due to the overextension of the US power. Nonetheless, the Gulf War of 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet bloc proved these declinist arguments to be completely premature. While the former demonstrated us clearly that the America’s imminent decline was too early to talk about given the impressive exercise of the American military power in the Gulf, the latter signified “the only remaining superpower status” of the US in the newly emerging unipolar moment. Therefore, in the early post-Cold War era the US rose as the provider of the global good and security in the so-called “New World Order” declared by the Bush administration through the aggressive, albeit multilateral, exercise of US power as well as the promotion of neoliberal values and principles. Yet, behind this euphoria laid a massive US budget deficit and a slowing economic growth, and under these circumstances it was hardly surprising that the President Bush lost the presidency elections to his Democrat opponent Clinton in 1992.

Although it had no strong wish to be active and adventurous in foreign affairs, the Clinton government was quite successful in reducing the financial deficit and so restoring US economic dominance at the expense of Japan and Germany, both of which were recently regarded as the potential rivals to the US power. However, these much debated Japanese and, to a less degree, German challenges to US power have been undercut by their poor economic performances during the first decade of post-Cold War era and more importantly, by their unwillingness to compete militarily and politically with Washington under the new, uncertain conditions of world order. Rather than balance the US, both countries have been determined to maintain the regular pattern of engagement that dominated the Cold War. This fact was the key to bolstering

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American hegemonic power which started enjoying an enormous economic boost simultaneously under Clintonomics. Having left the strategy of containment behind with the Cold War's passing, the Clinton administration pursued a strategy of engagement and enlargement of the community of market democracies across the world\(^7\) and to this end it advocated the virtues of market-oriented reforms such as the opening of financial markets and further liberalization of world trade through the newly-created institutions of global economic order like NAFTA, APEC and WTO as well as IMF and the World Bank functioning under Washington's, and particularly the American Treasury's, heavy influence. In parallel to economic power, the spread of American culture and lifestyle was well under way all over the world and so, American values and cultural goods enjoyed enormously wide and powerful attraction amongst the world peoples. However, this rise of the US soft power by itself could not prevent Clinton from using these assets assertively or even aggressively were the US national interests necessitate. Washington did actually act in both ways in the late 1990s: assertively by pushing forward the NATO enlargement toward Eastern Europe, and aggressively by leading the first military intervention by NATO against Yugoslavia in 1999 during the Kosovo War that lacked specific UN endorsement and was justified on the grounds that human rights were in jeopardy and ethnic cleansing had to be stopped regardless of state borders.\(^8\) Thus, as a "benevolent power" equipped with military muscles, Washington under Clinton committed itself to cooperating in a multilateral environment in order to promote the universal good for everybody in the world by means of, this time, the


Third Way politics, serving as not less than a distinct form of neoliberalism as the foregoing discussion shows.

The Third Way has been, like the New World Order, designed as a mechanism for rebuilding the American predominance and leadership in the post-Cold War era, too. It was originally conceived as a political-ideological middle route between social democratic model and laissez-faire neoliberalism. Though this Third Way politics is based on “neither left nor right” formula, there seems to have been an asymmetrical relationship between these two ideological positions: neoliberalism remains still in place and dominant with little prospect of disappearance despite the demise of Soviet socialism. In this sense, it can be viewed, according to some scholars, as “neoliberalism with a human face” whereas for Anderson “the Third Way is the best ideological shell of neo-liberalism today.” Indeed, although it is possible to speak of some concessions in the form of post-Washington Consensus coinciding with the Third Way in favor of poverty alleviation and some institutional reforms for the sake of market efficiency and at the expense of the straightforward neoliberalism of the Washington-Wall Street complex, they do barely move away from the well-established neoliberal trajectory. In a similar vein, the Third Way politics has allowed state intervention as in the case of US Treasury’s role in formulating neoliberal reform proposals to developing countries facing crises, but this, too, has aimed to promote market expansion rather than market restriction and


tended to be on behalf of powerful financial interests. Accordingly, as the US government took the lead in the completion of NAFTA in 1994 and gave its full support to the formation of WTO in 1995, it also demanded in 1997 that the liberalization of capital accounts be made a precondition of IMF membership, the steps which proved the fundamental continuity of the Third Way with neoliberalism. Of these the WTO served as a “much more rigorous enforcement mechanism for imposing decisions broadly favorable to the Washington Consensus.”

More importantly, during the 1997 Asian crisis the US government and Treasury urged further liberalization of capital accounts in this region through the IMF and World Bank policies based on the standardized macroeconomic stabilization and fiscal austerity programs. Therefore, throughout the 1990s Washington has acted, in fact, as the main globalizer force since the Washington Consensus-Wall Street policies survived and were even considerably consolidated under Clinton via multilateral economic tools, consensual mechanisms of globalization and the punitive (albeit limited) use of force when necessary.

