efforts. I think that the United States is capable of engaging in ‘strategic restraint,’ reassuring partners and encouraging cooperation. The open and pluralistic way in which U.S. foreign policy is made can often reduce surprises, allow others to have a voice, and contribute to soft power. Whether other countries will unite to balance American power will depend on how the United States behaves and the power resources of other probable challengers.

1. On September 2011, 191 states have signed and ratified the Kyoto Protocol; the only remaining signatory not to have ratified the protocol is the United States.

2. This partnership began in 2008 with the two countries working together to develop local government structures in the DRC; the program currently supports South African efforts in Southern Sudan and Malawi.

3. Over two-thirds (68%) believe the US military presence in the Middle East provokes more conflict than it prevents and only 17 percent believes US troops there are a stabilizing force. (BBC World Service POLL, 2007).

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