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Dante R. Toppo  
*Claremont McKenna College*

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE

**THE TRAGEDY OF AMERICAN SUPREMACY:  
HOW WINNING THE COLD WAR LOST THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR JENNIFER MORRISON TAW

AND

DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER

BY

DANTE TOPPO

FOR

SENIOR THESIS

SPRING 2015

APRIL 27, 2015



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I must thank Professor Jennifer Taw, without whom this thesis would literally not be possible. I thank her for wrestling through theory with me, eviscerating my first five outlines, demolishing my first two Chapter Ones, and gently suggesting I start over once or twice. I also thank her for her unflagging support for my scholarly and professional pursuits over the course of my four years at Claremont McKenna, for her inescapable eye for lazy analysis, and for mentally beating me into shape during her freshman honors IR seminar. Above all, I thank her for steadfastly refusing to accept anything but my best.

I must also thank my friends, roommates, co-workers, classmates and unsuspecting underclassmen who asked me “How is thesis?” Your patience as I shouted expletives about American foreign policy was greatly appreciated and I thank you for it.

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## INTRODUCTION

Why has the United States, given its status as the sole remaining superpower following its Cold War victory, been unable to translate its preponderance of power into the outcomes it desires? The system established by the United States over the course of the Cold War does not effectively translate its power into influence in the post-Cold War world. In fact, the way US-Soviet competition shaped global affairs created systemic problems, weak and failing states, terrorism, autocracy and human rights abuse, that cannot be solved by the mechanisms of influence the US relied upon to win the Cold War. However, precisely these issues now dominate the American foreign policy agenda as its strategic objective shifted from defeating communism to maintaining the stability of the liberal world order that resulted from communism's defeat. The United States, reliant on Cold War era mechanisms of influence, lacks the tools to accomplish these new objectives because these mechanisms were designed to exploit or accept the problems of statehood that now plague the liberal world order. Therefore, for the United States to make effective use of its abundance of power, it must either change its tools or its objectives.

Chapter One will first describe the mess the United States is in, and assess the sources of threats to the United States strategic interests, concluding that the most intractable challenges emerge from problems of statehood—states that govern poorly, autocratically, or fail to govern at all—and from empowered violent non-state actors that emerge from such dysfunctional states. Chapter Two will consider and reject alternative causes for the apparent decline of US influence. Then, Chapter Three will chart the Cold War origins of the system of norms and structures that translated US power into influence, revealing that the strategic imperatives of containment shaped these systems to exploit or

accept these problems of statehood and non-state actors. Finally, Chapter Four will explain how this Cold War legacy challenges the contemporary liberal order, while rendering US channels of influence ineffective or counterproductive in accomplishing the strategic objective of order maintenance.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE MESS

At the conclusion of the Cold War, Charles Krauthammer described “The Unipolar Moment,” claiming that “the center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies.”<sup>1</sup> Though the extent of that unipolarity and the privileges or obligations it conferred upon the superpower were up for debate, the globally dominant position of the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union was apparent to all. Yet this shiny new “American World Order” appeared to fall apart almost as soon as it began. Over the course of two decades, confidence in the United States’ superpower status was shaken to the core due to a series of shocks reaching back to the failed US intervention in Somalia and extending through 9/11, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the 2008 economic crisis. In 2015, the world appears far less ordered than in 1991, and the United States’ ability to achieve the outcomes it seeks, greatly diminished. So, what contemporary elements of the global environment explain that American influence is on the wane?

A major part of the story is that structural and normative elements of the post-Cold War world order are (or at least appear) embattled. The Westphalian system’s sovereign and independent states seem less sovereign, less independent and, troublingly, less relevant as the system is complicated by non-state, sub-state, and transnational challenges ranging from terrorism to disease. Furthermore, many states have failed to meet the expectations of “good behavior” implicit in the US-backed post-Cold War liberal order, including

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1, (1990/1991,) 23



domestic respect for democracy and human rights, as well as international respect for the mores of the global community. Rather than enumerate a laundry list of problems facing the putative American World Order, this paper will group them into three levels, the internal level within states, the international level among states, and the transnational level smeared between, across, and beyond states. These categories, though empirically blurry, offer a lens through which genres of problems—like organized crime, terrorism, or climate change—can be analyzed based on their causes and consequences at each level. Further, this lens reveals that the major sources of trouble for the American world order have their origins in problems of statehood—the intersection of weak states, authoritarian states, and violent non-state actors. The challenge for the “unchallenged superpower, the United States”<sup>2</sup> is that while Cold War era methods of influence grant it substantial leverage at the international level, these outdated modes of influence leave it unable to resolve the problems of statehood that contribute to the most pressing threats to world order.