The Recent Debate on American Empire Project and Neoconservatism

Although the second term of the Clinton presidency witnessed a sustaining economic expansion at both domestic and international levels, this did not come as a result of the much-celebrated new economy but of speculative financial movements in stock markets. The emerging recession in the late 1990s in American economy experiencing deindustrialization, corporate scandals and increasing indebtedness made harder to “continue to legitimize neoliberal globalization in the face of deteriorating economic and social

conditions in the US and in the South."\textsuperscript{14} As well as the obstacles surmounting on the path to the reproduction of neoliberalism, a weakening US power in economic terms would possibly encounter serious difficulties in the field of foreign policy as well. Indeed, for the new Bush administration and neoconservatives, the Clinton years could best be defined by indecision and a lack of grand strategic vision despite the recently assertive and aggressive record of the Clinton administration in an attempt to sustain US economic and political hegemony. At that moment, while some pointed to the paradoxical state of American power just before the September 11 terrorist attacks by arguing that it is ‘too great to be challenged by any other state, yet not great enough to solve problems such as global terrorism and nuclear proliferation,\textsuperscript{15} there were others “who still felt the US could do much better – or more precisely, could do far more to exploit all its various assets and turn them to American advantage.”\textsuperscript{16} Of this latter group, neoconservatives firmly believed that the time is ripe for closing the gap between US military capabilities, further strengthened by the substantial advances in military technology through “revolution in military affairs” (RMA) and its global role by eliminating all the constraints imposed over the last superpower in the post-Cold War period. In fact, even before 9/11 there were clear examples of unilateralism on the part of the Bush administration such as its outright rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. In the aftermath of this event, the Bush Doctrine and the subsequent 2002 National Security Strategy declared the essential characteristics of the new neoconservative foreign policy: military superiority to that of any potential competitor, preemptive use of military force, and the unilateral conduct of foreign policy. The quest for global predominance in the post-Cold war era is


thus reflected in Washington's constant temptation to perpetuate and prolong the unipolar moment into the 21st century.

Following 9/11, the debate about American power has promptly focused on the terms “empire” and “imperialism” in the sense of an emerging American imperium based on neocorporate power projections. Here it is possible to distinguish between two divergent viewpoints: one which claims that there is a substantial continuity between successive US governments from Reagan to Bush Jr. with regard to their commitment to neoliberalism, and the other arguing that the latest belligerent actions of US in foreign policy present a break from neoliberal globalization particularly in its form championed by the Clintonite Third Way. To begin with the former, the argument here is that the differences between the Clintonite geoeconomics-based foreign policy and Bush's power-based neoconservatism might not be as sharp as conventional wisdom assumed. Indeed, the US has not really shifted away from neoliberalism and the claims regarding the break of junior Bush's neoconservatism from the neoliberal project appear, for Kiely, unfounded given that

While the Bush administration has been more openly unilateralist in its methods, its aims of (selectively) developing liberal sovereign states (albeit US allies) with efficient market economies was compatible with a whole tradition of US liberal internationalism, and therefore with the globalization project endorsed by politicians who advocated the global Third Way. 17

In other words, there exists a fundamental continuity between neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the essence of policy formulations going beyond the partial departures from this project in terms of the means used in the pursuit of American national interests. To illustrate, this fact was overtly evident in the administration's Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) of 2002, an aid and development policy tool which was imposing pre-emptive conditions compatible with the neoliberal policies over the recipient countries. To state in the words of Soederberg, “the form of the MCA appears novel, but its content is the same as preceding development

17Kiely, Empire in the Age of Globalisation, p. 155.
agendas." Also, with its support for the continuing role of IMF and the World Bank in intensifying the neoliberal regime of accumulation, its promotion of free trade in defusing the threat of radical terrorism, its insistence on the revival of WTO negotiation process halted in Seattle and its imposition of a neoliberal agenda over post-Saddam Iraq, the Bush administration seems committed to the continuation of neoliberal project. So it can be argued that there has been a remarkable continuity and cohesion rather than a break in the US' pursuit of neoliberal global agenda in the forms of Reaganism, Clintonism and Bush's neoconservatism. In fact, no US administration including even Clinton's has genuinely and continuously been committed to the multilateral policy framework neoliberalism requires and, in this sense, the Bush administration appears as much committed to neoliberal globalization as the previous administrations.

The second perspective, by contrast, tends to see an essential departure in the latest actions of the US from the neoliberal strategies of global restructuring. The advocates of this view argue that 'the US seemingly assumes a quasi-imperial role in the mould of Regressive globalization' and the Bush's turn in foreign policy, with its unilateral defense of preemptive strikes and its scorn for multilateral institutions, constitutes a substantial break with neoliberalism. This argument rests on the idea that "neoliberal processes of profit-making, accumulation and institutional regulation, which give a degree of security to the system, simultaneously produce insecurity on all levels of social and individual life." The break in the US foreign policy actions resulting from this security/insecurity paradox of neoliberal globalization particularly manifests itself in the fact that


21Soederberg, *The War on Terrorism and American Empire*, p. 159.
the key position in the Bush administration is now held by the Pentagon outflanking other sectors as opposed to the Clinton presidency in which the US Treasury was the primary branch in foreign policy making. Among other indications of this break of the Bush administration with the logic of market and finance are its protective measures in agriculture and steel sectors, its inconsistent attitude toward the WTO principles and decisions about trade-related issues, its imposition of "the compliance with the US foreign policy" criteria in commercial negotiations over other parties and its moving away from the principles of transparency and good governance for the sake of national security. Thus, sufficient evidence to back up the thesis of a return to an old-fashioned power politics in US foreign actions to the detriment of its benevolent hegemony is available and this is enough to suggest that Bush's neoconservative foreign policy represents a regressive retreat from the potential of globalization.

These debates stem from the assumption that the eroding US economic (both in production and finance) and soft power in the early 2000s forced it to extend hegemony through military means as the only remaining and reliable tool of exerting its power in international arena. The 9/11 attacks gave a great momentum to this temptation to rest on solely military power and the accompanying strategy of regime change as the gap between the US' pursuit of neoliberalism and the multilateral policy framework it requires and its endangered national security interests started to widen. Since Bush's neoconservatism intended to ensure the security of both the US and the rest of the world, it would "transform the low-intensity warfare waged around the globe under neoliberalism into a dramatic confrontation, supposedly capable of eliminating the threat once and for all" if the functioning of neoliberalism and the multilateral...

