

# America and multilateralism: a history



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Perhaps it is safe to surmise from the very beginning that there does not appear to be a country in the world that is not affected or has not been affected in one way or the other by the United States of America. Short of this, there most certainly does not remain in existence a country, people or society which has no knowledge, however limited, of the United States of America. No single day passes without the American power being addressed or diagnosed in one capacity or the other by the global media. Over time, but in particular, in more recent times, no other country's political, domestic, economic defence or capabilities and abilities have been more studied or discussed than the extent at which America has been. In actual fact, it is safe to surmise that very few political issues today provoke such strong and diverse responses as the role of the United States of America in its attempt to re-shape world affairs. <sup>[1]</sup> The recent terrorist attack on America of grave consequences, its reaction to it and the wars in Afghanistan as well as Iraq have intensified the debate about the nature and prospects of American super power. There remains a school of thought that continues to celebrate the United States' achievements in proclaiming as well as bringing liberty, democracy and prosperity to every corner of the world. Others are more inclined towards condemnation of America's pursuit of hegemonic status and its attempt to impose a single economic system and a narrow set of moral belief on other nations around the world. Whichever school of thought one belongs to re America's performance on the international podium, most have arrived at the conclusion that the history of the twenty-first century will be determined to a large extent by the way American power is used, and by the way in which other major political players on the international front react to it. The nation has often been referred to as an imperial, an empire or

hegemony. Most people still continue to perceive America as that democratic land of roses where ‘ anything can happen’. Some still believe in, especially those outside the shores of the country and straining to one day be admitted into the great country, what they call the ‘ American Dream’. It is supposedly a country where ‘ anything is possible’. Often times however, America is no longer beheld with rose tinted spectacles. Given its recent history world over, this is hardly a surprise of any significance. The word which best comes to mind when America, that great nation is under discussion as it constantly is for diverse reasons, is hegemony. What, it might be useful to enquire at this juncture, is hegemony? In lay man’s terms, hegemony, succinctly put, is leadership by predominance (some might even say aggression) of smaller and weaker states or nations by naturally bigger nations in an effort to achieve world domination. Does America therefore stand rightly accused of attempting to dominate the world through its conceptualisation of global politics, foreign policies and armed forces, or at least to dominate those nations which are considered smaller and weaker? It is common knowledge that while some countries practice communism or socialism, America was and remains a capitalist country where the motto right after ‘ In God We Trust’ is a universally accepted but unspoken ‘ survival of the fittest’. In the introductory words of G. John Ikenberry in his book ‘ America Unrivalled’, “ *The pr-eminence of American power today is unprecedented in modern history. No other great power has enjoyed such formidable advantages in military, economic, technological, cultural or political capabilities. We live in a one-super power world, and there is no serious competition in sight* ” [2]

These words immediately bring to mind perhaps the most controversial wars of all times and America's gargantuan contribution or one might even dare say blatant single minded orchestration of the same, the Iraqi invasion (and on-going war till date) in 2003. It is worth reminiscing at this juncture how the world watched and waited with bated breath while the United Nations deliberated on whether or not the United States should be granted the authorisation to invade Iraq based on its reports about the so-called axis of evil and the weapons of mass destruction they supposedly had in the making which it further claimed posed un-foretold threats to the international world. It is yet another point in favour of the argument that America is fast becoming or indeed has all but attained the status of an hegemonic state that President George W. Bush announced to the world that regardless of the UN's decision and that of its Member States, America will forge ahead in war against Iraq and Afghanistan, alone if they had to. In his exact words, " ... *when it comes to our security, we really do not need anyone's permission*"

