

The Imperial Republic after 9/11

by Robert S. Litwak

America's global dominance prompts popular references to a latter-day Roman Empire. Transcending the Cold War rubric "superpower," "hyperpower" has entered our political lexicon to convey the magnitude of the United States' paramount international status. But though American power has never been greater, there has never been greater confusion about what to do with it.

The current U.S. foreign-policy debate—typically framed across a broad range of issues as the choice between unilateralism ("going it alone") and multilateralism (working in concert with others states)—is a reflection, not the source, of this confusion. The roots of the confusion lie rather in the persisting tension between America's twin identities, a duality aptly characterized by French political theorist Raymond Aron in *The Imperial Republic* (1973). The United States is an "imperial" power dominating and maintaining an international order whose key institutions and governing norms bear an indelibly American stamp. At the same time, it's a "republic"—that is to say, a sovereign state existing within a system of sovereign states equal under international law. The tension created by the two identities, which American policymakers can manage but not totally resolve, has important practical consequences. For example, should the United States act to uphold the global norm against genocide in a conflict region where its national interests are not tangibly at stake? Or, again, should it use unilateral force to prevent a "rogue state" from acquiring weapons of mass destruction?

The clash of identities now plays out in the transformed political environment of the post-9/11 world. After the unprecedented attacks on New York and Washington by Osama bin Laden's Qaeda terrorist network, Leon Fuerth, who had been national security adviser to Vice President Al Gore, commented that September 11, 2001, would henceforth be a demarcation point as stark as B.C. and A.D in U.S. foreign policy. The occurrence of a mass-casualty attack on American soil by perpetrators originating from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, half a world away, augured a sea change in U.S. policies, both foreign and domestic. Some political observers viewed the magnitude of the change as comparable to that of the readjustment of the early Cold War era. As Secretary of State Colin Powell observed after September 11, "Not only is the Cold War over, the post-Cold War period is also over." The latter era, ushered in by the collapse of the Soviet empire and the 1991 Gulf War, lasted a decade. It's testimony to what Henry Kissinger called "the infinite complexity" of international relations during the decade

that policy practitioners and scholars could characterize the period only through reference to the preceding Cold War era.

Yet the post-9/11 conventional wisdom that “everything has changed” and “the world will never be the same” requires qualification. In terms of its enduring impact on the American psyche, that horrific day is rightfully grouped with Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination. The 9/11 attacks ushered in a new age of American vulnerability and exposed the dark side of globalization. A radical Islamic group whose idealized conception of society is rooted in the seventh century turned the hallmarks of our 21st-century networked world—the Internet, satellite phones, and commercial jets—into weapons. The increased proliferation of dangerous technologies and the existence of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda that would not hesitate to use weapons of mass destruction raise the specter of a potentially worse mass-casualty attack in the future. There has been a chilling new conjunction of capabilities and intentions. As American society and societies worldwide adopt counterterrorism measures for our new age of vulnerability, 9/11 has an unshakable psychological and practical impact. And yet, for all the talk of change, the events of that day did not alter the structure of international relations. Indeed, the attacks led not to a transformation of the pre-9/11 international order but to its resounding

affirmation, evidenced, most notably, by the emergence of a broad international coalition against terrorism. The explanation for this lies in the nature of the international order that was created after World War II.

American diplomatic history shows two contending approaches to international order, realism and liberalism. Each school of thought has its own long history and deep philosophical roots, and each offers a different answer to the most fundamental



The view from the axis of evil: To Iranian cartoonist Touka Neyestani America's response to 9/11 looks like just another exercise of oppression.

question in international relations: How is international peace to be achieved?

