Managing Global Security beyond 'Pax Americana'

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We often hear that we live in a world where power and wealth are increasingly decentralised. The world is indeed changing, in some cases rapidly, as prior chapters in this book have documented. Despite this, there has been one constant since the end of the Second World War – the United States of America (US) has been the dominant military and economic power in the world and the manager of global security. The phrase 'Pax Americana' can therefore be used to describe an era without major war post-1945, overseen by the stabilising force and military might of the United States. IR calls actors that are noticeably above others in military and economic terms 'hegemons'. While there have certainly been regional hegemons in the past, there has never been a global hegemon in known history – until now.

Today, the bulk of the citizens of earth would surely be able to identify the sitting American president by name, or at least recognise their face. This cannot be said for any other leader. Many debates in International Relations circle around the question of whether such a situation is desirable or sustainable. In order to address these debates, it is important to assess how dominant the United States is and whether the situation is likely to continue. As we ponder this we must also understand that a debate is underway not just internationally but also within American society over whether it should continue to play a global role. This chapter explores such questions in a direct and sometimes provocative way: the eventual answers, whatever they may be, will determine the next era of international relations. We should therefore not shy away from pondering the implications of a world beyond Pax Americana.

From isolation to global superpower

The Second World War was the hinge point for establishing American dominance. Prior to that war, the United States had focused on continental expansion, making sure its neighbours recognised its regional dominance and pre-empting the influence of European powers in the Americas. George Washington, the first American president, warned in his farewell address that the US should avoid 'entangling alliances'. Another president, John Quincy Adams, said that America should not go abroad searching 'for monsters to destroy' and that its glory was in liberty, not dominion. The United States did, nevertheless, dabble in imperialism during the late nineteenth century, toppling a decaying Spanish empire to help liberate Cuba and acquiring Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines in the process. But, having won its own freedom in 1776 from British colonial control, there was little desire in America for it to become a colonial power itself. Even involvement in the First World War could not shake the US out of its preferred isolationist shell. The United States entered the war late, brought its forces home quickly afterwards and refused to help enforce a peace its president helped design due to the US Congress rejecting membership of the League of Nations.

The Second World War was truly global in scope and revolutionary in its impact. The United States was drawn into the conflict, again late, by German submarine warfare in the Atlantic and a surprise attack on its military facilities at Pearl Harbor by the Japanese in December 1941. When the war began in 1939 there were several powers contesting for global leadership, but the United States was not among them. The United Kingdom and France had sizeable empires. Adolf Hitler was determined to create a new German 'Reich' (or empire) that would last at least

1,000 years. Imperial Japan was seeking dominance in Asia and had already occupied parts of China and all of Korea. Finally, the Soviet Union had proved that a communist revolution was possible, and prospects were good that other nations would follow suit and communism would spread globally. By the war's end Germany and Japan were devastated, defeated countries, occupied by foreign powers. Among the victors, the United Kingdom and France were spent powers. Their empires were fragmenting and their economies near-destroyed. The Soviet Union had suffered the most significant losses of all, primarily through battling a German invasion. Despite winning the war, the cost of victory for the allied powers had been high. In contrast, by 1945 the United States had shaken off the effects of the Great Depression, the global economic collapse of the 1930s, and was relatively untouched by the war. It had demonstrated its power by mobilising and equipping a military of over 16 million. As the war ended it had military forces stationed across the globe and was the world's dominant economic power.

The United States took several lessons from the Second World War, the most important of which was that it had to be involved in managing global security in order to protect its own security. It was too big and too powerful for others not to challenge even if it had no interest in challenging them. Because international relations as a system is anarchical, with no ruler, powerful states tend to make other states feel insecure by default. Even if powerful states do not behave threateningly, there is a fear that they may do so in the future. This leads to competition and the risk of future conflict as states seek to maximise their security by attempting to increase their relative power. In the past this was typically done by acquiring territory, as described in chapter one. But in a post-war era characterised by decolonisation and the presence of nuclear weapons, security calculations were in flux. To monitor the situation, the United States chose to be involved globally, designing the international frameworks for commerce and governance at conferences it convened in Bretton Woods and San Francisco, both in America, and joining the United Nations which was headquartered in New York City. Essentially, the Americans created a new system of international relations, both economic and political, and placed themselves in the driving seat. Although the bulk of its forces were demobilised at the war's end, the United States maintained the network of bases it had built during the war and retained a substantial military presence in both Europe and Asia. At home, it created, via the National Security Act of 1947, the governmental framework for coordinating the development and exercise of global power. In short, the United States was now permanently constituted to be a different type of actor.