[3] It was later argued that it would appear that even the United Nations, a so-called world moderator and international emblem of peace, is nothing but yet another tool in America's already brimming tool box. Although at the time, this announcement from the Bush Administration sounded as arrogant and 'above the law' as it really was, there were many who felt America would be justified in its decision in the wake of the September 11 attack. September 11 2001 (hereafter referred to as 9/11) brought about the turning point in history, international law and the use of force against terrorism. The words of an American man considered very patriotic indeed comes to mind at this controversial stance of George W. Bush re brushing off the world's opinion and/approval to its use of force in the name of fighting terrorism. The <https://assignbuster.com/america-and-multilateralism-a-history/>

man, none other than Richard Holbrooke, former United States ambassador to the United Nations, who once stated after careful observation, one should imagine, that the Bush administration threatens to make a “ *radical break with 55 years of a bipartisan tradition that sought international agreements and regimes of benefit to us*”<sup>[4]</sup> Many years, loss of lives both civilian and military, reports of horrible treatments meted out to prisoners of war (PWO) by the American soldiers against every rule of Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Convention, America’s refusal to withdraw its troops even after the fall of Saddam Hussein (its greatest enemy) the question on everyone’s lips is whether the war was indeed for all the altruistic reasons quoted by America in its rather fabricated reports or for more reasons closer to home. The question can even be posed all the way back to Operation Desert Storm in the same Iraq in 1993. Did America invade Iraq on both occasions for economic gain and ultimately to place itself as the world’s super power. Although it appears now to the world that the Bush administration is the one responsible for dramatically drawing America away from multilateralism, a look back into the Clinton administration will confirm that this is not remotely true. Under the Clinton administration, America neither waited for the United Nation’s approval/authorisation before deploying the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to Serbia in 1999 nor prior to its bomb attack on Iraq in 1998. There were also other Conventions, Acts and Treaties America rather conspicuously refrained from signing or ratifying such as the banning of further use of Land Mines (the Ottawa Convention of 1997). The difference perhaps would be where the Clinton administration adopted diplomacy in its delivery of such unilateral decisions; the Bush administration simply forges

ahead with no regard for the world's opinion, approval or in most cases disapproval.

In the era immediately after the World War (II), America's strength was not only viewed during the war with the deployment of its armed forces, which later formed an alliance with the United Kingdom amongst others (the allied forces) but also after the war in its attempt to rebuild Germany as well as other war torn countries in the war aftermath. In this, America had strategised and was apparently successful in ensuring that the world did not revert to its closed regional dealings of the 1930s prior to the war. The founding of the United Nations on 24 October 1945 also saw to it that the beginning of what is now known as globalisation was established. A post war era of multilateral character and significance was thus built around economic and security agreements such as the Bretton Woods Agreement on monetary as well as trade relations among nations. The American-led NATO security pact followed much later. This international order which came into existence after the war (World War II) was effectively one which was multilateral in character. A more open system of trade and investments began to emerge, largely encouraged by America. Economic and security matters as well as political relations became indistinguishable and indivisible among nations in what is best described as an open world market or globalisation. This is evident in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) as well as the Bretton Woods agreement earlier mentioned. An alliance tie emerged between the United States and the Great Britain in particular and the European continent in general in a scenario one could simply put in lay man's terms 'rub my back and I will rub yours'. America's economic as well

as security assistance to the Asian region is also worth mentioning. America ensured and continues so to do, that weaker and smaller states are afforded security assistance, protection and granted access to its markets, technology and country in general. In the wake of America's Green Card Lottery scheme, the support and admiration of other smaller states for which the scheme was intended and who continues to benefit from the same was firmly secured. In a similar vein after the world war, citizens of many nations flocked in their thousands to America from world over and started life over again after the war. In what is not unlike the stone age 'trade by barter' arrangement, the participating states in turn continue to ensure that political stability is maintained in their relationship with the United States, making available to America their diplomatic, economic and logistical support in return. For instance, America has training grounds in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, perhaps as a lasting result of *Operation Desert Storm*.