**Internal:**

The problem with the internal affairs of other states is a matter of expectation versus reality. The post-Cold War Westphalian system expects states to be independently sovereign. The US-backed liberal capitalist tradition that shaped regions within the United States’ Cold War sphere of influence expects those sovereign, independent states to be democratic, capitalist, and humane in the post-Cold War world. Often contemporary states meet none of these expectations.

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<sup>2</sup> Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” 23

*Weak, Failed, and Fragile States*

Nation-states that follow the Western European model of state formation, like the US, expect independent states to be sovereign. That is, as a participant in the post-Cold War Westphalian community of nominally equal, independent states, these entities are expected to actually govern the territories they claim and the civil society groups within the borders of that territory. But, the reality is that many states enjoy only limited sovereignty, lacking the barebones Weberian monopoly of legitimate violence within their territory. Further, they lack the more nuanced capacity to centrally govern civil-society through the implementation of policy via state coercion and institutions, articulated by scholar Michael Mann as the state's unique "institutional, territorial, centralized power."<sup>3</sup>

Fragile states have been a major concern for the United States for over a decade. President Bush's first National Security Strategy explained "The events of September 11, 2001 taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states."<sup>4</sup> President Obama's 2014 National Security Strategy includes "Significant security consequences associated with weak or failing states" as one of the eight "top strategic risks to our interests."<sup>5</sup>

The Fragile State Index enumerates 12 categories of factors that contribute to state fragility, including indicators ranging from economic and demographic pressures to intra-state violence. Though, according to the Fragile State Index, global state stability overall has improved over the last ten years, in 2014 34 states remain on Alert, High Alert, or Very

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State," *European Journal of Sociology*, Vol 25 No 8, (1985) 198

<sup>4</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (2002), ii

<sup>5</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2014) 2

High Alert, the index's most critical ranking.<sup>6</sup> These states include not just the Syrias and Libyas suffering civil war, but states of crucial strategic interest to the United States like Pakistan and Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, and Chile, all considered leading hopes in the developing world, rank among the "most-worsened countries" over the last 10 years. As current National Security Advisor Susan Rice commented on then President Bush's National Security Strategy, failed or fragile states pose a direct threat to the United States because the absence of effective governance contributes to the threat of terrorism; arms, human, narcotic, and conflict mineral trafficking; as well as exacerbated regional instability due to spillover conflicts that, in turn, weaken surrounding states.<sup>8</sup> Failed and fragile states, then, destabilize the post-Cold War system because in the absence of a meaningful state presence, actors and organizations that would otherwise be subordinated/contained within the state they inhabit (radicals, criminals, militias), emerge as structural players that upset the regional order (terrorists, cartels, insurgencies). Such problems of statehood may threaten US interests within that states borders while weak or predatory governments make terrible partners in securing those interests. The stability of the US-backed post-Cold War order relates directly to the stability of the states that comprise it, and therefore with the attendant causes and consequences of state instability. Some of those attendant dynamics bear more specific scrutiny.

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<sup>6</sup> J.J. Messner et al., *Fragile States Index* (Washington D.C.: The Fund for Peace, 2014), 34

<sup>7</sup> Messner et al., *Fragile States Index*, 34

<sup>8</sup> Susan E Rice, "*The New National Security Strategy: Focus on Failed States*" (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2003), 2

*Fragile states and terrorists, insurgents and separatists*

Terrorists, insurgents, and separatists, each a different species from the other (though linkages between them abound), nevertheless all emerge from and contribute to state fragility. The less effective a state apparatus, the more autonomy granted to terrorist cells, bands of insurgents, or ethnic/regional separatists. The more effective a terrorist cell, insurgency, or separatist movement is, the less credible or effective the state is, producing a vicious cycle.

However, though terrorists, insurgents and separatists are all factors in the story of state fragility, they emerge and operate in distinct ways. Terrorists utilize violence against civilian populations for political goals in opposition to the state. At the internal level, that is an organization that only operates within one fragile state, terrorists embed within civil society and do not seek to claim ownership over territory. However, by executing attacks against the citizenry of a state, and by contributing to an atmosphere of insecurity, they decrease confidence in the ability of the state to protect its citizenry. As a local phenomenon, terrorist groups can emerge even in fairly stable states, due to a range of conditions—consider the terrorism of Theodore Kaczynski or Timothy McVeigh. However, “major league” terrorism, supported by an organizational structure that can perform on an ongoing basis both the acquisition of inputs (money, recruits, supplies) and the execution of output (strikes, propaganda, kidnappings), is significantly more likely to emerge in the absence of effective state institutions.