Having helped destroy fascism in the Second World War, the United States set itself the task of first containing and then undermining the two remaining rival systems of global order – colonialism and communism. The test came quickly with the Soviet Union's push to dominate Eastern Europe and its acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1949. Many American politicians feared that the Soviet Union could dominate all of Europe and Asia – an area with the industrial resources and military potential to match or even surpass the United States. When China turned communist in 1949 and other nations looked set to follow, these fears seemed to have a basis in reality. A series of confrontations and crises that we now call the Cold War became the new normal in international relations. The conflict marked a two-power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union spanning more than forty years. IR calls this a bipolar system, as two principal actors are responsible for shaping global affairs. In the end, with the Soviet Union's internal collapse between 1989 and 1991, there was one superpower standing – the United States. The question was, would this mean that bipolarity would give way to unipolarity (the dominance of one power) or multipolarity (many centres of power)?

On global watch

Today, the American population of 325 million is the third highest in the world. Still, that total is less than five per cent of the world population and small by comparison with the billion-plus populations of China and India. However, the United States accounts on its own for over 40 per cent of global military expenditures, exceeding those of the next ten nations combined. The current amount it spends on defence per year is similar (adjusted for inflation) to its military spending during the Cold War when it faced a direct military competitor. Perhaps more significant is the legacy effect, as the United States has been investing tens of billions of dollars per year in defence technology since the Second World War. That investment has built a capacity that gives it a peerless military advantage in nearly every aspect of warfare. As we enter a period known as the 'Revolution in Military Affairs', when drones and other types of advanced – and even autonomous – weaponry become the new norm, the United States has a significant head start.

The United States Armed Forces is the only military with the ability to carry out truly global operations. It has a worldwide network of nearly 700 bases and other military-related facilities that supports its overseas deployment of more than 200,000 military personnel. Command and control for these forces is provided by several redundant and protected communications, intelligence and surveillance systems. Orbiting above the earth are dozens of US military satellites. Constantly circling the skies above several of the earth's trouble spots is an air armada of American military drones. Finally, roaming the world's oceans are ten US aircraft carrier groups – perhaps the most illustrative statistic as no other state has more than two. This military is substantially bigger than is needed to defend the American homeland. The United States is a geographically advantaged nation with oceans on two of its sides and non-hostile states (Canada and Mexico) on the other two. It is a nation that is hard to invade because of those oceans and even harder to intimidate because of its scale and wealth. Although reachable by missiles, the United States maintains a formidable nuclear deterrent force that has global reach.

The US military is scaled to maintain what it describes as global stability. In other words, the tempering of regional conflicts via deterrence and engagement. But, no one elected the United States to the position of global security manager. When the Cold War ended, no force stood in the way. It had the global presence, the alliance and aid relationships and the extra military resources to intervene anywhere to prevent conflicts from escalating and to provide assistance when famine or natural disasters struck. Some viewed this as a moral obligation as they believed American leadership was an indispensable force for good in the world. For others, the United States was acting more narrowly and using the opportunity of a lack of a rival to embed its position as the world's dominant power and gain a long-term advantage over any future rivals.

A world full of troubles

The United States has been constantly engaged in military operations of one type or another since the end of the Cold War. The seizure of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1990 is an early example. The United States led an international coalition to liberate Kuwait soon afterwards in what was known as the Gulf War. Unlike the second US-Iraq war 12 years later in 2003, the Gulf War of 1991 was authorised by the United Nations Security Council. Another mission for American forces just after the Cold War ended was the humanitarian effort in Somalia. Warring factions there had disrupted the distribution of food, causing widespread hunger and the potential for a major famine. Under a United Nations mandate, a US-led coalition sought to bring relief and stability to Somalia. Fighting among the factions soon spiralled out of control and the aid mission collapsed as the United States and other nations withdrew troops from the chaos to prevent any more of their personnel being killed or wounded. Somalia had become the classic failed state, a land and a people without a functioning government. The United States, chastened by the Somalian experience, has since been hesitant to help in other such cases. It turned away from intervening in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, as did other members of the international community. However, it has gradually returned to involvement in Africa via training and supporting the regional coalitions acting as peacekeepers in African Union and/or United Nations operations, especially those directed against militant Islamic terrorist groups like Boko Haram. Significant effort has also gone into humanitarian projects related to fighting international piracy off the Horn of Africa and combatting pandemics such as Ebola and HIV/AIDS.

