

The Empire: What it is and What it Means for all of Us

A global empire is in the making : the first global empire in history.

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Military Power

Like other empires in the past, this empire is also being forged through the force of arms. The US today commands overwhelming military power. It is not only more powerful than any other nation on earth. Its strength exceeds that of the next 14 militarily powerful states put together. There has never been a military power as formidable as the US in history. No less than 800 US military bases garrison the globe. Its military strength extends from the depths of the ocean to the outer reaches of space. It aims for 'total spectrum dominance'.

It is because of its massive, mammoth military power that Washington feels that it can disregard international law — as it did in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Even the servile and subservient Kofi Annan(United Nations Secretary-General) was compelled to declare that the war was illegal, albeit a year after the invasion.

Again, it is because of its military power that the US has bestowed upon itself the mantle of exceptionalism. It has demanded, and has secured, from a number of countries the right to exempt its soldiers from legal prosecution if they are involved in wrongdoings in the course of discharging their duties in foreign lands under the auspices of the UN or in other capacities. What this means is that even if a country is a signatory to the Rome Statute and upholds the International Criminal Court, it cannot haul American soldiers to Court. The US itself is vehemently opposed to the ICC.

Military power is also one of the reasons why in global politics Washington has chosen the path of unilateralism. With a few of its allies and clients in tow, it elects to do what it deems is right in the global arena without any regard for international public opinion. This is exactly what it did in the Iraq episode. It decided to invade and occupy a sovereign nation even though the people of the world were against its action, even though the UN refused to endorse its decision. Because it has opted for unilateralism over multilateralism and prefers coercion to negotiation, the US has been accused of fascism in international politics.

Iraq is also proof of how military power is used to gain control over a critical economic resource, namely, oil. Even in the case of Afghanistan military power was used to first topple the Taliban regime following which the US extended its tentacles to the five Central Asian

republics. Initially, in three of those republics it quickly established military bases. It now exercises effective control over the oil wealth of the entire Central Asian-Caspian Sea region. Military power has also been utilized to oversee strategic sea routes in order to safeguard American trade, investments and markets. In short, military power is an essential pre-requisite for the protection of the entire Washington helmed neo-liberal capitalist system with its Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Transnational Corporations (TNCs), banks, financial markets, currency dealers and commodity speculators. This is what Thomas Friedman, one of the staunchest defenders of the American Empire, meant when he lauded the iron fist as an important pre-condition for the functioning of the hidden hand.

Entertainment Power

But it is not just through military power that the Empire is being built. The United States' entertainment industry has always played a very big role in shaping popular attitudes both within and without the nation. Through films and videos, music and songs, cartoons and comic strips, the US is projected as a champion of freedom and democracy, a land of opportunity and prosperity, a nation which values talent and accomplishment. Over the years, the US, especially for the foreigner, has come to be associated with an alluring lifestyle built around personal liberty and individual success. No wonder entertainment products constitute the US's biggest exports !

Thus there is hard power—military power—and soft power—entertainment power—that are both being harnessed to build the Empire. To put it in another form, there is stark power and subtle power. As we have seen, subtle power depends upon stark power. The reverse is also true. Subtle power makes stark power palatable. After exposing Vietnamese youth to American pop culture for a couple of decades, US warships are now re-visiting Vietnamese ports.

Genesis ; Obstacles

At this point we should pause and ask: How did the American Empire grow and develop? Of all the Western colonial empires involved in the second world war, it was only the US that emerged relatively unscathed. Even the victors of that war like Britain were financially devastated. This meant that in 1945 it was only the US that was in a position to lead the world. And the US chose to demonstrate its leadership of the world in two ways.

It forced the world to acknowledge that only the US commanded overwhelming military power. It dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the 6th and the 9th of August 1945 respectively, killing 340,000 men, women and children. Since there is compelling evidence now to show that Japan was on the point of collapse and surrender a couple of months before the bombs were dropped, the only real reason for the bombings appears to have been the desire to prove to the world that the US was an invincible military power and that everyone should take notice of the fact.