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24 Harvey, The New Imperialism, p. 201.
framework in which it operates came to pose a threat to US and global security and order. More recently, Rieff also points out that
two recent controversies — the sale of port facilities to a company owned by the government of Dubai and the negotiation of a
controversial nuclear cooperation deal with India — underscore the tensions and contradictions between America's commitment to
economic globalization and its political priorities in a post-9/11 world.25

In the context of these debates, it can be concluded that what the US has sought to do, in an attempt to leave the tension between its
post-September 11 security concerns and its long pursuit of neoliberal globalization behind, is integrate the methods of imperialism with
those of neoliberalism in a naked militarism.

Against this background, the Bush era in US foreign policy cannot be easily separated from the US grand strategy carried over
from Clinton to Bush. The real motives behind the aggressive militarism of the Bush turn, it seems, is actually to do with "domestic
challenges and the structure of America’s political relations with other main mature and emergent centres of capitalism",26 namely core
capitalist powers as well as Russia and China, rather than combating terrorist threats from al-Qaeda or overthrowing the rogue regimes.
This view looks also compatible with Chomsky’s well-reasoned argument: "the primary principle of [US] foreign policy...is the
imperative of America’s mission as the vanguard of history, transforming the global order and, in doing so, perpetuating its own
dominance."27 From this perspective, the tactical targets, i.e. non-integrating gap remained unaffected from neoliberal globalization
such as Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan and Iraq, serve as nothing more than instruments or means for re-mapping US' relations with other,
core power centers. This is officially adopted in the 2002 National

Security Strategy which state clearly that the emergence of any rival power cannot be tolerated.28

What justifies this grand strategy is the fact that “American primacy...has not been secured since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. Instead the world has been in a transitional period. The task of the Bush administration was to reconfigure international politics and orientate the United States on a new path to bring that transition to an end.”29 At this point, 9/11 was a galvanizing factor which gave the Bush administration a historic opportunity to pursue its US-first strategy through the aggressive manifestation of US power as Afghanistan and Iraq wars showed clearly. Indeed, as Cox puts it, ‘September 11 is probably better understood as a catalytic converter’30 serving for the grand design or strategy. Supposedly, the post 9/11 conditions were uniquely ideal for the US to adopt a posture of benevolent and purposeful hegemony in the worldwide struggle against terrorism, but instead it preferred to frame and follow a much more high-risk and power-oriented strategy of coercive and unconstrained hegemony, thereby raising the specter of a geopolitical backlash by other rival powers against this kind of sheer dominance as discussed in the last section.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, what the true purpose of Bush’s neconservative vision was build a new global empire and preserve its superiority from further erosion by going far beyond the strategy of hegemony and moving toward a sort of absolute global dominance. Even though it has always been a part of US post-Cold War grand strategy, in the view of Bush and the neconservative circles the goal of preventing any peer competitor from equaling or challenging the preeminent position of the US has been achieved neither by the Bush Sr. nor by the Clinton administrations following largely status quo oriented foreign policies toward other would-be hegemons.31 They actually conducted their foreign policies in a

29Gowan, The Bush Turn and the Drive for Primacy, p. 132.
manner which is generally acceptable to them. So it was the Bush administration that demonstrated its deliberate and firm intention to preempt any rival power to rise to a great power status equal to that of the US by skillfully exploiting the new international disorder caused by the events of 9/11. Indeed, the Bush Doctrine was a reaffirmation of US determination to remake the world order in its own image by means of the unilateral use of military force. The pursuit of national security and defense has immediately become America’s primary national interest, making the economic well-being and individual liberties of the nation secondarily important issues. In this endeavor, the US is not viewed naturally as a benevolent hegemon which serves for the interests of all but an arrogant hyper power defying international law and organizations and acting unilaterally whenever it wishes. After having ensured the public approval of its new aggressive foreign policy in the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, Bush Jr. then sought to get the unconditional support of international community in his struggle with radical Islamicists and succeeded in this effort as was the case with the Afghanistan operation. However, this all changed in the run-up to the Second Gulf Crisis and the US under Bush ended up blundering into an avoidable war. This terrible blunder represented the high-water mark in its effort to achieve the status of a neo-imperial power.

Here, as some authors like Hardt and Negri, who argued in their book *Empire* that the age of imperialism is over and no power has the capacity to build an imperial order any longer, may possibly object to the idea of an emergent US-centered neo-imperialism,\(^\text{32}\) others agree to describe this neoconservative project as “imperial” despite the vehement denials by Bush himself and the American public.\(^\text{33}\) Of this latter group, Cox and Odom and Dujarric emphasize

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that the US can simply be regarded as an empire with its own characteristics and peculiarities such as its reliance on democratic imperatives, its non-territoriality, its dependency on allies and proxies and the lack of public awareness of building an empire, while Ikenberry insists that these special qualities do not necessarily mean that it is an empire in a real sense. Meanwhile, Pieterse formulates the new characteristic of this imperial project pointedly by drawing our attention to an intriguing distinction: "this is an imperial episode...in view of the long-term American disposition towards primacy, and an imperial moment in view of the recent perceived capability to implement this aim." In what follows, to what extent this imperial moment is sustainable so as to extend the imperial episode to the 21st century will be examined in terms of both the inherent weaknesses and contradictions of US power and potential challenges to it.