Going back in history however, it remains indelible that there were 5 world super powers including America itself. How then can Ikenberry infer that America has no competition in sight in its steady climb to the top in the international hemisphere? Who were the other four super powers and what became of them? The five major contenders when the United Nations was founded in 1945 were Russia, Great Britain, China, and France. It is accurate to say that the cold war put paid to Russia's contention with America. The Great Britain, as exhibited more recently under the Tony Blair administration is more or less a lap-dog to American's policies and remains a rather very friendly ally than a potential contender. Yet it will be nothing short of fallacious argument to say that America has no contender or is without

competition in one form or the other. Worth remembering as well is Germany and France's initial reluctance as well as refusal to throw their weight behind the Iraqi invasion in 2003. America's hegemonic state is therefore not without challenges as well as challengers, it is however the multifaceted character of America's power that makes the country so far reaching, daunting, provocative and formidable to less equipped and smaller countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the Cold War saw an acute decline in rival ideologies and even tighter alliances formed between the United States and other regions. Following the Cold War, America continued to grow from strength to strength. In the 1990s its economy was commendably and successfully restructured. Also growing in significant progression alongside its economy is its armed forces and global recognition as a state to reckon with. By the turn of the millennium, America's economic and military growth had wedged a seemingly insurmountable gulf between itself and other major players in world politics. While the late 90s saw Japan's economy grow by 9 per cent, the European Union altogether by 15 per cent, American economy grew by a significant 27 per cent, nearly doubling and tripling that of the other regions. <sup>[5]</sup> This did not go unnoticed by the rest of the world. In fact literally doffing his hat to the United States in a speech in Paris (1999), the French Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine, observed that the growth witnessed by the world in America " is not comparable in terms of power and influence to anything known in modern history" <sup>[6]</sup>

America's devotion to its armed forces can by no means be ignored. America boasts an army that is better equipped and out numbers the armed troops of well over 14 countries put together. There are training grounds for the



United States army in well over 40 locations world wide. This automatically means that when another weaker or slightly less advantageous state envisages itself in trouble, the first point of call for protection and assistance, when and if necessary is the United States of America. In its usual confidential, bordering on arrogant manner America's National Security Strategy declared to the world that their forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries/would-be challengers from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or even remotely equalling, the power of the United States. <sup>[7]</sup> It is not impossible or even unthinkable for America to utilise its military capacity to impose its policies on other states in different regions of the world. It has been observed already that America spends on its armed forces more than the next fourteen countries combined and that the U. S. military expenditures will shortly be equal to the rest of the world combined. <sup>[8]</sup> Another scholar of repute, Paul Kennedy, also surmised that it is already the case that all the other navies in the world combined could not dent American maritime supremacy. <sup>[9]</sup> Still on the issue of security, expressing his own opinion and an opinion apparently shared by many others world over, Barry Posen has suggested that the United States' command of the sea, space, and air forces is the ' *key military enabler of the U. S. global power position* '. <sup>[10]</sup> Assuming its economic growth remains as healthy as it has been since the 90s, the concentration of world military power may continue for several decades yet. Even at the current level of U. S. capabilities, it is the general view that ' the United States can shoulder the burden of maintaining global security without much help from Europe' or the rest of the world for that matter. <sup>[11]</sup>

It begins to appear obvious that perhaps America's initial support for multilateralism in international trade and globalisation was borne of a grander strategic move to acquire and retain more power while legitimately promoting international reliance of one state on the other, one region on others for support, growth and assistance. A quick glimpse at major historical turning points such as 1919, the end of World War II in 1945 and the period immediately after the Cold War all but confirms this logic. It would appear that America promoted multilateralism in such a strategic way so as to signal restraint and commitment from other states. <sup>[12]</sup> This precipitated the acquisition of support, if not actual trust, acquiescence and cooperation of other weaker states. But surely when one country is placed so much higher than others in the case of all animals are equal but some more than others, there naturally arises the problem of balance of power or even equality before the law. What the majority of member states may attempt with the United Nations and come out facing adverse repercussions for is the same thing the United States will not only attempt but carry out and come out smelling of roses. For the sake of this discussion, should one be given to a flight of fancy however fleetingly and imagine for a moment that a member state such as Ghana or Nigeria threatens the use of force against Cameroon and declares to the world that the same will be effected whether or not the United Nations and indeed the world approves of its actions. At the very least, economic sanctions will immediately be placed on such a country. However in the name and under the umbrella of 9/11 it would appear that America is permitted to do and undo whatever catches its fancy and of course promotes its economic as well as military growth. How else can one begin to explain the issue of thousands held prisoner at the US military