At the same time, the US helped to establish a number of international institutions which would shape the world according to its vision. The most notable of these was of course the UN founded in 1945 which was to be led by the US and its four allies at that time (Britain, France, the Soviet Union and China) all of which were given the veto power. Before that in 1944, the US had launched the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In 1947, it initiated the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

However, Washington's plan to dominate the world with the assistance of its allies was short-lived. By 1949, the Soviet Union was in effective political and military control of Eastern Europe. Soviet style communism was the reigning ideology in the region. Europe was now split into states professing capitalist democracy in the West and states aligned to the Soviet Union in the East with a bifurcated Germany epitomizing the divide. The cold war had begun. 1949 is also significant in the sense that it was the year that the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Mao Tze-Tung seized power through a people's revolution. As with the Soviet Union, the US now regarded China as an adversary. With the emergence of two powerful communist states with their respective supporters, it had become more difficult for the US to push ahead with its vision of the world.

There was another phenomenon which began to unfold from the late forties which also affected Washington's drive for dominance or hegemony. A number of colonized states in Asia and then Africa achieved their independence through the fifties and sixties. These countries did not want to be subservient to the US—or to the Soviet Union for that matter. Some of them came together in Bandung, Indonesia, under the leadership of men like Sukarno (of Indonesia), Jawaharlal Nehru (of India), Chou En-Lai (of China) and Gamal Nasser (of Egypt) to proclaim their collective determination to defend their national independence and sovereignty on the basis of the Bandung Principles. Asian and African nationalism, it was obvious, was yet another obstacle to Washington's Empire. If anything, nationalist sentiment was further consolidated through the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 which included almost all the states that initiated Bandung, with the exception of China.

The challenge posed by communism, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other, to Washington and its allies merged in the valiant struggle of the Vietnamese people under Ho Chi-Minh to restore their integrity and independence. After a struggle that lasted more than ten years, they succeeded in defeating US aggression and occupation. The victory of the Vietnamese people was undoubtedly one of the high points in the resistance to American imperialism as it spread its wings to different parts of the world in the decades following the second world war.

There were other important though less dramatic events from the late fifties to the late seventies which showed that there were hurdles in the path of US hegemony. Cuba under Fidel Castro asserted its independence from Washington in 1959 through a people oriented revolution. A couple of other Latin American states made less successful attempts at preserving their sovereignty. In Africa, Julius Nyerere tried to chart an autonomous path to development for his country, Tanzania. From its Independence in 1947 right up to the early eighties, India held on to a non-aligned foreign policy buttressed by a certain degree of economic nationalism.

Even more significant, in the Middle East, countries such as Libya and Iraq which had nationalized their oil, working together with the Saudi monarch, King Faisal, revitalized the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) into a powerful cartel which succeeded partially at least in breaking the grip that Western oil companies had hitherto exercised over petroleum prices. The economic power that OPEC commanded in the mid seventies, limited though it was, enabled countries of the South to articulate their agendas in the UN and other world bodies with a sense of confidence. Proposals for a New International Information Order (NIIO) and a New International Economic Order (NIEO) were products of that era.

The Tide Turns

Nonetheless, even as the South was demanding justice in the international system, the tide was beginning to turn. For one thing, anti-colonialism—the glue that held together the newly independent states of Asia and Africa—no longer had the impact it generated in the immediate post-war decades. As they grappled with the myriad challenges of economic development and social transformation, different states discovered that their interests and aspirations varied. Given the different rates of progress of different states, their interests became even more divergent. To make matters worse, a number of the states that belonged to NAM aligned themselves to either the US bloc or the Soviet bloc and as a result weakened non-aligned solidarity. Then there were the inter-state wars and conflicts—some of which were US-Soviet proxy battles — that further emasculated the South. One of the earliest of such wars was the brief Sino-Indian border clash in 1962. But the most damaging was perhaps the Iraq-Iran conflict from 1980 to 1988.

We need not discuss in depth the reasons for the war. Suffice to know that fear among the Gulf Rulers that the anti-monarchical Iranian Revolution of 1979 would undermine their authority; US antagonism towards the anti-American Iranian ruling elite which had overthrown the pro-US Shah; Soviet suspicion of a religious based revolution; and Saddam Hussein's ambitious desire to assume the mantle of Arab leadership after Nasser's death, all served to instigate Iraq to launch an unprovoked assault upon Iran. The war between two leading OPEC members sapped the dynamic strength of the organization much to the delight of Washington. In fact, there is substantial evidence to suggest that Washington provided Saddam with tangible support in the form of military intelligence. The war also had a negative impact upon both NAM and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) since Iraq and Iran were, and are, members of the two outfits.

