

Grano Series – *The American Empire*

This speakers series, held in Toronto at the Grano restaurant, explores the potential and limits of American power in the 21st century through the ideas of four outstanding thinkers.

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The great American myth

There is no U.S. empire, but there is a uni-multi-polar world

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*Samuel Huntington, the Harvard University political scientist whose *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in 1996 predicted conflict between the West and Islam, spoke in Toronto recently on the limits of U.S. power. Huntington was the third of four speakers in the Grano lecture series on *The American Empire*. Edited excerpts:*

My central argument is the American empire doesn't exist. It's a myth. And the fact that people believe in this myth has some not very good consequences. Because of the belief in this myth by both Americans and non-Americans, we are moving in the direction in which, if current trends continue, Iraq will only be the first in a series of incidents with disastrous consequences.

The usual definition of empire is the rule exercised by one nation or people over other peoples. And quite clearly, the United States has not been much of an empire throughout its history. We did have colonies at one time in the Philippines and a few other places, but we didn't exercise direct rule over other people by and large.

More recent theorists and commentators have broadened the definition to include the ability to shape events in other societies in a significant way. One of the astonishing things in the past decade, however, has been the extent to which the concept of America having an empire has been adopted so enthusiastically by people who are labeled neo-conservatives. So we have this peculiar situation in which liberals find it hard to challenge the idea of an American empire because the neo-conservatives say, "We should go out and reform the world, promote

democracy and human rights and reshape the world basically in the American image." And the liberals just don't know how to deal with that sort of a conservatism.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the power of the United States has declined momentarily. Now, people say, "Well, you're the only superpower, and therefore you can do anything you want." But that's simply not the case, because you can only exercise authority and influence over other countries if you can get them to go along; if they need you in one way or another. Countries all over the world now no longer need the United States to provide their security as they did during the Cold War. The idea that the European Union would have evolved in the way in which it has during the past decade or so would have been unthinkable during the Cold War, when the United States was crucial to providing the security for Germany and France. They don't need us now -- and control over them, as well as over many other countries, clearly has gone down dramatically.

It is useful to think of global power today in terms of four levels. First, there is the United States, which is indeed the only superpower with overwhelming dominance in virtually every category of power, whether it's military, economic, technological, cultural, diplomatic or what have you.

There are, however, at level two, a significant number of major regional powers. These would include the European Union, meaning basically the German and France condominium in Europe; Russia; China; India; Brazil in Latin America; Israel in the Middle East; Iran in the Persian Gulf; Indonesia in Southeast Asia; and probably South Africa in Africa. And these are powers which don't have the same global sweep as the United States, but still like to think that they should exercise influence within their particular region of the world.

There are, thirdly, a large number of secondary regional powers. And some of them are clearly very important countries, but they have to orient their attitudes and thinking in terms of their relationship with the major regional powers. These would include the United Kingdom in Europe; Poland, Ukraine, Uzbekistan in the Russian sphere; Pakistan, obviously; Japan; Argentina; various other countries.

Then at the fourth level, there is everybody else, some of which are important for one reason or another, but don't quite play the same role in shaping global politics.

This four-level structure of global politics is basically a uni-multi-polar world. The United States cannot dictate what goes on all by itself. It needs the cooperation of some of these major regional powers to accomplish anything in world affairs. But, on the other hand, the United States, as the only superpower, is generally able to veto international actions proposed by any coalition of these other major actors.

In this new power structure, a natural antagonism exists between the superpower and the major regional powers. The United States thinks it has, and in large part it does have, a significant interest in every part of the world. Each of the major regional powers, however, thinks *it* should be able to shape what goes on in its part of the world and clearly resents U.S. efforts to do that.

There is, however, this third level of actors, what I've called the secondary regional powers. And what are their interests? Well, their basic interest, or at least one underlying basic interest, is not to be dominated by big brother next door, by the major power in their region. And hence, they share an interest in working with the United States against these major regional powers.

One can see the significance of these alignments if one looks at the attitudes that governments took towards the launching of the war in Iraq. All of the major regional powers with the notable exception, of course, of Israel, opposed it. Most of the secondary regional powers supported it and sent troops in varying degrees. The principal providers of troops to fight in the war included, of course, Britain, but also Poland and Ukraine, who sent relatively large numbers of troops.

Even in the current situation, the United States has not been very successful in achieving its major objectives such as preventing nuclear proliferation. Iran undoubtedly will have nuclear weapons at some point in the next three or four years. It is very natural for any country that considers itself the major power in its region to want nuclear weapons. That's the symbol of your power. Now, I don't think nuclear weapons are going to be used by a state in any war in the future, but it's still a symbol of power. When a major regional power like India gets nuclear weapons, that just encourages Pakistan to go ahead with what it was doing and demonstrate that it has nuclear weapons, too. So if a major regional power in a region gets it, at least some secondary regional powers are going to want that capability also.

Also, the United States has not been successful in a significant way in the past decade in promoting democratization around the world. It also wasn't successful in lining up meaningful support for the Iraq war, and then there is this much broader feeling of anti-Americanism throughout the world, that the United States is just too powerful and has to be cut down to size.

I think that for the United States to export democracy or free markets to other countries is something to be avoided. We can certainly support the groups in those countries which want to move in that direction, but the idea that we're going to be able to impose our rather peculiar view of democracy and of economic liberalism on other countries seems to me to be a very dangerous fallacy.

These factors are at work here as we see efforts to change the structure of global politics from what I have awkwardly called a uni-multi-polar world into a truly multi-polar world. That is the way in which inevitably the world is moving, and both the world and the United States will probably be much better off once we get there.