Is This Neo-imperial Project Sustainable?: The Weaknesses and Paradoxes of US Power

It becomes clearer today that America’s resources are not commensurate with the maintenance of its policy of absolute dominance any longer and the indispensable nation of the Clinton era is now in danger of becoming a dispensable one. Accordingly, it is highly doubtful that American hegemony is an exception to the general rule about the ultimate fate of hegemonic powers and can endure indefinitely. In the wake of the historical fact that every hegemonic order has come to an end after either the internal decay of


the system or the arrival of new rivals or hegemons which clearly seek to challenge the leading power, this argument looks more to the point. Indeed, the dramatic shift from consensual to more coercive hegemony in the US' case is likely to inspire other major powers or even weaker states to call for constraining American foreign actions and hence counterbalancing American ascendancy as the Chinese and French condemnations of US hegemony and hyper power in the near past indicate us. In other words, notwithstanding the immensity of American military and technological power, a US hegemony founded solely upon the unilateral, coercive and punitive use of force is bound to be counterproductive. On the basis of this observation, it is arguable that Bush’s go-it-alone style has already been unsuccessful in reshaping the world to America’s advantage and so sustaining its supremacy over a long period since it is based on a substantial misreading of the realities of US power. With regard to the social, economic and political conditions under which the new imperial strategy was developed, the American empire, unlike the post-Second World War American hegemony, does not seem free from serious difficulties and challenges in the near term and “these are more likely to increase rather than diminish in the years that lie ahead.  

In terms of its economic power, US balance of payments currently runs the mother of all-trade deficits amounting up to 700 billion dollars, making it the world’s biggest debtor. This escalating trade deficit compounded by the huge current-account deficit is largely financed by the huge amounts of capital flowing from East Asian countries, mainly China and Japan, purchasing US securities and bonds and holding US dollar-denominated foreign reserves, as well as by the European investments. The weakness of the US position in this regard has to do with “the historically unprecedented growth of liabilities to overseas” and “the historically unprecedented vulnerability of the US economy to the flight of capital and a collapse of dollar.” In addition to its reliance on foreign capital inflows in order to cover the deficit, albeit in return for the dependence of the world on the American markets, the devastating impact of the

37Cox, The Imperial Republic Revisited, p. 118.
increasing military spending on the US foreign indebtedness should also be noted. Beside these serious difficulties, what is more worrying for Washington is that its freedom of maneuver to reverse this worsening situation is quite limited because of both the paradoxes like a need for more deficit financing, which may be involved by a possible adoption of the neo-Keynesian measures such as a massive redistribution of wealth, and the resistance from neoliberal economic circles to this sort of policies.

In military and political terms, insistence on a US foreign policy based solely on the unilateral use of force and forceful regime change is likely to lead to the self-destruction of the American hegemony. The apparent incapacity on the part of the US is already evident in largely inconsequential American military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Administration’s rhetoric that presents the two wars as liberation and the subsequent occupations as democracy promotion worries and even alienates the rest of the world while not even satisfying the national public opinion any longer. In contrast to the rhetoric, things have gone terribly wrong and the gap between words and deeds has considerably widened both in the struggle against radical terrorism and in the invasion of Iraq. Rather than defeating terrorism, the US war on terror has bred new recruitments into the terrorist networks as the fierce battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan is hardening. As Mallaby puts it, “the government is wobbling, warlords run drugs and the pro-al-Qaeda Taliban have 4,000 to 5,000 active fighters in the country.” Turning to the grinding war in Iraq, it is obvious now that the US did succumb to the arrogance of power and overstretched by trying to spread Western style democracy by force. The current state of affairs in the country indicates that even though US coercive power is highly capable of defeating any enemy it is also uniquely vulnerable since it is closely dependent on “political rule through territorial states.” This structural incapacity is further worsened by the fact that what

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emerges in these two occupied countries is the control over air and sea but not over land and, as linked with this, the continued fragmentation of political authority, especially in Iraq. Undeniably, the nation-building effort and peaceful transition to democracy in Iraq has proved not a piece of cake as that the US got bogged down with the rising insurgency showed us clearly. What had earlier been seen as a short-term occupation has become a growing uncertainty which is fueled by the already complicated situation in economic, political and military terms in the country.

Admittedly, as prewar projections turned out to be illusory, the administration’s long-range plans seem to have been foundered by grossly mismanaging postwar policy, but there is no end in sight to the American presence in Iraq despite this mind-boggling failure. Unlike Afghanistan where the US army succeeded in overthrowing the Taliban regime without high casualties and the Taliban attacks on NATO forces remained relatively sporadic when compared to Iraq, the Iraq war and Washington’s apparent failure in dealing with the insurgencies in various forms, namely the Ba’athists, local Sunni radicals and foreign jihadists, signify that the US imperial ambitions face a serious trouble at least in the short-term. Given the increasing number of US casualties and the lack of well-trained Iraqi security forces in the bloody struggle against insurgents, a conventional military victory has unsurprisingly turned into a Vietnam-like quagmire in which the US military power, albeit its technological superiority, mainly stayed alone in overcoming the unconventional combat in spite of the military contribution of its