Needless to say, the Iraq-Iran conflict, against the backdrop of all the other trends we have noted affecting the South, created a situation that was specially favourable to Washington. It was made even more favourable with the collapse of the Soviet Union. As with any cataclysmic change of this sort, a variety of factors would explain the demise of the Soviet system in 1991. The ignominious Soviet defeat in Afghanistan at the hands of the Mujahideen had grave repercussions for the moral authority of both the Soviet state and the Soviet army. The defeat reverberated in not only the Muslim republics within the Soviet Union but it also indirectly encouraged the East European states in the Soviet bloc to throw off the Soviet yoke and to intensify their campaign for democracy. Of course, in the midst of all this, US and Western propaganda against the Soviet system and communism also played a role. Besides that, Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt at opening up and restructuring the system through glasnost and perestroika had the unintended effect of weakening the authority of the Soviet leadership. But most of all the inherent weaknesses within the Soviet system—its inability to respond to changing and growing consumer demands; its inefficiency; its declining productivity; its over-emphasis upon military technology; its lack of accountability; its suppression of dissent — were the more important causes of the collapse of the Soviet system. Even before the collapse, the cold war had come to an end—in 1989 — largely through the efforts of Gorbachev.

Thus, by the end of the eighties and the early nineties, communism and nationalism, the two major forces which stymied the US drive for global hegemony were in no position to challenge Washington. But there was another challenge looming on the horizon which we had alluded to in different contexts. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 thrust Islam to the fore of both national and international politics. Likewise, the Mujahideen's victory over the Soviet

army in 1989 underscored the ability of an Islamic resistance movement to defeat a superpower. Though the larger significance of both these events was not immediately obvious, the roles that Islamic movements are playing today in offering different modes of resistance to hegemony cannot be properly understood without reflecting upon 1979 and 1989. We shall return to this later.

In the meantime, let us remind ourselves that with communism and nationalism out of the way, the US was able to project itself — for a second time — as the harbinger of a new world order. And it did so in grand style. It mobilized an impressive array of governments under its leadership to force the Iraqi army out of Kuwait—which Saddam had invaded in violation of international norms on 2 August 1990. This US led coalition of thirty two states was a demonstration of the power and influence Washington commanded after the end of the cold war. Washington had no contenders for global leadership. It was the sole superpower of the day.

It was around this time—in early 1991 — that some of the people associated with President Bush Senior tried to convince him that the US should seize the moment and ensure that its hegemonic standing as the world’s only superpower is permanent and perennial. Before Bush Senior could move in that direction, he was booted out of office. The advocates of total, absolute hegemony had to bid their time.

Bush’s successor, Bill Clinton, was also acutely conscious of the fact that the US was now the peerless leader of the world. His military forays into Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan showed that he was prepared to use and abuse US power to advance its global interests. But Clinton was not willing to go all the way : from time to time he took into consideration the views of his allies, the positions adopted by other global actors and the realities of the international environment.

The Neo-Cons and other Vested Interests

With the ascendancy of George Bush Junior in 2000, the situation began to change. The neo-conservatives (neo-cons) around him — men like Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, Eliot Abrams and Richard Perle some of whom had worked for his father—have a blueprint for transforming the world. The US, they are convinced, should use its enormous military power to ensure it remains dominant forever. It should be so overwhelmingly powerful that no other nation or combination of nations would even contemplate challenging the US for global supremacy. US supremacy in turn would reinforce Israel’s position to such an extent that it would be able to dominate and control the Middle East politically and militarily. The Neo-Cons incidentally are all Zionists. Israeli and US hegemony would also help to ensure that they exercise some control over the supply of Middle East oil and indeed oil from other regions of the world through safe and secure sea routes which would be under their watch. Of course, in order to gain total control over the Middle East and the world, the Neo-Cons will camouflage their real motives by arguing that their mission is to deliver freedom and democracy to people everywhere.

The 911 carnage in a sense provided the Neo-Cons with the excuse to embark upon their mission. Since terrorists allegedly opposed to freedom and democracy are hell-bent on destroying the American way of life, the Bush Administration is justified in making the US and the world safe for everyone by fighting terrorism. For the Neo-Cons this is the justification for the US attack on Afghanistan and the ouster of the Taliban regime which

