CHARACTERISING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY -

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Introduction and Overview

As United States foreign policy has become more activist and controversial, terms used to describe it have become more varied and flamboyant. American policy abroad is now routinely characterised as not only unilateralist and arrogant but also hegemonic, militaristic, exploitative, provocative of terrorism, and destructive of international order. Furthermore, the adjective *imperial* has been resurrected by critical scholars and foreign rivals and embellished with various prefixes (new-, neo-, hegemonic-) and suffixes (imperium, imperial footprint, imperial design) by media and academic commentators.

In contrast, most Americans conceive their government's policies as measured, selfless, and just. A conceptual gap has opened between the US and much of the rest of the world that may jeopardise traditional patterns of international cooperation.

Given the extravagant criticism the United States has attracted because of its exercise of political will and military might in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the question arises whether the traditional concepts of international relations and foreign policy are adequate to encompass America's uniquely paramount standing in the international system. It is time for serious analysts to stand back from the debate and attempt conceptual clarification.

This Strategic Briefing Paper surveys traditional characterisations of US foreign policy starting with realism and idealism and moving on to isolationism, moralism, and pragmatism, then to variants of conservatism and liberalism.

It then considers theories critical of US policy such as parochialism and protectionism, economic exploitation, militarism and imperialism. Then mainstream American perspectives are presented, wherein US power is seen in the context of theories of liberal internationalism, hegemonic stability, soft power, and democratic peace.

The Paper queries whether the US is vulnerable to imperial overstretch and concludes 'not yet'. It observes furthermore that US power is a fact that needs to be dealt with by international relations (IR) theorists, foreign policy analysts, media commentators, and diplomats. It argues that if they are applied intelligently, existing concepts are still adequate to frame and describe US initiatives abroad. The Paper concludes with suggestions of how academics can assist in clarifying concepts and terms and thus improve the political debate.

Realism and Idealism

The classical Realist-Idealist dichotomy has served IR scholars well and provides a straightforward starting point for this Paper. It contrasts Realism and its corollaries self-help, economic nationalism, and balance of power to Idealism (or liberalism) and its corollaries multilateralism, economic interdependence, and balance of interests. But because US foreign policy is so varied, it can display realism, idealism, unilateralism and multilateralism simultaneously in different policy sectors, or *seriatim* in response to particular challenges and opportunities from abroad. Also, the conceptual contrast between realism and idealism arises from the Cold War debate, which is of fading relevance, and presupposes a rough balance of power, which is not an accurate description of a world in which America is predominant. More discriminating concepts are needed.

Isolationism, Moralism, and Pragmatism

Daniel Papp is one of the many American foreign policy scholars that adopt a more historically grounded approach. He suggests that US foreign policy springs from three American historical traditions, Isolationism, Moralism, and Pragmatism. Each gives rise to a particular posture depending on external circumstances, and the domestic political mood and leadership inclinations. But isolationism and moralism are uniquely American extremes, which reduces their usefulness as comparative categories. Nevertheless US foreign policy is pragmatic most of the time, and therefore comparable to the foreign policies of other powers. American exceptionalism may be endemic as an attitude, and demonstrable as a fact, but it is muted or dormant in policy in normal times.

Four Foreign Policy Traditions

Pundit Walter Russell Mead elaborates the historical approach by delineating four US traditions according to their degree of focus on strength at home and activity abroad. (See Figure 1). Each tradition arises from the initiatives of a particular president, and together they provide a menu of choice for current presidents, and at the same time a four-fold paradigm for foreign policy analysts. The presumption is that the four traditions, or combinations of them, are uniquely American.

George W. Bush began his presidency as a Traditional Conservative but crossed over to Neoconservatism after September 11. But some members of his Administration, notably Colin Powell, maintain a commitment to tenets of Neoliberalism that characterised the Clinton Administration.