To liberal thinkers and practitioners, from Immanuel Kant to Woodrow Wilson, the key determinant is the internal organization of states. That gives rise to the notion that international peace can be secured through the global proliferation of democratic political systems; in the words of President Bill Clinton, “Democracies don’t attack each other.” In contrast, realists from Thucydides to Kissinger have argued that peace derives not from the domestic structures of states but from a stable distribution of power among states. The competing pulls of realism and liberalism are evidenced in the pendular swings of U.S. foreign policy. Thus, for example, during the period of superpower détente in the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon and national security adviser (and later secretary of state) Kissinger could not sustain U.S. domestic support for a realpolitik foreign policy divorced from core American values that promote democracy and human rights. Jimmy Carter subsequently encountered the opposite problem, when liberal idealism ran up against the power realities of an increasingly assertive Soviet Union.

The international institutional structure built after World War II reflected the influence of both schools of thought. Through the Bretton Woods economic agreements and the Marshall Plan, America envisaged an extended geographic zone of democratic, free-market states whose core would be North America, Western Europe, and Japan. The new institutions in the system, firmly grounded in a liberal conception of international order, became the keystone of our modern, connected world. They were complemented by an equally important security-alliance system that began with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The institutions in the security alliance were built in the realist tradition to address the paramount challenge of the postwar era: containing an expansionist Soviet Union. Writing under the pseudonym X, American diplomat George Kennan elaborated the containment doctrine in a classic article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947. He viewed the West’s efforts to balance Soviet power as essentially a long-term holding operation until the internal contradictions of the communist society led to its “break-up” or “mellowing.” As the Cold War unfolded, successive American administrations defined U.S. interests beyond Europe and Japan (and most significantly in the Third World) in terms of a global competition with the Soviet Union.

“An imperial state,” wrote foreign-policy specialist Robert Tucker in *Nation or Empire?* (1968), “must have as its purpose the creation and maintenance of order.” By that definition, the United States, through its unique institution-building role after World War II, certainly was an “imperial” power. But that American “empire” was unlike any before. Looking to the United States for protection and economic assistance, the recovering European states outside the Soviet sphere willingly joined the multilateral institutions forged through American leadership. The consensual basis of these states’ association gave the postwar international order its unique character—and led Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad to characterize the U.S.-led Western system as an “empire by invitation.” By contrast, only the coercive presence of the Red Army held together the Soviet bloc—that “evil empire,” in President Ronald Reagan’s famous words.

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In 1989, George Kennan's prophetic analysis came to fruition. An aggressive and revolutionary Soviet state became a traditional great power that accepted the legitimacy of the international order. That transformation, which ended a decade of intensified superpower competition after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, required both Reagan's revitalized containment strategy *externally* and Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev's commitment to political reform *internally*. With the demise of the Soviet threat, the chief characteristic of the post-Cold War era became the absence of a significant risk of conflict between great powers. The United States emerged from the Cold War as a "hyperpower," and the economic and military gap between it and the other leading powers—the European Union, Japan, China, and Russia—increased still further in the 1990s. The main residual challenge to international order stemmed from so-called rogue states, relatively marginal international actors such as North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya that employed terrorism as an instrument of state policy and were pursuing weapons-of-mass-destruction capabilities.

As striking as the advent of America's unrivaled international position was the response to it. Against the prediction of classic realist theory, no overt countercoalition of major powers emerged to balance American hyperpower in the aftermath of the Cold War. Political scientist John Ikenberry argues in *After Victory* (2000) that the explanation for this historic departure can be traced to the unprecedented character of the post-World War II international order, which encompasses a web of multilateral economic and security institutions in which American power is embedded and through which it is channeled. That unique quality of the "empire by invitation" has made American power more acceptable and less threatening to other states in the international system. The multilateral institutions and their underlying norms, codified in international law, constitute the core of what liberal internationalists refer to as an emerging system of "global governance."