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allies. Understandably, Bush and his foreign policy team are often blamed for badly underestimating the magnitude of the postwar reconstruction of post-Saddam Iraq. In contrast to the administration’s calculations, the fight with Iraqi insurgency has taken a far longer time than predicted and this disturbing fact has compelled Washington to reconsider the number and effectiveness of its troop deployments in dealings with hardened local and foreign fighters. In implicit recognition of this blunder on Iraq, the Bush administration eventually, albeit reluctantly, abandoned the pre-war plans for the reduction of the US forces and the troop strength were increased with the aim of making the army operationally stronger following the withdrawals by some allied states like Spain hit by a massive terrorist attack just as Washington somehow managed to convince other coalition members to stay in Iraq. Beside this debacle, another trouble the Bush administration facing is, unlike the first Gulf War of 1990-91 when the cost of war were largely covered by other coalition partners, its paying most of the mounting costs of the occupation and reconstruction in afterwar Iraq. Lastly, it has also turned out that using Iraq as a springboard to transform the Middle East politically is an irredeemably flawed strategy. In a stark contrast to US plans, further political openness in the Middle East imposed from above through the US-led projects like the Greater Middle East initiative has helped not to weaken but to strengthen the power and leverage of radical movements and forces like Hamas and Hezbollah in the political processes of their host countries. As a result, the relative influence of the US to affect the course of events, including the Arab-Israeli peace process, in the region has significantly decreased. Thus, since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Bush’s neoconservative foreign policy, with its maximalist goals and expansive vision of America’s world role, had already lost its foreign


credibility and this was the case not only in invading but also in pacifying Iraq and transforming the entire Middle East.

As well as "running the risk of endangering the credibility of US military might in the world at large", the war in Iraq would also mark the terminal crisis of US hegemony in the longer-term as opposed to the ambitious strategic goals pursued by neconservatives. As Colás and Saull note, "what the invasion and occupation of Iraq seems to bear out, then, is that the 'imperial episode' in US foreign policy...may be coming to an end." This is not to say that the end of US power is certainly imminent, but despite its desperate efforts to savor the unipolar moment and turn it into a permanent dominance over the globe on the basis of short-lived politico-military gains, it should be recognized that Washington under Bush Jr. has fallen into the trap of self-encirclement and in this case, the longevity of unipolarity does not seem to increase but to decrease rapidly.

With regard to its ideological power basis, American empire is again fraught with difficulties and contradictions. The ideological, or soft, power of the US has eroded soon following its rejection of multilateral cooperation on the path to the Iraq war, the resentment of other major powers over this US unilateralism and the increasingly worsening image of Bush in the eyes of the world populations. This rapid erosion of benevolent power image projected particularly by the Clintonite liberal internationalism has been strongly stressed by Wallerstein: "Over the last 200 years, the United States acquired a considerable amount of ideological credit. But these days, the United States is running through its credit even faster than it ran through its gold surplus in the 1960s." Similarly, Friedman points to the rising tide of anti-Americanism among Muslim nations by referring to the war on terrorism: "We cannot win a war of ideas against [Al-Qaeda] by ourselves. Only Arabs and Muslims can... But it is hard to partner someone when you become so radioactive no one wants to stand next to you." On the other hand, it is also possible to speak of

47 Colás and Saull, Introduction, p. 20.
a lack of ideological motivation on the part of the US state apparatus and public in relation to its imperial status in the global order. As some analysts argued, the US has constantly refused to be named notoriously as an empire and rather remained an empire in denial at both governmental and popular levels. Therefore, in addition to economic, military and political troubles, Washington also faces, perhaps, a more worrying obstacle to its so-called empire: a rapidly collapsing – both internal and external – ideological base for the alleged American primacy.

On the basis of this brief account of US weaknesses, it is hard to disagree with Mann’s comment on the future state of American power in terms of its aforementioned troubles and contradictions: “American Empire will turn out to be a military giant, a back-seat economic driver, a political schizophrenic and an ideological phantom. The result is a disturbed, misshapen monster stumbling clumsily across the world.” Then it can reasonably be argued that the neoconservative empire building is unsustainable since it is recently taking a less justifiable course and so seems almost certain to remain just a temporary phase in the conduct of US foreign policy guided by the neoconservatives whose influence is in a steep decline. Both this desperate empire building effort and the actual course of US foreign policy are thus an aberration in the long pursuit of restoring pax-Americana from Reagan to Bush Jr. As such the US “empire” in its recent form appears pretty much open to challenges which can be posed by its East Asian rivals and some mid-size Third World states or simply worldwide popular movements involved in a conscious struggle against neo-imperialism whereas their inherent but disputed


potentialities in rivaling or challenging Washington are also noteworthy.

**How Challengeable is the US Power?: New Insights and New Realities**

It is a rather hard task to make confident predictions about the durability of American hegemony but one thing is reasonably predictable: the emergence of balancing or challenging acts against the hegemonic state. Rather than an imperial domination of other nations, Washington’s actual exercise of economic, military and political power is more like a hegemonic dominance. The US under Bush administration is now generally regarded as a predatory hegemon, not a benign power which is broadly welcomed by others. This effort to rebuild hegemony coercively would, however, result in an echo of its former self, destined to wane as other powers grow to become new hegemons and, by invading Iraq and disregarding its allies and international institutions, the US has really engaged in a behavior sufficiently aggressive to provoke countervailing actions and coalitions. It is no longer significantly unconstrained and nor does it enjoy wide discretion in its foreign affairs as it did in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Indeed, it appears that the pillars by which the Bush administration is seeking to erect a new world order have been tottering since the invasion of Iraq. Consequently, it is claimed that a geopolitical backlash against American preponderance is far from being a distant possibility.52