Figure 1
Four US foreign policy traditions, the presidents that launched them, and modern exemplars

Traditional liberalism (Jefferson) *Traditional liberals focus on promoting democratic, social, and market values at home.* Modern exemplars: FDR, Lyndon Johnson, Democratic Party. They are idealists by example rather than proselytisers.

Traditional conservatism (Jackson) *Traditional conservatives emphasise promotion of the physical security and economic strength of the American state.* Modern exemplars: Inter-War presidents, domestic political, ethnic, commercial, and union leaders who tend to protectionism and isolationism. Also the Republican Party, Eisenhower, Kissinger, and George H.W. Bush inasmuch as they were cautious 'realists', reluctantly balancing power abroad to enhance safety at home, not change the world.

Neoliberalism (Wilson) *Neoliberals emphasise the spread of democratic and free market values throughout the world.* Modern exemplars: Truman, Carter, Clinton, and some members of the George W. Bush Administration such as Colin Powell). They are 'idealists' (or 'moralists' or 'evangelists') abroad, but in practice tend to be multilateralists. They are sometimes called 'liberal internationalists'.

Neoconservatism (Hamilton) *Neoconservatives seek to advance American security by vigorous global initiatives.* Modern exemplars are Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. They are muscular global security managers ready to act militarily, unilaterally and pre-emptively against threats. Their promotion of liberal values and regime change is a means to the end of greater security for the US.

Critical Characterisations of US Policy

Bush's muscular Neoconservatism has reawakened old critiques of US foreign policy and stimulated new ones. These include:

- Parochialism and Protectionism critiques, that US policy is an unprincipled outcome of pressure-group politics, bureaucratic infighting, and Congressional posturing, not anchored to national interest.
- The Warfare State, Garrison State and Preaetorianism critiques, that the military and defence industry dominate policy-making.
- Globalisation, that trade and investment are vehicles for exploitation by the US, also called neo-Marxism, structuralism, or world systems theory.
- The Imperialism critique, that the US aims to occupy or pressure any state that disagrees with its policies and 'run the world' in disregard of the UN and international law.

While most of these critiques have been around for decades in the Revisionist tradition of American scholarship, they have gained new life in reaction to recent US activism abroad. The criticism of globalisation prior to September 11, and the decrying of US imperialism in the past year, have been prominent on the lips of critics in the Middle East and the Third World and more recently in Europe, especially Germany and France.

Added to the post-World War II globe-spanning deployment of US troops, the recent military conquest and military administration of Iraq, and the pressure by the Bush Administration on Syria, Iran and North Korea, make the charge of US imperialism superficially plausible. But the indictment goes back to the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the US invasion of Cuba and the annexation of The Philippines and Guam, when world conditions and US motives were very different from today.

Sober political scientists and historians should point out that applying the term imperialism to US military deployments and occasional interventions for specific purposes for limited periods of time is loose and tendentious. Current US policy is not on track to conquer and occupy a new colonial empire as did the European powers of the 19th Century. See Figure 2. If the term imperialism is stretched to mean the pursuit of national interest by exercising influence backed by power, then it encompasses all major powers' foreign and economic policies with the sole difference that the US is simply the largest and most successful of many ambitious states. If imperialism means American opening, trading and investing in markets around the world as in 'economic imperialism', or the influence of Hollywood, basketball, and permissive lifestyle as in 'cultural imperialism', the term loses any discriminatory utility and devalues to mere rhetorical disapprobation.

Figure 2
Imperial America? Countries in which US bases have been closed, troops sharply reduced, or military visits curtailed, in the last 20 years

China	Nicaragua
Egypt	Panama
Ethiopia	Philippines
Germany	Puerto Rico
Granada	Saudi Arabia
Greece	South Korea
Guam	Spain
Japan	Thailand
Lebanon	Tunisia
New Zealand	Turkey

Sympathetic Characterisations of US Policy

Mainstream American political scientists concede the same facts as the critics but put them into a different context, so they see a different America. They acknowledge US predominance in the world, but don't interpret it as domination, bad citizenship, or lawlessness. As Michael Glennon shows from a Realist perspective, the current crisis over Iraq merely confirms the fact that great states will exercise power in pursuit of their vital interests, or to be blunt, power will trump law. Since 1945 Washington has treated the United Nations and international law as adjuncts rather than determinants of its security policies. But the US is a law-abiding UN member most of the time.