Elsewhere, the nations freed by the collapse of the Soviet Union face continuing problems as Russia seeks to reclaim lost territory and protect the interests of ethnic Russian populations caught on what they see as the wrong side of new borders. Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and has also intervened in parts of Georgia and Moldova. And Ukraine endures a Russian-supported rebellion in its disaffected eastern regions. Although the United States now rotates combat units through Northern and Eastern European nations, and is constructing a ballistic missile defence system on NATO's eastern frontier, West Europeans have been content to be mostly worried observers, concerned about Russian behaviour but also concerned about their trade with Russia. There seems no strong appetite in Europe to rise to the Russian challenge in any way other than via economic sanctions and punitive diplomacy.

Closer to home, in Latin America, there are constant problems with poverty, drugs and corruption. Haiti, the region's poorest country, has had US troops as frequent visitors – for instance, to help the government survive a coup attempt and to provide relief after a devastating earthquake. Columbia required substantial assistance to suppress a

persistent insurgency, fed in part by narcotics traffic. Less visibly, the United States helps Mexico cope with wars among rival drug gangs that have cost thousands of lives and threaten the stability of the Mexican government. Several Central American nations suffer similarly. Through the Mexican border and the Caribbean flows a flood of migrants seeking to escape poverty and crime by heading north into the United States.

More than six decades after the 1953 truce that ended the Korean War, one of the first battles of the Cold War, the United States still keeps nearly 30,000 troops in South Korea to protect it from North Korea. American forces also keep Japan separated from its neighbours, several of whom have territorial disputes with Japan and outstanding grievances tied to Japan's behaviour prior to and during the Second World War. The most significant of the neighbours is China, whose expansive designs in the South China Sea appear to threaten the interests of many Southeast Asian states as well as the right of free passage for shipping through one of the most travelled international shipping routes. The US Navy has stepped up its patrols in the region and other elements of the US military, primarily the Marine Corps, have begun rotating units to Australia in what some have called the 'Pivot', a US military rebalance towards to Asia.

This quick contextual sweep across the globe does not reflect the central concern the United States has when it looks out to the world. Since 9/11, when it was attacked by Al-Qaeda, its main military preoccupation has been in fighting transnational terrorism. This includes a 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, where the leaders of Al-Qaeda were being harboured by the Taliban regime. It also includes drone and other raids in Pakistan where some of the terrorist leadership had fled. Most notably, perhaps, it also includes an invasion of Iraq in 2003 to depose Saddam Hussein, supposedly to eliminate his efforts to develop and stockpile weapons of mass destruction. Both Afghan and Iraqi actions succeeded quickly in removing the offending regimes, but led to ongoing and costly counter-insurgency campaigns that have destabilised neighbouring countries. The so-called 'Global War on Terror' has ensured that the gaze of the United States remains cast widely, especially in those regions where terrorism is prevalent such as the Middle East and North Africa. This extends beyond traditional military means into areas of intelligence and cyber warfare.

A world full of free riders?

The United States does not always act alone. Often it is in a coalition of one kind or another. Some of the coalitions are authorised by United Nations Security Council mandates such as those in Somalia and Haiti. Others are under NATO auspices, as in Bosnia, Kosovo and Libya. Others are the product of the recruitment of 'coalitions of the willing', such as those formed for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 when the United Nations would not approve the war. Coalitions are important because they add political legitimacy at home and abroad to interventions with a high risk of substantial casualties and long-term costs. The American public typically sees the participation of other nations as an endorsement of its own leaders' wisdom in deciding to intervene. That being said, as Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated in their initial phases, the United States is perfectly willing to act on its own when it feels there are serious threats to its security. This is also the case when there are complications or delays in gaining international approval and assistance. Acting alone is often referred to as 'unilateralism'. Strong states such as the United States can be prone to acting unilaterally because they do not always feel bound by shared rules or norms. However, this can have consequences and it is more common for states to at least appeal to multilateral principles and practices so they do not incur the wrath of the international community. The issue with the United States is that, arguably, it has the power to withstand any such criticism.