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operated prison and indeed a recreation of Camp Delta, Guantanamo Bay, for years with neither charges nor trial in the name of fighting terrorism? America claims not to have jurisdiction in Cuba to try these prisoners yet it has the power and the authority to imprison them in Guantanamo Bay. What, one is right to ask, happened to the universal (at least in democratic states) ‘*writ of habeas corpus*’? Another example of America’s marked shift from multilateralism to unilateralism and establishing itself as a super power above the rest of the world is again glimpsed shortly after the controversial invasion of Iraq in 2003, when America was quick to submit allegations against North Korea as well as Iran for also becoming threats to the international community as they were manufacturing nuclear weapons. In an ironical twist however, in 1998, Japan, perhaps once one of America’s closest allies, was reportedly furious with America when its officials unilaterally decided that funding for North Korean Nuclear reactors was to continue despite Japan’s complaints that North Korea was firing missile over its territory. <sup>[13]</sup>

What then can possibly put an end to America’s domination of the international stage and its rise towards a super power of hegemonic characteristics? It has been established that the two most important factors in the growth of any nation; its economy and defence, remain the two areas where America continues to excel and prosper rendering it even more of a force to reckon with by other nations of the world. Is it then any wonder that many are of the school of thought that it is only a matter of time before America seeks to completely dominate the world and by so doing, simply crush out weaker states of the world. It is enough to alert the world that

more than any other administration before it, the Bush administration is significantly departing from materialism especially on agreements dealing with arms control and proliferation. Multilateralism, as Ikenberry's book posed the debate, does indeed seem to be on the decline in America's policy and political stance. It has become to America a selective game where multilateralism is embraced when it adds to the muscles in its already bulky biceps and unilateralism at every other turn. As America continues to systematically depart from multilateralism and promote more unilateralism in its foreign policies and decisions on security affairs affecting not only its boundaries (assuming such a word as 'boundary' exists in the American dictionary) but also spread ashore to other nations of the world, the world may very well be moving rather rapidly towards the final unravelling of America as a hegemonic nation. What and who in the world can then possibly challenge America's hegemony? Surely it would take a large scale war or a crucial global economic crisis to challenge or even come close to threatening America's hegemony. While this might be very well put and even precise in theory, surely either option will definitely have grave repercussions on the international community.

However, Ikenberry argues in his book, '*America Unrivaled*', that there are limits to the United States' hegemony such as it stands at the moment. He is of the opinion that a complete hegemonic order would require not just preponderant capabilities but also some significant degree of acquiescence on the part of other states, especially the other major players in world politics for the maintenance of such order. Following the Cold war, America acquired the support and cooperation of one of the major players in that

region, Japan. Japan was once America's closest ally as a result of this, however even Japan is becoming resentful, as presumably are the rest of the world, at America's increased unilateralism (as in the North Korean case mentioned above) and the selective choice of multilateralism only when it favours the nation in one form of economic or security purpose or the other. It is therefore not impossible that other major players in the world, on examining their alternatives on how to best rid America of its hegemonic status and by so doing release the unsuspecting world from American domination, may very well challenge its hegemonic position. Capitalising on the regional and international relationships once promoted by America, the other major super powers in the Asian Region and the European Union could orchestrate an overthrow of America's position as an hegemonic state or at the very least challenge the same. Not ignoring the power and importance of smaller or weaker states however, they would quite naturally also have to be involved. This however would be an all scale war, the magnitude, repercussion and significance of which will tremble the world perhaps more than every previous wars put together! Any would-be hegemonic challenger would most naturally have already arrived at the very same conclusion. Apart from the fact that every single one of these would-be challengers rely on the United States for one aspect of its sustenance or the other, it would take a lot of consideration, meetings, strategising and concrete persuasion to convince every member state of the necessity of such a global war. With its present and ever growing resources both at home and abroad, it is therefore only a matter of time before America, at whom the war is intended, becomes aware of the plans and builds up enough or adequate defence against the same. While it is not impossible that several nations of the world