US scholars tend to view the US as a gentle giant that is normally sociable, as portrayed in Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's Complex Interdependence theory. When the US giant rears up, it is for good reason, and the action usually serves the interests of the rest of the international society as well as those of the US, such as leading coalitions of the willing against aggressors or tyrants or pressuring protectionist governments to lower trade barriers and subsidies.

This line of thought leads to the Hegemonic Stability Theory put forward by Charles Kindleburger, Robert Gilpin, and John Ikenberry among others. The policies of the US giant constrain wrongdoers and encourage world order, thus allowing industry to flourish and commerce to flow with minimum risk of theft and violence. World order produced by US hegemony is a public good, freely available and universally consumed. Why doesn't US hegemony provoke a counter-balancing by fearful rival states as Realists would predict? Nye suggests this is because the US exercises Soft Power, that is, its values are attractive and are shared by many other governments and peoples. These values include democracy, law, human rights, and open markets.

The theory of the Democratic Peace, foreshadowed by Immanuel Kant, elaborated and tested by a host of US political scientists such as David A. Lake, and incorporated into the periodic US National Security Strategy reports by both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, is an extension of this notion. Its corollary is the theory of the Market Peace. Together they observe that democracies and free market states have almost never practiced aggression, so promotion of democracy and markets throughout the world will enhance the chances for world peace. And both are morally right inasmuch as each enhances human freedom of choice.

Rather more extreme is the notion of a unique Unipolar Moment celebrated by Neoconservative writers such as Charles Krauthammer, Robert Kagan, and William Kristol and manifested implicitly by proactive officials such as Richard Perle, John Bolton, Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. The historic opportunity presented by US dominance should be exploited to thwart current and potential challengers to US hegemony, pre-emptively, unilaterally, and militarily if necessary, thus making the world safe for the US and every other law-abiding government as well. Peripheral in the 1990s, the Unipolarists were empowered by President George W. Bush and their prescriptions given wide credibility by the September 11 attacks. It is they whose project in the Reagan era was the reshaping of the Communist world and now under Bush is the reforming of the political systems of the Middle East.

But traditional religious, ethnic and cultural leaders will conspire to oppose the US, warns Samuel Huntington in his Clash of Civilizations thesis. They will react perversely, and sometimes aggressively and violently, to Western values in defence of their privileged political status, or out of frustration with their dispossession, envy, or anger at offences real, imagined, and manufactured. Others will be sincerely affronted by new values undermining their hallowed traditions and give tacit support to the less scrupulous such as terrorists. In any case Huntington advises the US, the West, and like-minded states to retain their political, military, and economic advantages and to work together to defend themselves and their hard-won civic and human values against the traditionalists' backlash.

The Clash of Civilizations thesis was scorned in the 1990s but is rapidly gaining credibility in US eyes. It is validated every time militant Islamists reject out of hand US reform proposals, scorn offers to negotiate as venal and imperialistic, and publicly condone anti-US and anti-Israel terrorism. It is fuelled by the obstinacy of China in building up arms while denying civil liberties and Taiwan's autonomy, and by the hostile rhetoric of North Korea and Iran as they covertly develop WMDs and test missiles. Some Americans conclude that such regimes are irretrievably antithetical to US interests, talk is pointless, and pre-emptive defence or regime change are the only options left.

Imperial Overstretch?