American politicians complain occasionally about the burdens the United States carries, but not often and not with conviction. NATO was created to contain the westward spread of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The principle of NATO is that it offers a collective security guarantee for all of its members. If one member is attacked, all others are treaty-bound to respond to the aggression. In the Cold War context, this was to deter any communist attack on Western Europe so that communism would not spread any further. However, it has expanded greatly since the end of the Cold War, even absorbing many former republics of the Soviet Union. NATO endures in the post-communist era because collective security is a positive thing for states, especially those newly independent states that fear Russian resurgence. But, few of the newer or older members of NATO meet the alliance's goal of allocating 2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defence. Instead, they are safe in the knowledge that the United

States, which invests nearly twice that, will be there to do the heavy lifting when a crisis arises.

This raises the larger issue, which is that it appears to some in America that other rich states find excuses to do little for global security or even their own defence. Japan and Germany, the world's third and fourth biggest economies, seem to prefer to be on what is now mostly a voluntary parole for their Second World War crimes. Japan spends about 1 per cent of its GDP on defence. Germany does participate in some United Nations and NATO-sponsored operations, but largely avoids a combat role. Both nations are shielded from nuclear threats by a US deterrence policy that promises them protection from challenges by other nuclear powers. The United Kingdom and France, the fifth and sixth largest global economies, do contribute to global security somewhat in proportion to their wealth. Both, however, have found it hard to prioritise military spending as they embark on domestic austerity policies in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. South Korea has an economy just outside the world's top ten. It is at least 25 times richer than North Korea on a per capita basis and has double the North's population. Yet it leaves the task of defending itself primarily to the United States. South Korea rarely participates in coalitions to help others, and when it does, as in the case of Afghanistan, it sends non-combat troops. The Scandinavian countries, particularly Demark and Sweden, are exceptions, but Spain, Italy and a half-dozen other developed countries seem to prefer to opt out from most of the hard work in international coalitions. Going beyond Western nations and those with historic ties to the United States; China and India are big in many dimensions but both are absorbed with their own security interests. China has the world's second-largest economy and India the ninth. Both are greatly expanding their military power, but both limit their participation in international peacekeeping efforts and global security issues. China's recent focus has been on asserting itself as Asia's dominant power, causing unease among its neighbours who had grown accustomed to a more inward-looking China.

Finding an alternative world order

As the Cold War was ending US president George H. W. Bush and Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev declared there was a new world order emerging that would be based upon cooperation between the two superpowers. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, only one super power remained to provide order. Filled with both goodwill and vast hubris, the United States has set itself an unsustainable task of maintaining global security. It is unsustainable because such a world order is in neither America's interest nor in the interests of the world at large. Although it is possible to concoct long causal chains that tie American safety or prosperity to the fate of failing states in Africa or ethnic conflict in the Balkans, most global problems are distant and of marginal importance to the United States. On the contrary, American involvement in these distant problems can be said to threaten American interests. Interventions often produce enemies, with some of those affected assuming it is not altruistic motives that drive the United States but a desire to steal their assets or slander their religion. And there are real costs of blood and resources. Americans (and of course non-Americans) die in these distant fights and domestic needs such as education and healthcare are neglected as vast sums of money are diverted to military operations.

Those challenged by the United States, including Russia, China and many in the Middle East, deny the legitimacy of its actions and see the United States as a neo-imperial power meddling in the affairs of others. Even America's allies worry about the wisdom of its interventions, most especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003. People the world over concern themselves with who is going to be the next president of the United States, even though they cannot vote in its elections, because of the potential impact a presidential choice has on US foreign policy and its readiness to intervene in their states. Some Americans hope that the United States will come to its strategic senses and abandon the quest to manage global security (Gholz, Press and Sapolsky 1997; Posen 2014). Others believe that the expansion of the welfare state, especially with the implementation of national health insurance and the aging of the population, will curtail military spending in the United States and the temptation to be the world's sole superpower (King 2013). The economy too is a potential restraining factor as the American global policing wars of the post-Cold War era have been financed through extensive borrowing that someday will need to be repaid. The United States may be the world's leading economy, but it has debts of approximately $20 trillion.

If not the United States in the lead, then who? The alternatives are not robust. The United Nations makes itself responsible for significant peacekeeping, particularly in Africa. But it is limited in resources and also by the Security Council's veto system whereby any of the five permanent members can reject an action. This can lead to gridlock

and indecision in even the most pressing of cases. There are also persistent problems related to member participation, troop training, discipline, equipment and sustainment for UN peacekeepers. And although they have been forced to do some serious fighting at times to separate or suppress warring factions, they cannot conduct sustained combat operations without the military weight of a major power. The United Nations is also dependent on financial contributions from member states to keep it afloat – it does not have an independent income. The United States is the largest donor. Regional organisations such as the African Union and the European Union are also active in peacekeeping, both in conjunction with the United Nations and on their own. Supplementing their work are relief organisations such as the International Red Cross, Doctors without Borders and the International Rescue Committee. All of this is vital, but it is not enough when the United States is removed, financially and militarily.