provided sanctuary to the Al-Qaeda terrorist network under Osama bin Laden. What is concealed from the public is how US control over Afghanistan has facilitated — as we have seen—access to huge oil resources in the surrounding regions. Similarly, Saddam Hussein had to be overthrown to prevent him from allowing terrorist networks to acquire the weapons of mass destruction that he allegedly possessed. Though the invaders of Iraq now acknowledge that Saddam had no WMDs and there were no terrorist cells in Iraq before the invasion, they insist that their action was justified because it led to the elimination of a tyrant who oppressed his people. But they will not admit that gaining control over the world's second largest petroleum resource was a major consideration just as getting rid of a regime that was totally opposed to Israel was a primary motivation. Indeed, it is because of the Neo-Cons' obsession with Israel's total, absolute security—which can only be achieved through Tel Aviv's hegemonic power over the region — that moves are now being planned against Syria and Iran. More than any other group in Washington, it is the Neo-Cons, and of course the Israeli elite, who want to cripple Tehran's ability to produce nuclear energy.

Apart from the Neo-Cons, the other ideological group that is committed to US hegemony and the American Empire is the Christian Right. A global American Empire which has total control over the Middle East in particular, will, in their view, guarantee Israel's future. And a dominant and triumphant Israel is the pre-requisite for the return of the Messiah. When the Messiah returns, influential elements in the Christian Right reckon, the whole world will embrace Christianity ! In the mean time, Washington and Tel Aviv should use their military power to eliminate all those who threaten Israel's security in any way.

However outlandish the Christian Right may sound, one should not dismiss them outright. A significant segment of the Christian population in the US — some would estimate it at forty percent — it is said subscribe to Christian Right ideas of this sort. Besides, there are influential lobbies and important political leaders in Washington who would be seen as part and parcel of the Christian Right.

There are other interest groups associated with the petroleum companies, the arms industry, business corporations, the banks and the finance networks who may also have a stake in the Empire. American global hegemony may enhance their wealth and expand their opportunities. But there may also be elements in all these sectors of the economy who may be uneasy with the creation of an Empire which is bound to generate tension, instability and, in the ultimate analysis, perpetual chaos.

The Empire has also some enthusiastic advocates outside the US. Like the empire builders in the US, they are averse to using the term 'Empire'. But it is obvious from their support for, and participation in, the hegemonic designs of the Neo-Cons that they believe in the US domination of the world. The Israeli elite and perhaps even a sizeable section of the Jewish-Israeli population would espouse US hegemony. The British ruling elite has clearly chosen to identify itself with the Empire. The Empire would also resonate with elites in Canberra, Tokyo, Manila, Singapore and perhaps certain other capitals.

Impact ; Consequences.

What has been the impact of this attempt to build a global empire? What have been the consequences?

The colossal loss of human lives is undoubtedly the most tragic consequence of the attempt to build an Empire. In both the Afghan and Iraq wars tens of thousands have been killed.

According to one source, since the invasion of Iraq, about 100,000 civilians have died most of them at the hands of the occupying forces.

We have observed that the drive towards global hegemony has been accompanied by the rise of global authoritarianism. A corollary to this is the introduction of restrictive, sometimes repressive laws to fight terrorism even in the established democracies such as Britain, the US and Australia. It is ironical that the Empire that seeks to spread freedom and democracy has created conditions that have led to the erosion of civil and political liberties in a number of places.

An even more horrendous manifestation of the strangulation of liberty would be the numerous instances of torture and abuse in some notorious prisons and detention centres managed by the Empire. Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib would be but two such examples. Evidence is now emerging that the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has even established a whole network of prisons in different parts of the world where some of the well known leaders of Al-Qaeda are detained indefinitely without recourse to legal counsel or to a fair trial.

The Empire has also in a sense undermined some of the fundamental tenets of national sovereignty. Sovereign governments no longer exercise ultimate authority on matters pertaining to national security. US intelligence services not only have full access to internal security records of most governments but also sometimes dictate to them on how to act on a certain matter.

There is yet another consequence of empire that deserves to be highlighted. Since neo-liberal capitalism is the economic ideology of the Empire, the empire builders are determined to use their overwhelming power to pursue their agenda of liberalization, deregulation and privatization which has led to a widening of economic and social disparities in individual countries and at the global level. A UN report published in September 2005 for instance shows that the top 20 percent of the world population residing mainly in the North owns and controls 80 percent of global wealth while the bottom 80 percent living in the South owns and controls only 20 percent. It also noted that the situation is getting much worse for the global poor. In fact, since empire building began in earnest 3 or 4 years ago there has been an even greater drive to force countries in the South to accept terms in global trade, technology and investments which are clearly detrimental to their interests.

