

The american influence in the post- cold war era: a critical perspective

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



Introduction

The post-Cold War era saw the end of the simple bipolarity in international affairs, and the redistribution of power in the international system resulted in the revision of classic concepts of war, power, security and conflict. The new agenda for economic development of the poorest regions and their political integration in a globalizing world, led to an increased role of non-governmental organisations in foreign affairs (Cox, 2003; 2008; Baylis & Smith, 2007; Brown, 2005; Strange, 2002). With globalization, the capacity of the state was undermined, and transnational corporations and global firms became the landmarks of a new world order, which some labelled as post-democracy (Crouch, 2004).

In the age of post-democracy, the debate around the reorganization of power in the international system and the sustainability of the main continuities in US foreign policy such as trade liberalization and democratization became a question of new debate (Nye, 1990; Strange, 2002; Cox, 2003; 2008). The question whether the United States was going to preserve its economic and political primacy in a much more complex world divided experts, and existing theories of imperialism clashed with newly emerged visions of a multilateral world, where influence and resources are shared among a relatively strong America, and emerging Asian powers. This short essay will critically examine the influence of the United States in the post Cold War world, and will explore whether the demise of the American dream for political and economic freedom is really on its way. This will be observed in the context of US foreign policy.

Research question

This essay will explore whether the American dream and its replications in foreign policy is in its demise in the post-Cold War era. It will defend the view, that despite the rising powers from Asia and the political and military capabilities of Russia, Israel and Iran, the American continuities in foreign policy remain resilient and to a large extent - sustainable in a multi-polar world.

In order to do this, the author has decided to look at two specific tenets of US foreign policy and their sustainability as factors in global politics - economic trade liberalism and democratization. Both of them will be discussed separately. First, the author will briefly mention the replications of the American dream in foreign policy.

The American dream re-examined - the foreign policy dimension

The American dream largely reflects the American values, embedded in the ideas of social equality for all people and economic freedom. Its replications in foreign policy have had two shapes - one is economic trade liberalization, and the other one is the spread of democracy.

In the post Cold War era, theories related to the contested powers of the United States permeated the political discourse, and the ubiquity of the American influence in the world became a topic of discussion. According to Gowan (2008), one of the characteristic traits of American foreign policy has been the preservation of its capitalist policies, through the spread of liberal

values all over the world. He argues that despite the rise of Asian powers, the US has managed to maintain its “ world empire image” (347) through the sustainability of American dominated free market and institutions. The result of this post-Cold War strategy is the increasing political influence of the US in military and security issues. In sum, the American dream in foreign policy in the post-Cold War period can be looked at on two levels - one is economic and is related with the ever expanding policies of trade liberalism. The other one is related to growing political power, stemming from the preservation of American controlled markets. For the purposes of this essay, both will be examined.

The American economic liberalism in the new era

In this section, it will not be sufficient to explore only the American macroeconomic performance after the end of the post Cold War. First, we need to briefly highlight the ideological tenets, on which this performance rests. The ideology, which has shaped the US performance since WWII is related to economic liberalism, free trade and cooperation, for the purposes of sustaining a capitalist model of production (Gowan, 2008; Brown, 2005 Cox, 2003; 2008). It rests on the image of liberal values and openness, which the US embraced during its expansion in Latin America in the 19th century. This image, described by some as American exceptionalism (Hunt, 1987; Levy, 2001) has remained continuity in US foreign policy, despite the changing conditions of the external political environment. The idea of open trade, dynamic industries and multi-lateral trade relations are all tenets of the perpetuating image of the United States as a key player in trade and

economics, and a proponent of capitalism. Although it is argued whether this consistency has revolved around economic multilateralism, mercantilism or neo-imperialism (Wallerstein, 2003; Gowan, 2008), its perpetuation in international affairs is undisputed.

Despite the global recession and the rising Asian powers, the US has preserved its position as one of the leading powers in the global economy. Official figures for American gross domestic product show that since 1994, the American economy has grown at a significantly faster rate than other main advanced economies such as the Eurozone and Japan (Gowan, 2008). Growth declined sharply in 2001 and 2002 but recovered shortly after, and before the recession, figures show that the US total share in the global economic output has grown to 49.6 per cent (Gowan, 2008: 351). With the global recession, the American economic ideology was challenged, and the supremacy of the dollar as the world currency – put to question because of issues related with mounting trade deficits and foreign debt. However, at present America remains one of the largest actors in the global economy, because of its ascending productivity, increasing competitiveness and domineering trade relations. Undisputedly and despite the global economic conditions, the American market will always be attractive for capitalisms from the rest of the world, because of its enormous size (Gowan, 2008; Dam, 2004; Verdier, 1994). This would perpetually encourage other economic powers from Asia and Latin America for example, to accept “American-centred economic regimes” (Gowan, 2008: 353). Also, the tangible American presence in the international financial institutions such as the World Bank

and the International Monetary Fund, makes the US a dominant power in terms of development economics and recovery. In this sense, the ideology and the structural characteristics of American capitalism have succeeded in a post-Cold war world, and despite the challenges ahead, at present the US remains a leading economic power.

Democratization and the United States

As the previous section briefly outlined, despite the formidable challenges on the global horizon, which the US faces, it has managed to preserve its economic position in the world. This economic position, however, is not simply the result of the rise of American capitalism within the world economy, but also of the political rise of the American values and the ability of the US to use its political power and influence in a globalizing world (Gowan, 2008). Authors such as Wallerstein (2003) and Gowan (2008) suggest that the US has managed to reshape the ideas of world peace and cooperation, through the historic preservation of its capitalist ideal. Also, the attempts to export democracy (Chua, 2004) and democratic values in many parts of the developing world have led to the widespread influence of the United States. Some are willing to speculate, that this was a devised strategy, designed to sustain the position of the United States as a leading political power (Cox, 2003). What was labelled as neo-imperialism or the spread of American values through the use of “ soft power” (Cox, 2003; Nye, 1990) is one of the main reasons, why the United States is likely to keep its place in the international system in the decades to come. The American democratic model has been exported to Africa, the Middle East and Latin

America and despite the criticisms related to its implementation, it has served as a means for the preservation of the American position in foreign affairs.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show, that despite the challenges on the US foreign policy agenda, its influence in the international system remains significant. Therefore it would be exaggerated to say that the American dream is a reminiscence of the political past. The most powerful manifestations of the perpetuating American presence in foreign affairs are related to economic liberalism and political exports, such as democracy, human rights, and social equality. In the post-Cold war period, the United States has continued to spread its influence, and has largely remained at the centre of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In terms of political governance, the American formula remains uncontested. America's greatest export commodity - democracy - has established a sphere of influence in the developing world, where the American presence will remain strong, at least for several decades to come. Whether one will take the mercantilist, multilateralist or imperialist approach to understanding America's future role in the world is less relevant compared to the fact that the United States remains an important element in a shared world leadership, where the swing of China and Russia towards capitalism, and the rise of a global civil society, have already shifted the balance of power in a totally different direction.

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