Serious change can only come about if the United States actually does less international intervening and those states (or organisations) closer to trouble spots are forced to act when their security is at risk. Other large rich nations will have to fill the vacuum if the United States pulls back from managing global security. Test cases are interventions in Libya (2011) and Syria (2013–), where American reluctance to act has been particularly evident, even though both are marked by a degree of US engagement. The vast regions of North Africa and the Middle East are beset by security problems that outsiders can seemingly neither settle nor fully escape (Engelhardt 2010). Colonialism left behind non-viable boundaries. Although there are many natural resources, the most exportable is oil, which usually enriches rulers, not the masses. Sectarian divides and a rising tide of extremism afflict Islam, the dominant faith. It is territory governed weakly or exploitatively but rarely democratically. But the rich nations of the world are responsible for at least part of the chaos as they are all consumers of oil, former colonialists and/or occasional interveners. They also get some of the refugees and see all of the images of the suffering. The United States will likely find its interventionist urges in the Middle East and North Africa tamed by memories of past failed efforts, high casualty rates, wasted assistance and lack of effective international and local partners (Bacevich 2016). Certain former colonial powers may feel a continuing obligation to help, but they too have memories of past failures. Some states in both Africa and the Middle East can defend themselves, but most cannot. The rise of a regional hegemon is possible, but the area is full of competitors marked out by the long rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran – which are also the leading states, each representing one of Islam's two major branches. What is left is continuing turmoil and perhaps disaster. And given that scenario, the question should be asked: who will assist if not the United States?

For other regions of the world a post-US framework of security is more readily available or more easily constructed than it is in the Middle East and North Africa. The European Union (or a NATO minus the United States) can easily control security in Europe or even deal with a resentful Russia should it find the political will. The European Union has more people than and is approximately as rich as the United States. It should have no need for or any claim on American troops for the security of Europe. There are more serious challenges relating to security arrangements for South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. For South America the problem some might see is keeping the United States out. But US interest in South America after the Second World War was largely prompted by fear of the spread of communism and the influence of the Soviet Union, both of which are fading from memory. The South American nations themselves have several boundary problems but little inclination to settle them through the use of force, at least in recent years. Most South American nations focus their attention on economic growth, which is sporadic but not non-existent. Fortunately for all concerned, self-restraint has tempered the competition for regional dominance and arms racing. In Asia the prime security issue is how to accommodate the rise of a richer, more assertive China. But many other nations in Asia also have large populations and growing economies. Most advantageous for regional security would be the development of regional institutions that can temper territorial disputes without interrupting the pathway to continued prosperity. Some nations seem to want to keep the United States engaged in Asia to balance an ever more powerful China. No doubt the United States needs to think of ways to adjust to China, but getting involved in regional disputes is not likely to be one of them.

Conclusion

It is important to understand that the United States cannot be taken for granted. This is equally true whether it continues – or tries to continue – the role that it established for itself in the twentieth century or becomes a 'normal' power much as the United Kingdom did following the Second World War. The rivalry of superpowers that we saw in the past was a certain kind of world order. The hubris of one rich and powerful nation, the United States, is another.

Should the United States change its priorities, the large, rich nations of the world may collectively find the need and will to create yet another form of order – one in which they share the decision-making and costs of taking necessary actions. If this does not occur, it is likely that dominant regional powers will provide local security – as meagre or brutal as that may be. The North Africa and Middle East regions lack a plausible candidate for this role and will likely remain in turmoil until one emerges. There could be a struggle among potential contenders, in those and in some other regions, that escalates into more serious conflict. Thus, a large part of the world may continue to be torn by instability, with few voluntary interveners for the foreseeable future. The question many will ask is can more stable regions such as Europe and North America isolate themselves from this instability? Or, does peace and security at home require – as those in America who favour intervention abroad claim – a constant foreign military involvement? Considering such issues as the migration crisis in Europe, which has at its roots instability outside Europe, brings real focus to these questions. Another worry is competition among regional powers. Once a nation gains dominance locally, will it have an irresistible temptation to expand as the United States did after the Second World War? Again, this question brings us back to the issue of China's rise. With all of this in mind, some may come to remember 'Pax Americana', for all its faults, as an era of peace and stability.

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