The push for Empire has also widened the chasm between Washington on the one hand and the Muslim masses on the other. The first two countries to be attacked by the Empire were Muslim; the next two on the hit list are also likely to be Muslim. Since most of the oil that is bought and sold in the world flows beneath the feet of Muslims they know that the Empire's desire to control the commodity is one of the reasons why they have come into conflict with the latter. The Empire's other agenda - re-shaping the Middle East to ensure Israeli hegemony—is perhaps an even more potent cause of conflict as recent events have shown. To ensure Israeli hegemony, Muslims realize that the legitimate struggle of the Palestinians for a just peace will not be allowed to bear fruit. At the most, the Neo-Cons, the Christian Right and other interest groups may tolerate the creation of a Palestinian Bantustan on Gaza and a small portion of the West Bank under Israel's effective control. For Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims everywhere this would be an unjust and immoral solution. It will only spawn more anger and antagonism towards Washington and Tel Aviv.

There is also another reason why relations between Washington and the Muslim world have

deteriorated dramatically since 911 and the drive for global hegemony. In the name of fighting terrorism, Muslims in a number of Western countries are routinely hounded and harassed and subjected to a great deal of intimidation and humiliation. The ease with which a segment of the media, certain Christian theologians and some politicians in the US in particular equate Muslims with terrorism has reinforced the stereotyping and stigmatization of the community. Of course, typecasting Muslims as terrorists or as people who are prone to violence has a long history behind it. It is at the crux of an ancient phenomenon called Islamophobia which in the last four years has witnessed a huge revival in the West. Even in some non-Western societies Islamophobia is beginning to present itself.

Terrorism and Al-Qaeda.

By criticizing the stigmatization of Muslims and by lamenting the pervasiveness of Islamophobia, one is not denying that there are fringe groups in the Muslim world who resort to violence and terror in their quest for justice. Al-Qaeda is one such group. It came into prominence in 1991 when it lambasted the stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia which it considered an act of sacrilege since the land was the home of Islam's two holiest shrines. In 1996, Al-Qaeda launched a bomb attack at the King Abdul Aziz Air Base in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia killing nineteen American soldiers. Al-Qaeda has been associated with other attacks since then — ; against American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; against an American warship in Yemen in 2000. The climax was the 911 attack on the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York and the Pentagon in Washington which killed a total of almost 3000 people, mostly civilians. Since 911, Al-Qaeda is also alleged to have staged the Madrid bombing in March 2004 and the London bombing of 7 July 2005.

If the conscious, deliberate targeting of civilians is part of Al-Qaeda's strategy to fight the injustices perpetrated by the US and its allies, it has embarked upon an approach which Islam would condemn as heinous and barbaric. Islam does not permit the killing of civilians or non-combatants in pursuit of any cause, however noble. This is why immediately after 911 a number of leading Muslim theologians from all over the world condemned the dastardly deed in the strongest language possible. The Madrid and London bombings and other similar incidents involving civilians have also evoked condemnations from Muslims of all shades.

There are other dimensions of Al-Qaeda's belief system which mainstream Muslims would reject as inimical to Islamic teachings. Al-Qaeda adheres to a simplistic dichotomization of the world into Muslims and infidels. It has an exclusive rather than an inclusive view of the religion and its message. It follows from this that Al-Qaeda has a pejorative perception of people of other faiths. It justifies the systematic discrimination of women in public life. Its interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence is dogmatic and often atavistic. Al-Qaeda's reading of Islam's basic text — the Quran — is literal and outmoded.

Al-Qaeda subscribes to this particular view of Islam because of the influence of Wahabism. Wahabism is a reference to an ideological strain that developed within Islam in parts of Saudi Arabia from the eighteenth century onwards which was characterized by an extreme puritanical attitude. As time went on Wahabism became more and more doctrinaire. It had some influence upon elements within the Saudi royal family and the Saudi elite in general.

When the Saudi ruling class wanted to counter the impact of the Iranian revolution amongst Muslims, it was this Wahabist version of Islam that it exported to other parts of the world. Groups within the Mujahideen in Afghanistan who were fighting the Soviet occupation of

their country embraced Wahabism. The Saudi rulers in any case were also financing the Mujahideen. This explains the Wahabist orientation of the Taliban—and indeed Al-Qaeda—who were also part of the Mujahideen.