The debate on potential alternatives and challenges to American power focuses its attention on two possibilities: first, the rise of popular, anti-globalist and anti-war movements, and second, challenges posed by emerging regional powers or power blocs. The first viewpoint argues that if alternatives to American hegemony are to come about, these are likely to emerge from the bottom up rather than come from above.53 Here it should be noted that neither the contemporary insurgency in Iraq nor the terrorist networks worldwide

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will form a strategic alternative to American preponderance since they have ‘none of the popular and democratic components of the national liberation movements of the 1970s...’ On the other hand, the emergence of a global civil society opposing to US power and neoliberalism is under way. Indeed, populist and oppositional movements in Latin America exemplified by the latest election victories won by the leftist politicians have gathered a fresh momentum and leverage and seem to constitute a more serious alternative today to American empire project than they were in the past. In the meantime we are also witnessing the efforts put by the global justice movement of the 1990s and world social forums to present an alternative and more progressive vision to the neoliberal dogma, ‘all indicate the immense potential for such a democratic internationalism to take root in the near future.’ However, in the last instance, there exists no coherent and coordinated activism agreed by these diverse groups which can be required by any attempt to counterbalance the US and this makes a “bottom up” counter-hegemonic backlash in the near term unfeasible.

As for the challenges presented by other major powers such as Russia, China and India or power blocs like an Eurasian alignment between these powers, in fact, they were mainly status quo, rather than challenging, powers in the post-Cold War period which acquiesced in playing a subordinate role within the US-led international system. Today many scholars contend that they would involve in competing and balancing the hitherto unrivalled US supremacy because of Bush’s neoconservative foreign policy provided that they stick to the general rules of the great power game. As there have been many indications since the Iraq war that the US hegemony is no longer welcomed warmly and unquestionably by other powers and even is seen as a potential threat to their own security, whether this opposition may take the form of structural or revisionist challenging and counterbalancing acts on the potential rival powers’ part is still an open-ended question.

54Colás and Saull, Introduction, p. 21.
55Foster, Naked Imperialism, p. 20.
56Colás and Saull, Introduction, p. 21.
57Foster, Naked Imperialism, p. 20; Layne and Thayer, American Empire, pp. 70-75; Halper and Clarke, America Alone, pp. 326-327.
The current debate on a possible regional power-based challenge to US hegemony revolves around the likelihood of an emerging East Asian geopolitical rival: China. As Mastanduno observed a decade ago, "China's combination of rapid growth, international ambition, and a history of discontent with what it perceives as humiliation at the hands of great powers makes it a more likely candidate to launch a global revisionist challenge." Today this shrewd observation is still valid given that Beijing is increasingly becoming capable of counterbalancing Washington by virtue of its remarkable record in GDP growth, the huge size of its land army and its rising influence in its near abroad. Currently, China’s rapid strides toward great power status are becoming manifest globally, too. Indeed, its latest ambitious economic and commercial engagements worldwide as in the case of its widely influential and rapid economic penetration to Latin America and its recent investments and quest for new energy suppliers in Africa indicate its determination to throw its weight globally and more importantly, its intention to compete the US in these far parts of the world. But for some analysts, due to the modest scale of its economy, its heavy dependency on American market commercially, its backward military equipments, its weakening political authority and its domestic social troubles and contradictions, China's capacity to counterbalance US is still far from that of a serious challenger. Rather, China’s emergence as a revisionist state which seeks to tilt the balance to its advantage has not yet taken place since all these factors prevent it from taking some

radical steps toward acting like an unconstrained and irresponsible power, putting its economic and social development in jeopardy for the sake of short-term geopolitical gains.

Another rival power which might be tempted to contest American aspirations for global dominance is Putin’s Russia, which is openly displeased with the hegemonic exercise of US power. In recent times, there is suggestive evidence of Russia’s distancing itself from the US and pursuing a proactive and assertive foreign policy in order to pose a counterweight to growing American hegemonic influence in its near abroad. In fact, it has an increased capability as well as potential willingness to do this given the marked economic revival sparked by the rising global oil and gas prices, the relative reversal of military decline and the restoration of internal cohesion and political consolidation of the regime under Putin to the detriment of democratic freedoms. Hence it seems only too eager to counter American actions in domains that it regards particularly vital to its own interests: its close relations and nuclear engagement with Iran, its displeasure with the long-term base arrangements between the US and the neighboring countries in the Russian sphere of influence, its

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fierce opposition to the deployment of US missile defense system in Eastern Europe and NATO enlargement toward Georgia and Ukraine, its recent suspension of the conventional forces treaty, its direct and close contact with Hamas, its selling arms to anti-American regimes like Syria and Venezuela, its pursuit of energy dominance by bullying its neighbors into abandoning their pro-Western policies, its recent rapprochement with China and very recently, its opposition to Kosovo’s US-backed independence from Serbia are all cause of deep concern for the US government and can relatively be seen the first signs of a renewed geopolitical competition, or even a new cold war,\textsuperscript{62} between Moscow and Washington. In response, the Bush administration has not mentioned the US-Russia strategic partnership in its 2006 NSS and weakened its active support to Moscow’s WTO membership bid. But despite the US concerns, Russia, with its rapidly declining population growth, appears to have no chance of catching up the US economically despite its rise as an energy superpower and remain only a military and nuclear power, the hard power assets which are apparently not effective to challenge any great power seriously in today’s globalized and integrated world. Thus, it is arguable that Putin’s new foreign policy path is “consistent with the strategy pursued by the Kremlin for the past decade, whose fundamental component is not challenging Western influence but prove that Moscow still matters internationally.”\textsuperscript{63} In the face of the rapidly decreasing US capability to compel changes in Russian behavior, however, a possible return to the old pattern of strategic rivalry between the two nuclear powers would cause instability in the Eurasian region which is becoming an arena of great power game because of its rich hydrocarbon resources. This instability would therefore become the most fundamental world order challenge Washington must grapple with, with the likelihood of provoking a balancing Eurasian coalition against it.