This brings us to the Imperial Overstretch critique espoused by Senator William Fulbright, Paul Kennedy, and Ted Galen Carpenter among others. Imperial overstretch is warned against by American Conservatives and hoped for by critics from Europe, Russia, China and the Middle East. The big question is: If the 'unipolar moment' is to be prolonged and the clash of civilizations managed, and if the US is losing the support of key Western allies and alienating much of the Third World over the Iraq war, can US hegemony be sustained?

The answer is yes…for a while. The US has spent less than one half of one percent of this year's GDP on the war on Iraq without having to raise taxes. War casualties were fewer than auto accident fatalities over a long weekend, the Fourth Armored Division was not even needed in the thrust to Baghdad, and US troops,

warplanes and aircraft carrier battle groups had started home before the war was even a month old. Previously sceptical governments and publics are bandwagoning as US success in Iraq emerges from the cloud of media scepticism. European governments brushed aside in April 2003 are now searching for ways to re-engaged with the US without losing face. On their side, Bush Administration leaders, nudged by Tony Blair, are already softening towards a United Nations 'vital role' in Iraq and will soon be as amenable to burden sharing in future as their predecessors were in the past. The US may be experiencing s*tretch* but to predict o*ver*stretch, implying bankruptcy, collapse, retrenchment, and a new cycle of isolationism, is premature.

Challenges and Recommendations

But whether the US is dominant or domineering, hegemonic or imperialistic, is less important than how other states react to the fact of US power. Much will depend on standpoint, as Robert Kagan's stark contrast of US and European outlooks, or the different slants of CNN and Al Jazeera, suggest. Those who benefit will applaud and support the US, and those who are hurt by it will resist and conspire to oppose. Nevertheless, US power will prevail for the foreseeable future, so the task is to manage it for the greater good. The immediate challenge to leaders in the US, and in the Middle East and Asia as well, is to resist the temptation to escalate their anti-US rhetoric, polarize the world, and provoke a new cycle of pre-emptive attack and reactive violence. They must forestall US-Arab, Christian-Islamic, Western-Asian, or any other version of a clash of civilizations.

Academic foreign policy analysts can play a role, building conceptual bridges over the chasms opening between the US, the West, and the rest by sharpening perceptions, clarifying thinking, and putting the debate on a civil footing. Six recommendations are offered. While cursory, they can serve as starting points for qualification, elaboration, and augmentation.

- Rather than decrying the fact of American power or its alleged illegal employment, turn instead to analysing its uses and evaluating its consequences.
- Acknowledge the ability of other governments such as New Zealand's to resist the influence of the US in specific policy sectors or circumstances.
- Take note of the substantial elements of cooperation and multilateralism manifested by US policy, and good US policy outcomes, and encourage them.
- Put US policy outcomes in comparative perspective by asking: who could have done it better? Or what if nobody did it?
- Put current US policy into historical and electoral-cycle perspectives by asking: how might new leaders, e.g. Democrats, do it differently in future?
- Explore how other states or regional groupings such as the EU can augment their power and exercise it benignly, thus supplementing US power and making its exercise less necessary or frequent.

Conclusion

Are the concepts of international relations and foreign policy that scholars are familiar with obsolete with regard to US foreign policy in this post-September 11, unipolar era? Not yet. The approaches sketched above, taken in appropriate combinations, encompass all that is significant even though no single approach is comprehensive. Straining to produce neologisms such as 'hyperpower' (French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin) or stretch old terms such as 'imperialism' (*Foreign Affairs* and *Newsweek* commentator Fareed Zakaria) is not only unnecessary but also can politicise public discussion, taint scholarly analysis, and drive wedges between the US and its partners.

Serious analysts are urged to employ words, concepts, and theories familiar to policy-makers and the educated public, and to avoid capture by headlines such as 'destruction of the UN', 'erosion of international law', or 'new world disorder' attributed to US actions. They should stick to what they do best: conscientious analysis of the workings of the international system and balanced assessment of the predominant role of the United States in it.

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