It is important to reiterate that Washington which was an enthusiastic supporter of the Mujahideen against Soviet occupation had no problem with Wahabism at that stage. In fact, Osama bin Laden and the CIA worked closely together in resisting the Soviets. By cultivating Osama, Al-Qaeda and the Mujahideen, the US, in a sense, strengthened the role of a conservative brand of Islam in national and international politics. That such a brand of Islam could triumph over a superpower must have been a tremendous boost to Osama and his ilk. It may well have inspired him to take on the other only remaining superpower. How ironical therefore that Osama the CIA ally should now come back to haunt the Empire. That is blowback at its finest !

Whatever Osama's dream may be about destroying the American Empire, it is very unlikely that he will succeed. He may not realize that his terrorism has strengthened the Empire. After 911, the Empire, in the name of fighting terrorism, has, as we have seen, penetrated Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, conquered Iraq and tightened its grip over the security apparatus of countries all over the world. Osama has proven that terrorism is counter productive; that it is a foolish strategy for fighting the Empire.

Resistance.

Are there other ways of resisting Empire ? Perhaps the strongest resistance at the moment is taking place in those countries which are under the direct occupation of the US and Israel. Leaving aside Afghanistan where there is organized but sporadic opposition to US and other foreign troops, there is no doubt at all that in Iraq resistance is widespread and systematic. Similarly, Palestinian resistance to Israeli rule is one of the most sustained and determined struggles for liberation in the contemporary world. Since controlling and dominating the Middle East is pivotal to the American and Israeli agenda, one can argue that Iraqi and Palestinian resistance have tremendous historical significance. To put it simply it is because of their resistance that the Empire is caught in a quagmire. Otherwise, the Empire builders, it is quite conceivable, would have expanded their hegemony to other parts of the Middle East by now.

We shall now turn to resistance to Empire from different regions of the world beginning with Europe. Though Europe remains integral to the Washington helmed Western alliance, governments in Germany and France are sometimes uneasy about American unilateralism and its eagerness to resort to force in the resolution of conflicts. This difference in approach was obvious in the Iraq crisis. Nonetheless, one should be realistic and should not expect European governments to stand up to Washington's imperial project.

In contrast, there is much more hope in Latin America. Cuba has the most consistent, principled record of a nation standing up to the Empire for more than 40 years and refusing to submit or surrender to its hegemony. In the last four years, the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, has also displayed some of the courage and conviction of his Cuban mentor, Fidel Castro. Chavez is equally determined to ensure that development benefits the poor and powerless in his society and that Venezuela does not become an appendage of the US. Other countries in Latin America such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay are also becoming a little more assertive vis-a-vis US power.

In Africa, government leaders in the Sudan, Libya and South Africa do take positions from time to time on regional and international economic and political issues which reveal that they are conscious of the importance of retaining their independence in the global arena. This would also be true of the leadership in Syria. The Russian leadership which has much more political muscle than many other governments in the world, partly because of its population and partly because of its recent history, is also not prepared to give in meekly to US hegemony. It appears to be keen to harness its military strength to advantage. The Indian government is also acutely aware of the fact that India is the world's second largest nation. Some of its leaders do not want her to become a mere client state of the US. In Southeast Asia, both Malaysia and Vietnam have shown that in spite of pursuing market oriented economic policies it is possible to preserve one's political independence.

Our quick survey of nations which continue to enjoy a degree of independence in the international arena leaves us with four states whose roles we have yet to explain. North Korea and Myanmar have isolated themselves from the global community and for that reason need not figure in our analysis. Iran is an outstanding example of a country which since its 1979 Revolution has thwarted numerous moves by the US and its allies and proxies to destroy its independence and sovereignty. In spite of an eight year war that was imposed on it, a failed invasion engineered by the US, a series of assassinations of its top political and religious leaders, economic sanctions by, and frozen assets in, the US, Iran has remained firm in its commitment to the Islamic ideals of its Revolution. Unlike Al-Qaeda—which is bitterly opposed to Iran and its Shia ideology – Iran has chosen to resist the US through the strengthening of its own sinews and through the forging of political and economic alliances at the regional and international level, guided by an approach to Islam that is less exclusive and more contemporary.

The other nation which offers a challenge to US hegemony is of course China. China, in a sense, is more indispensable to the global economy today than the US itself. It is an economic powerhouse which helps to create jobs and to keep businesses flourishing in a number of countries all over the world. Because of its economic power and its demographics—it is the world's most populous nation—Washington has become very wary of China and is going all out to contain the emerging giant. But China has developed good relations with countries in every continent and is generally held in high esteem everywhere.