As well as great power competitors, Washington has very recently had to deal with the rise of a Near Eastern adversary: a nuclear Iran. It is true that it is currently encircled by the American forces from both sides and looks highly vulnerable to a possible US


\textsuperscript{63}Mankoff, \textit{Russia and the West}, p. 124.
military action. However, the case can be markedly different from another angle. As the neoconservative scholar Fukuyama pointed out, "the US unintentionally abetted Iran's regional rise by invading Iraq, eliminating the Ba'athist regime as a counterweight, and empowering Shia parties close to Tehran." In that case, the troubles and hardships plaguing Washington in its struggle with terrorism and the Iraqi insurgency have already convinced Iran, which is targeted by the Bush administration for regime change owing to its nuclear ambitions, its support to radical terrorism and insurgency in Iraq and its constant threats against Israel, that US is much capable of neither persisting its ambitious projects toward the democratization and liberalization of the Middle East nor deterring it from developing an independent nuclear capability. Rather, having seen the US' failure to press North Korea to forgo its nuclear program, Tehran came to the conclusion that the possession of a nuclear clout is an insurance against any such pressures or any act of foreign aggression. Therefore, despite the neoconservative insistence on a military action against Iran, the US' goal of the full containment of Ahmadinejad's regime is not a piece of cake and the Bush administration is now in a much weaker condition than it was in the aftermath of Iraq war in imposing its will on these unresolved issues over Iran just as US-backed Israel's fierce but inconsequential fight with the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon last year proved. This picture makes a less confrontational policy and a process of effective and preventive diplomacy a more compelling option for the US interests. Otherwise, Washington's insistence on the militarized and hard-line policy may help rather than weaken Tehran to consolidate its power position in the Middle East even though it does not pose a strategic challenge as a mid-sized regional power to American hegemony.

64Francis Fukuyama, "Neocons Have Learned Nothing From Five Years of Catastrophe", The Guardian, January 31, 2007, [http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,2002290,00.html].
The emergence of a Eurasian power bloc which will unite these two regions in competing Washington is also made a case by some who contend that the shared opposition of France, Germany, Russia and China to the US-led Iraq war can be viewed as the first sign of such an enormous alignment. In this context, the ongoing cooperation between China and Russia via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and joint Sino-Russian military exercises as well as the recent rapprochement between China and India would likely sow the seeds of a strong power bloc in such a strategically important region. For Kagan, the current strong opposition of Russia and China in the UN Security Council to punitive sanctions or a military action against Iran is a warning sign for the US with respect to the emergence of an autocratic alliance with its proxies like Sudan. Although their recently ambitious foreign engagements and their intentions to rival and tie down Washington in some areas are already visible, however, these powers’ ‘edging away’ from the US has not taken place and it is not clear yet if they save Iran, and perhaps Russia, may be willing to establish an anti-American axis that “precludes their cooperative involvement with the American empire.”

In addition to traditional great power rivalry, given its integrated economy almost equal in both size and capacity to the US economy and the threatening rise of the Euro as the reserve currency of choice, the European Union (EU) as an expanding regional bloc seems at first sight able to be a counterweight to American power. Beyond its economic weight, “even the combined military resources of European states are, on paper, impressive, with about a quarter of global military expenditures being spent by EU members…” However, with all these invaluable assets, “the EU is better thought

70 Odom and Dujarric, *America’s Inadvertent Empire*, pp. 48.
of as having powers, than as being a ‘power’.”

That is, it has generally been unable to convert those assets into equally vast power which can exercise considerable influence over the outside world as effectively as the US. As far as the EU as a political actor is concerned, Brussels has in recent times taken some important steps toward being and acting as a full-fledged global player such as the initiation of the European Security and Defense Policy, the adoption of the two successive catalogues of forces and specific capabilities and the endorsement of European Security Strategy as well as its first independent military operations abroad from 2003 onwards, each of which reflects the growing strategic thinking on the part of the Union. Here lies the EU’s distinctiveness with respect to providing sufficient strategic and political leverage to its stance in the world politics: the Union appears capable of forming a global power based on both hard and soft power with its more independent resources and capabilities in contrast to US power with its increasingly militarized trajectory, moving beyond the concepts of “civilian power” or “sub-system Europe” despite that these two characteristics are still in place. Thus, such a course, if followed determinedly by the Union, would actively propel the US to take the Union seriously as a global power acting as one, and even come to terms with its apparently unique capacity to pose a counterweight if it really wishes to do so.

Nonetheless, the EU as a political actor is still viewed far from being a global power which can effectually shape the world politics alongside Washington, let alone rival it. This is plainly evident in its poor record in the field of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era – in particular its ineffectual handling of the Balkan Crises of the 1990s and the 2003 Iraq Crisis – as well as its more structural difficulties, which were exacerbated by the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in some member countries, such as its lack of “a centralized state structure”, of “a singular language” or “a standing


Ahmad, Imperialism of Our Time, pp. 43-62.
army”. Indeed, many scholars have recently dismissed the prospect of a challenging Union to American power.75

Finally, the latest efforts put by other middle-ranking regional powers such as India, Brazil and South Africa in an attempt to influence the global politics further and to their advantage are also worth mentioning in relation to the worldwide birth of new counter-coalitions.76 In this respect, the newly-established trilateral dialogue forum between India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) would raise, it is argued, the likelihood of the spread of a challenging power bloc across the South. As Hurrell puts it, “such developments are picked up with alacrity by those looking for signs of a coordinated willingness to challenge Washington, or for evidence of emerging multipolarity and a renewed potential for systemic revisionism.”77 Yet, it is too early to talk of a highly coordinated multilateral effort which will probably be involved by the reactionary rhetoric and actions of the US against such kind of political formations given that these powers form an extremely disparate group of states in many respects.

