

What are the Main Factors Limiting the Power of the United States in World Politics?

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GUY WALFORD, MAY 24 2013

The United States has unanimously been considered the most powerful nation in the world, following the collapse of the only other Superpower, the USSR, and the subsequent end to the Cold War in 1991. However, the 21st century has seen increasing emergence of limitations to American power. America's hard power; its military and economic influence, is rapidly amassing opposition from ascending nations such as China. Equally, two decades of careless foreign policy, especially under the Bush administration (2001-2009) as well as limited spending on soft power institutions has opened the door for other nations to begin spreading their soft influence around the globe. In this essay, I intend to promote that whilst America remains, currently, the dominant military force in the world and probably will do for some time, the economic crisis of 2008, for which America was largely blamed (Nye, 2010:143), has put huge strains on their economic power, as well as their soft influence throughout the world. The preternatural growth of China; the world's largest exporter nation, both before and throughout the global economic crisis has seen it recently, but nonetheless ostensibly emerge as the main obstructer to US global hegemony. The rise of China offers considerable limits to both America's hard and soft power, and will thus be regarded the most fundamental limitation to US power. Alongside China's emergence, I will concentrate on America's dependence on foreign oil, and persistent errors in foreign diplomacy that America continues to make, as the most prevalent limitations to US power in world politics.

Establishing a definition of power is paramount in order to assess what limits to power the US face. Weber (in Swedberg, 2005:205) defines power as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out [their] own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.' Implicit in this definition of power, is a notion of influence; the focal purpose of this essay is to determine what inhibits the US from influencing other states and non-state actors across the globe. A distinction between hard power and soft power – first coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 – is also important to fully distinguish where and why US power is limited (Nye, 1990). Hard power relates to use of coercive economic and military authority in order to achieve your goals. Soft power utilises non-economic and non-military methods to persuade states to emulate your world-view, thereby furthering your own security. Ernest J Wilson (2008:115-116) points to the use of "smart power" – establishing a capacity to understand when the use of one kind of power would be favourable to the other, and employing this type of power correctly – as the best way of ensuring the efficient and effective advancement of an actor's goals. There is little illusion that America has not always used its power intelligently over the past decade or so, and this essay intends to probe the implications of this.

China is a nation at the forefront of most respects of world politics today. Its unprecedented growth, even through a world economic downturn, has seen Goldman Sachs advance the date that it expects China's economy to surpass that of the United States to 2027 (Nye, 2010:143). China's consistent economic performance has persuaded nations to switch allegiance from the United States, and trade more with China; for instance 'China is now the key trading partner of Brazil' (Steingart & Wagner, 2009). Compounding the notion that China is beginning to fiercely challenge the economic dominance of the US, is that as of June 2011, China held over 1 trillion US dollars in their foreign reserves (Arsenault, 2011). The effects of the rise of China on US economic power are therefore twofold; not only is the emergence of China providing the US with an economic rival around the globe, limiting US influence, but the huge American currency reserve that China has amassed gives China a large amount of power over the US. The US

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increasingly has to take into account Chinese interests when acting abroad – and this necessarily hinders their influence, and thus power.

‘China has always had an attractive traditional culture, but now it is entering the realm of global popular culture as well’ (Nye, 2008). Whilst China’s economic fruition has had negative impact on America’s hard power, China’s recent focus on soft power development is also beginning to obstruct US influence. The “Beijing Consensus” – which proposes the application of a market economy, but an authoritarian government – has become increasingly popular throughout the developing world (largely due to China’s consistent economic performance) (Nye 2010:144). Ramo (2004:4) highlights that China’s method of development offers developing countries a new chance to grow and prosper, after the “Washington consensus” (reinforced by international organisations) has failed to bring all countries that adopted American economic practices opulence. The challenge to US power here is evident; the admirable development China has managed to achieve without adhering to American convention is something other countries are rapidly becoming more aware of, and this will inescapably hurt America’s ability to persuade developing countries to adopt their practices.

China’s increase in soft power is not entirely coincidental, and simply based on their economic breakthrough. China has recently sought a much greater interest in developing their public diplomacy, in order to harness greater soft power, and develop a more positive world image (Wang, 2005:258). In a broad attempt to get the rest of the world to accept China’s rise to power, they have begun to involve considerable resources into developing their soft power – for instance by training thousands of Chinese language teachers at Confucius institutes around the globe (Wang, 2005:264). China is making impressive steps to integrate itself in to the world as a peaceful, diplomatic front-runner, and its concentration on soft power in recent years is eating into America’s ability to strongly influence the rest of the world with its culture.