may come together and challenge America's build up to hegemony, to say that the world may never recover from such a large scale war may perhaps be the understatement of the existence of mankind. In a brief state of fantasy, were one to assume that this large scale war does take place and does remove America from the pinnacle of power it currently occupies, there is no telling how many decades or even centuries it would take to rebuild a world of international trade and globalisation. Another danger in that is another country seizing the opportunity and rising very rapidly to the throne of hegemony, in this instance however, a country not so democratically inclined as America, for instance, China. The world as we know it now may cease to exist as a result of such a war. It is now 2008 yet traces of the Second World War still remain evident in some areas in the Eastern part of Germany as one imagines it does in other affected parts of the world. If the argument here is then that a full blown war against America's hegemony may do the world greater harm than good, what then can possibly stop America's climb to the top of the world?

As mentioned earlier, the strength of any nation lies in its economic as well as military growth. One, quite naturally, is not devoid of the other however as training camps, gears and facilities will be difficult to procure without a booming economy. Should the world then experience a global economic crisis, the like of which it is yet to ever experience, perhaps this will in a way also bring America to the same level as other countries or at least less dominant? In this present day, at least the European Union and America are experiencing an economic crisis that has been likened to the worst in many decades till date. The Great Britain's Royal Bank of Scotland recently

announced that the country is indeed in recession. China and Japan have also reported major decline in sales and poor performances on their Wall Street equivalent. Japan has actually announced to the world, like Great Britain, that it is indeed in the middle of a torrid recession. While this economic crisis may very well be unpleasant and indeed wrecking a lot of harm on the economy of the countries involved, it will take much more than this to cripple America or to reduce its hegemonic status. Even at this point in time, the US Dollar continues to rise against the British Pound and the Euro. Should the world experience an economic crisis of such negative significance that all the major states as well as even the ones considered smaller and weaker are effectively affected, America's hegemony, in my humble opinion, will most certainly be thoroughly challenged. This will be brought about by the fact that the international community in a bid to survive and revert to some semblance of normality will be forced to depend one on the other for that means to survival, America included. Such a scenario will almost take the world back in history to the early days when the advantages of globalisation and inter dependence of nations on one another was first discovered. Such an economic crisis will render it almost impossible for states to continue to concentrate on military training and equipments. One should imagine that nations will be more concerned with the immediate welfare of their people such as housing, medical care and social services as undoubtedly unemployment will rise astronomically in the face of an economic crisis of any significant magnitude.

From everything hereinabove appearing and the examination of different (learned) opinions as well as scenarios, it is therefore perhaps appropriate to

conclude by agreeing with the debate that should a full blown war orchestrated by would-be challengers of America's hegemonic state fail, surely an economic crisis of significant global scale will not only challenge but also probably, however temporarily, bring an end to America's hegemony. America will be forced to revert to the multilateralism way of international politics and to abandon unilateralism in a bid to promote globalisation and a closer knit international community.

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7. Charles A. Kupchan, ' Hollow Hegemony or Stable Multipolarity?', in G. John Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 72. According to Kupchan, the European Union is emerging as the main competitor of the United States in a future multipolar international system.



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**Footnotes**

[1] David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, 'Whither American Power?' In *American Power in the Twentieth-First Century*

[2] G. John Ikenberry 'America Unrivalled' Pp 1

[3] Quoted in Balz 2003, A1

[4] Purdum 2002., 1

[5] Ikenberry

[6] Quoted in Craig R. Whitney, 'NATO at 50' With Nations at Odds, Is It A Misalliance? New York Times 2, 1999

[7] President of the United States, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington D. C.: White House, September 2002), p. 30.

[8] G. John Ikenberry

[9] Paul Kennedy, 'The Greatest Superpower Ever', *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 19 (2002).

[10] Barry R. Posen, 'Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U. S. Hegemony', *International Security*, 28 (2003), pp. 5-46, p. 8.

[11] On the durability of U. S. supremacy see William C. Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security*, 24 (1999), pp. 5-41.

[12] Argument was developed by Ikenberry 2001

[13] Marshall and Mann, 'Goodwill Towards the United States is Dwindling Globally'