The enduring tension between the realist and liberal approaches was evident in the major foreign-policy debates of the 1990s, though on the contentious issue of NATO expansion, the two schools promoted the same policy recommendation: New Central European members should be admitted. The Clinton administration regarded their admission as wholly consistent with its neo-Wilsonian "strategy of engagement and enlargement," which emphasized the global extension of democratic political systems and market economics. In addition, NATO's expansion furthered the administration's long-term goal of enlarging the U.S.-led community of democracies, an evolutionary process that did not exclude even the possibility of Russian integration. Realists such as Kissinger, operating from diametrically opposite assumptions, also supported NATO enlargement—to move the alliance's forward line eastward as a hedge against Russia's possible re-emergence as an adversary were that nation's democratization process to fail.

This liberal-realist cleavage also framed the post-Cold War debate on the crucial issue of humanitarian intervention to prevent ethnic and sectarian conflict within states. In keeping with the liberal orientation of its strategy of engagement and enlargement, the Clinton administration was increasingly willing to intervene in internal conflicts, as in Somalia and Haiti, to preserve or reconstitute domes-

tic order. Political scientist Michael Mandelbaum, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, offered a powerful realist critique of the administration's policy on humanitarian intervention, which he characterized as a form of "social work" that focused on "peripheral" areas not of vital interest to the United States.

The debate on humanitarian intervention was emblematic of the broader confusion about the purposes of American power after the Cold War. To Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the United States was "the indispensable nation," whose engagement and leadership were essential to the resolution of any major international issue. But the nation's activism ran up against a more economical definition of U.S. interests in a world no longer focused on the global East-West competition. Indeed, in the absence of a galvanizing Soviet threat, policymakers in the 1990s faced a significant challenge in mobilizing domestic support for an activist United States. The title of a 1993 book by Richard Haass, *The Reluctant Sheriff*, captured the nation's ambivalent attitude toward its role in international affairs.

During the 1990s, the tension between U.S. indispensability and U.S. reluctance played out across a range of policy issues involving the use of force to uphold global norms. Robert Tucker's persistent question—nation or empire?—was recast in the altered international environment. With respect to the dilemmas of humanitarian intervention, the central issue became whether America would perform the *imperial* function of preventing conflict and maintaining order even when its *national* interests were not tangibly at stake in a particular country.

In 2000, presidential candidate George W. Bush campaigned on a realist foreign-policy platform of returning to "a focus on power relationships and great-power politics," as distinct from the Clinton administration's perceived emphasis on soft transnational issues. The new Bush administration came to office concerned about the potential rise of a great-power challenge from an increasingly assertive China and hostile to the notion of domestic engineering encapsulated in the term *nation-building*. America's allies bridled at Washington's unilateral rejection of pending international treaties, such as the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Embedding American power in international institutions may have made it less threatening to other states, but the Bush administration saw that arrangement as a potential constraint on the sovereign exercise of power in accord with U.S. national interests.

After 9/11, the Bush administration, whose statements reflected a conflicted attitude toward international organizations and treaties, rediscovered the utility of multilateralism. The terrorist attacks were directed not just at the United States but at the global system itself, which the perpetrators recognized as American dominated. Yet the horrific assault had precisely the opposite effect of what the terrorists may have intended: It strengthened and revitalized support for the global system. America's European allies responded with the first invocation ever of the NATO treaty's collective security provision. Even more significantly, the common perception of the threat posed by terrorism to their own societies and to the global economy pushed the United States, Russia, and China toward their closest relationship since World War II. In effect, the Bush administration

dropped its pre-9/11 ambivalence toward Russia and China. In an April 2002 speech that recalled the Clinton administration's strategy of engagement and enlargement, Richard Haass, now a State Department official, characterized the overarching concept guiding American foreign policy in the 21st century as "integration." China's accession to the World Trade Organization and the creation of a formal NATO-Russia Council were tangible symbols of the integration process. This shift in great-power relations, the long-term durability of which is questioned by foreign-policy realists, underscores the extent to which the 9/11 terrorism reinforced the existing structure of international relations.