In recent years, America has accumulated a considerable amount of bad press on the world stage. Bush conducted operation “Iraqi Freedom” in 2003 without a UN mandate as he proceeded to invade Iraq. The unpopularity of the war was compounded by the virulent notion – supported by many influential people within the US itself such as Alan Greenspan (former head of the US central bank) – that it was a resource driven conflict (Adams, 2007). This has profoundly damaged America’s image across the globe, as this invasion was thought by many to be indicative of an irresponsible world power. The Iraq war highlighted that whilst the US might endeavour to portray itself as committed to multilateralism, when it chooses, it still maintains the capacity to act self-interestedly – potentially to others detriment (Layne, 2006:24). Moreover, the Iraqi conflict revealed to the rest of the world that, although US military strength is hugely imposing, it is not as effective as perhaps once thought. ‘The Bush administration had expected operation “Iraqi Freedom” to be a short, tidy war with a decisively tidy outcome. In the event it turned out to be a long, dirty (and very costly) war yielding, at best, exceedingly ambiguous results’ (Bacevich, 2011:1).

America’s involvement in Afghanistan – another war, which kept the US engaged for much longer than they previously anticipated – as well as in Iraq, brings Wilson’s concept of “smart power” to colour. Globalization has increasingly brought power to nations who develop the capacity to manipulate and create knowledge and information that is grasped favourably by the world’s media (Wilson, 2008:112). Arguably, America’s intrinsic compulsion to fund hard power institutions very heavily has led to neglect of soft power institutions. America’s policy elite’s inability to register effectively when and how to apply the power they have – especially under the Bush administration – has in fact been detrimental to their power, as it has created a world view less sensitive to America’s intentions (Wilson, 2008:113).

The alliances America has made with some countries have created some controversy, and in some cases have imposed substantial limitations to their soft power. The close relationship America holds with Israel has come under criticism as some of Israel’s actions in the Middle East create instability in a region that the US needs to keep stable (Kinzer, 2011). Furthermore, Chomsky highlights that the US have faced obloquy for stressing that Israel is seeking negotiations with Palestinians over land ownership without preconditions (where the Palestinians refuse), where in fact the opposite is more true (Chomsky, 2012). Strong links with controversial nation states such as Israel further allude to America acting self-interestedly – Chomsky even goes as far to suggest that ‘the U.S. supports democracy if, and only if, the outcomes accord with its strategic and economic objectives...’ (Chomsky, 2012). It is a pensive

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perspective to view the US as being only pro-democracy when it suits them, but the problem Chomsky highlights is clear; acting in the pursuit of their own interests as opposed to as a hegemon looking after multi-lateral world issues creates distrust from other nations towards the US. This distrust impedes the US' ability to convince others to adopt their customs, and thus limits their soft power.

Oil is a universally essential resource, but because of its huge demand and finite reserve, it has become increasingly scarce. The US currently spends a staggering billion dollars (roughly) on foreign oil a day, and with the price of oil continuously rising, this is an expensive problem (Klare, 2011). Perhaps more importantly, however, an innate dependency on oil means that the US cannot easily pick and choose where it imports it from. For instance, the US recently increased its imports from Saudi Arabia – a region that is relatively unstable, and potential conflict could seriously harm US' ability to acquire oil (Krauss, 2012). Foreign dependency on oil presents a potentially huge limitation on US power as they may be forced to adhere to the requirements of oil rich nations, in order to stay on favourable terms.

Trade is not the only problem connected to oil, however; scarcity in oil has led competing powers such as the US, Russia, and recently China to stake claim to oil-fields that will become accessible in the coming decades (Rosenthal, 2011). The severity of the conflict that might be caused because of this fresh oil, so to speak, is difficult to determine. However it is certainly an issue that the US will have to approach carefully, and certainly if conflict is to be avoided, co-operation with other nations involved will be a necessity. No matter how imposing the US' power on the world, its dependency on scarce resources like that of oil will remain fundamentally important, and that is why America's increasing reliance on foreign oil – the distribution of which it can't completely control – creates a serious limit on US power.

The US still remains the current predominant power in world politics, but there is no question that its 'power to get its way in the world is waning' (David: 2011). The Economic Crisis has shaken the American economy, previously thought by many to be the safest in the world, and damaged the credibility of the "Washington Consensus" across the globe. The Rise of China has compounded America's loss of economic and soft power from the economic crisis. Their economic development has both promoted their rivalry with the US significantly, and attracted other nations to imitate more of their customs – and thus less of the US'. Poor foreign policy – particularly in the Middle East – has further infringed US soft power, and alluded to the diminishing power of the US military. Increasing dependency on foreign oil is progressively rendering the US subject to other nations' behests, and convoluted rights to future oil ownership could lead to stark tension between the US and other powerful nations. The next decade promises to be crucial for US power development; co-operation with rising powers, most importantly China, could prove critical for the US to maintain substantial power in the long-run in world politics.

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