China's position in the international arena today and the role played by a number of other countries, apart from the resistance of the Palestinian and Iraqi people, mean that it will not be easy to build or to sustain the American Empire. If anything, the concerted opposition to the Empire from a segment of civil society has made it even more difficult for the elite in Washington and its allies to impose their imperial hegemony upon the rest of humankind. In global forums to parallel UN Summits on themes ranging from environment and human rights to development and racism held from 1992 to 2001, to massive street protests against predatory globalization in the late nineties and the early years of this century, these civil society actors had made it abundantly clear that they wanted a better world. The causes they espoused and the positions they articulated culminated in the inauguration of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre Brazil in January 2001 — a forum which embodies the people's aspirations for global justice and global peace, and is the antithesis of the neo-liberal capitalist, hegemonic world that Washington and its allies seek to build.

While some civil society actors were attempting to formulate alternatives to the dominant global system, others sought to address specific global concerns — which also constitute a form of resistance to hegemonic interests. Civil society groups, together with some

governments and a section of the media, played a major role in the successful campaign to ban landmines. Though the US government and other powerful states were against the Landmines Treaty of 1997, civil society demonstrated that it has the ability to advance the cause of international law, however formidable the obstacles. Civil society also helped to make the Kyoto Accord of 1997 on global warming a reality — again in the face of strong opposition from the US and other states. The contribution of civil society in the creation of the International Criminal Court through the Rome Statute of 1998 would be a third example of how civil society resisted the hegemonic power of the US and in the process strengthened international law.

It is only when these trends within a segment of civil society expressed over a period of a decade or so are placed in their proper context that we will be able to appreciate the ability of civil society to mobilise millions and millions of people worldwide in the protest against the war in Iraq in March 2003. It is worth repeating over and over again that the Iraq protest was the most massive mobilization of people against war and for peace in history. It was the most significant expression of collective resistance against US hegemony that had ever taken place. It was the peoples of the world rejecting Empire !

Though the people failed to stop the war, they succeeded in de-legitimising the war. It was because of civil society mobilization that the war was rendered immoral and unjust. At the end of the day it showed that the Empire now has a formidable foe – in the people of the world.

Decline

However, resistance from outside alone will not be enough to bring down the Empire. It is one of the unerring laws of history that empires collapse partly because of internal weaknesses. The US's military adventures—two wars in three years—are beginning to strain its resources. The Iraq war in particular has become an albatross around the nation's neck.

It is one of the reasons why the federal deficit has increased in recent years. Calculated together with the trade deficit, the US's total public debt stood at 7.9 trillion dollars as of 15 August 2005. The US is the world's largest debtor nation. It is faced with other economic and social problems too, including unemployment, inadequate health care coverage, escalating fuel prices and a lack of investment in public infrastructures.

In the course of the last six months domestic opposition to the Iraq war has also been increasing. It is partly because the death toll among American troops in Iraq has been climbing steadily. At the time of writing, it has reached 2038. A majority of Americans now feel that the invasion of Iraq was a mistake. They would like the Bush Administration to set a deadline for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. It is significant that armed forces recruitment exercises in the last one year or so have consistently recorded shortfalls. In other words, fewer and fewer Americans are prepared to go and fight in Iraq.

In the midst of all this, the anti-war movement in the US has received a shot in the arm through a brave mother who lost her son in Iraq. Cindy Sheehan whose soldier son Casey was killed in combat has asked President Bush to explain to her why her son had to die. What was the noble cause he was fighting for, she wants to know. Through sheer perseverance she has drawn around her thousands of other protestors who are equally determined to continue the campaign till the last soldier is brought home. In fact, Sheehan is now talking of launching a nation-wide civil disobedience movement against the war.

If domestic support for the war is in rapid decline, the US Administration's international standing had slumped a long time ago. Even before the war started, Bush's international credibility was at a low ebb. After two years it is obvious to even his most faithful supporters that Iraq is a total mess. It explains why in the eyes of the world Bush is at his nadir.

When a leadership commands so little credibility at home and abroad, how can it hope to continue to build a global empire ? This is why one can be absolutely certain that the first global empire in history is doomed to fail. And humankind will have every reason to celebrate.

The above essay is based upon a lecture delivered at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia on 2 September 2005. The lecture was the university's Annual Public Lecture (national level).

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