But despite the essential continuities of the post-9/11 world, the attacks have recast the foreign-policy debate on two issues critical to America's dual identity as an "imperial republic": nation-building and the use of force. Although presidential candidate Bush expressed his opposition to nation-building and humanitarian intervention, the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terrorism have blurred or called into question the pre-9/11 analytical categories. Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime was supported by Osama bin Laden's subventions, elided the distinction that had been drawn previously between rogue states and failed states. Afghanistan, in legal scholar Michael Glennon's nice play on State Department terminology, had become "a terrorist-

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sponsored state." The autumn 2001 war there, capped by the overthrow of the Taliban regime, has ushered in an era that emphasizes peacekeeping and stabilization.

The long-term role of the United States in what now amounts to a humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan by the international community is unclear. Some "mission creep" from counterterrorism to nation-building is likely. But what's broadly evident is that the United States cannot afford to be indifferent to the "failed state" problem, even in a region not considered of vital *national* interest. The notion that America should eschew nation-building in regions of "strategic irrelevance," as conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer has argued, is of limited operational guidance when *any* failed state can provide fertile ground for terrorists groups with a global reach. Although the United States cannot do everything everywhere to reconstitute failed and failing states, it continues to perform an essential imperial function in the maintenance of international order. Indeed, taking imperial action of this kind to forestall the creation of another Afghanistan may be a particularly effective means of tending to the national interest.

The attacks of September 11 have also changed the terms of debate over the use of force, the most consequential and contentious foreign-policy issue facing the United States. The focus on "exit strategies" that marked the post-Vietnam era has shifted as the United States wages a global war of unspecified duration against

an elusive terrorist enemy. This new war highlights the central theme of political scientist Joseph Nye's recent book *The Paradox of American Power* (2002). On the one hand, the Afghan operation revealed the extraordinary ability of the U.S. military to operate virtually alone. The military instruments employed in the conflict—from long-range transport aircraft and heavy bombers with precision-guided munitions to aircraft carriers and armed drones—exposed the gap, not to say chasm, in military capabilities that exists between the United States and other countries, including its closest NATO allies. On the other hand, to wage an effective counterterrorism campaign against a Qaeda organization that's operating in more than 60 countries requires unprecedentedly close multilateral cooperation, most notably in the area of intelligence. Such multilateralism offers an effective means of attaining American objectives, and, equally important, it provides political legitimacy for American actions.

American policymakers must weigh the tradeoffs between the utility and the constraints of multilateralism. As John Ikenberry observes, “Cooperative strategies that reinforce norms of international conduct do constrain the ways in which the U.S. uses military force, but they also make other states more willing to join the coalition.” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has baldly stated that in the war against terrorism “the mission determines the coalition,” not the other way around. That determination of the Bush administration to maintain flexibility of action was reflected in its decision not to seek explicit UN Security Council authorization for the war in Afghanistan and in its apparently reluctant acceptance of military units from allied countries.

The imperative of preventing another mass-casualty attack on America, the warnings of which are issued almost weekly by U.S. government officials, has transformed the debate about the geographic scope of the war on terrorism and the preemptive use of force. Proponents of American unilateralism argue that pre-9/11 constraints, such as the international legal prohibition against “anticipatory self-defense,” are nonsensical in an age when Osama bin Laden has said that obtaining nuclear weapons is a moral duty—and when he certainly has no compunction about using them against America. In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil” and stated that his administration “will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.” In short, the president argues, to protect American society, which is uniquely threatened by Al Qaeda, the United States may be required by the exigencies of the new era to take action without the legitimizing cloak of multilateralism. Critics of this unilateralist approach respond that the pursuit of what is perceived as an American *national* agenda will erode international support for what the Bush administration has cast as a *global* war on terrorism.

In the post-9/11 world, America remains the indispensable superpower. But global terrorism no longer permits it to be a reluctant sheriff. As the Bush administration assesses the calculus of risk of various courses of action, including a possible war against Iraq, its greatest challenge is to forge a strategy for this new era that will reconcile the policy tensions endemic to an imperial republic. □