Conclusion

It is almost unthinkable nowadays to analyze American power and foreign policy without referring to “e” or “i” words, empire and imperialism, and in the wake of the recently aggressive exercise of


77Hurrell, Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order, pp. 3.
American power in Afghanistan and Iraq, these terms seem relevant in some respects. To exercise hard power in favor of American interests which are seen as inseparable from the universal interest of humanity has been the central tenet of the Bush’s neoconservative strategy in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks and hence, the US has committed itself to acting alone to defend the nation against international terrorism and other “evil forces” even by doing this pre-emptively. Beyond this, however, by pursuing dominance as a goal in itself, the US, despite its peculiar aspects and the denials by its president and public, has also been acting undeniably as a neo-imperial power which seeks to reshape its strategic relations with other core power centers through tactical struggles with terrorists and military occupations of failed or rogue states and to stop a new peer competitor from coming about, as can be clearly seen in its National Security Strategy and the Bush Doctrine. The leverage of security paradigm in this grand strategy is all too apparent and the central dilemma in this respect for Washington is to decide on whether it remain committed to the neoliberal restructuring of world order in a multilateral framework or selfishly pursue its own endangered interests and America-first strategy at the expense of neoliberalism, institutional mechanisms of global governance and multilateralism in economic and political terms.

The notion of predatory hegemony rather than empire is then arguably more convenient for America’s conduct of its recent foreign policy reflected not only in the continuation of neoliberalism with military means as well as economic instruments, but also in the rising resistance to the American presence in the occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, as coercive superpower behavior was massively reinforced under Bush, imperial control over these territories could have hardly been established thus far and it does not look to be so despite the ever increasing military presence of the occupying power and huge amount of money squandered for pacification and reconstruction efforts. After four years of invasion, the picture in Iraq does really look gloomier in both respects and the overly optimistic prewar miscalculations and illusions have inevitably led the US into a morass in the region with their worrying implications for the American foreign policy. Notwithstanding worldwide public support for the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and during the Afghanistan war, the degree of hegemonic influence that Washington exerts over other nations has alarmingly decreased to the lowest
levels the world had ever witnessed because of its rejection of the relevance of multilateral diplomacy and institutions and its special insistence on the unilateral exercise of American power in the buildup for the war. In this case, the US has exercised its hegemony in a way that was deemed as incompatible with the national interests of both its allies and rivals. It becomes clearer now that the neoconservative project of empire building is not more than a temporary phase in the conduct of US foreign policy guided by the neoconservatives, and with the end of the neoconservative moment, it seems that this project will have failed to generate the intended consequences for the American global interests, thereby pushing a return to a more consensual and cooperative policies in dealing with global problems and crises.

In today’s unipolar setting, the American leadership is on the wane in the light of the fact that coercion is an overrated form of hegemonic control. The self-serving conviction that the US is able to be a surviving hegemon is likely to prove utterly false. The abrasive and ad hocery foreign policy rhetoric and practice of the Bush administration is rather prone toward decay and breakdown in the wake of its poor record in both pre-war diplomacy and post-war pacification and reconstruction. In reality, we are in a period of steadily eroding US hegemony because of a lack of consent as the key component of the long-term hegemonic rule, and despite the fact that no set of rival order is on the horizon, it is not unwise to argue that other powers or power blocs would compete and balance the unrivalled US supremacy while the potential of globally mobilized and progressive social forces are also noteworthy, too. In this (temporarily) neo-imperial moment of our age, indeed, other emerging power centers seem to have enough assets to form a counterweight, if not a challenge, to US power in mid- or long term with the potentiality of building the first blocks of a multipolar and multivoiced global order. But they are also faced with inherent troubles and vulnerabilities to American influence and manipulation. If they manage to overcome these hurdles in some way, then the exit strategy for the US to prevent any counterbalancing act from happening would be to shift back again to a post-Second World War-like pax-Americana which is founded upon what and how other nations think about it and whether or not they give their active consent to it in the name of global public good. What is needed in this regard is more consensual, cooperative and institutionalized ways of
managing the world order and to this end the US should engage in strategic restraint by reassuring other nations that it does not impose its will upon them by force, but it will lead them by example as in the near past. Assumingly, this kind of order can be established by means of either rebalancing the exercise of American soft and hard power or even restoring the influence and predominance of its soft power over its hard power. In the face of the rapidly deteriorating US image and prestige across the world, the latter in the short-term would have to take precedence over the former in an attempt to both repair the existing widespread discontent with the conduct of US hegemony and the diminishing luster of American leadership and return back to a truly functioning multilateral system. Such a step toward an institutionalized and rules-based order would also arguably enable the US to go beyond momentary advantages and gains offered by the unilateral foreign policy and continue its hegemony beyond the peak of its power in a more durable and predictable setting that better safeguards its interests as was the case with the post-Cold war pax-Americana. Still, in the long run even this structural (but not pragmatic) change of foreign policy trajectory cannot deny the fact that every hegemonic order paradoxically produces its opponent.