Insurgents are operationally distinct from terrorists in that an insurgency actually engages in a military contest against the state. Insurgencies do so through asymmetric and unconventional means, but they do not simply placing bombs in marketplaces, though an

insurgency may begin in that fashion and incorporate such terroristic tactics as part of its strategy. Furthermore, the insurgency competes with the state for political legitimacy. It requires, at minimum, the grudging acquiescence of a host population. While a small terrorist cell can survive in a hostile society, the insurgency cannot. The average state experiencing an insurgency is likely more fragile than the average state experiencing terrorism. Insurgencies can only emerge in earnest by occupying spaces or strata of society beyond the reach of the state.

Finally, separatists are a special class of internal challenger. Though separatists may indeed wage insurgencies, they specifically fight for some form of political autonomy, either outright statehood or greater autonomy within the state. Separatists contribute to the instability of a state because they challenge not only the center's monopoly of violence but also the very territory the state claims.

#### Authoritarian states

A major normative component of the post-Cold War order is the legacy of the ideological triumph by democratic capitalism over totalitarian communism. President Bush in 2002 declared in the first sentence of his National Security Strategy that “The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the 1990s saw an explosion of free-enterprise and the rapid opening up of formerly planned and closed economies. For example, the former Soviet bloc countries started implementing economic policies that

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<sup>9</sup> *National Security Strategy*, (2002), i

were farther right than the West, including such Tea Party staples as the flat tax.<sup>10</sup> While free enterprise has made great strides, progress in freedom and democracy has disappointed. The persistence of capitalist yet authoritarian states frustrates the normative goals of the liberal democratic post-Soviet world. The United States, which in 2002 committed to “extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent,” and again in 2014 “to the advancement of democracy and human rights and building new coalitions to combat corruption and to support open governments and open societies,” has declared a vested interest not just in whether states govern, but in how they govern.<sup>11</sup> As a result, when expectations for responsible governance are not met, the liberal world order seems less liberal and less ordered.

Indeed authoritarianism appears to be on the rise in recent years. Freedom House reported that 2013 was the eighth consecutive year in which the global prevalence of democracy and respect for civil liberties declined.<sup>12</sup> Authoritarian leaders toe the line by crippling but not exterminating opposition, and by gaining control of institutions beyond the executive and legislative, like the media and private sector influence.<sup>13</sup> Larry Diamond explains that the shallow standard of electoralism to which modern authoritarian leaders are held does little to contribute to the democratization of their polities.<sup>14</sup> Many autocratic states hold elections but lack independent effective governing institutions and civil society groups that undergird resilient institutional power and democratic legitimacy. The

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<sup>10</sup> Hilary Appel and Mitchell A. Orenstein, “Ideas Versus Resources,” *Comparative Political Studies* 46, no. 2 (2013): 123-53

<sup>11</sup> *National Security Strategy* (2014), i; *National Security Strategy*, (2002), i

<sup>12</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World* (Washington D.C.: Freedom House, 2014), 1

<sup>13</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, 3

<sup>14</sup> Larry Diamond, “The Democratic Rollback,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2008): 39

regression to authoritarianism in regionally important states like Turkey, Egypt, Thailand, Nigeria, and Russia demonstrates the importance of democratic institutions beyond elections.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the persistence of authoritarianism in states like China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Venezuela demonstrates the obstacles to the proliferation of democracy.

### Human rights

Both authoritarian regimes and failing states undermine the protection of basic human rights. Normatively, the United States' post-Cold War order is founded on a commitment to the protection of these rights. The 2014 National Security Strategy affirms an international "responsibility to protect" civilians from mass atrocity, including preventive action. Though this responsibility has been charged by both its detractors and supporters as inconsistently fulfilled, there nevertheless persists a compelling American interest in the principles of universal human rights. These principles have been invoked, rightly or wrongly, sincerely or cynically, as the justification for US-led international military and economic interventions in places like Libya, Bosnia, Somalia, and Iraq. However, the apparent inability or unwillingness of the United States to marshal the resources required to protect human rights and the rule of law everywhere, casts aspersions on the sincerity of its efforts to protect them at all.

### **International**

American structural-level hegemony backed by the United States' vast conventional military dominance precludes overt challenges from rival states in the international community. However, history has not ended. Contestation of the post-Cold

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<sup>15</sup> Diamond, "The Democratic Rollback," 36

War status quo appears at its margins. Joseph Nye's characterization of international affairs as three dimensional chess is instructive here. The US commands hegemony on the top chessboard of conventional military power. However, Nye argues, the second, economic chessboard is largely multipolar, accommodating the rise of China and other developing economies. Finally on the third chessboard, "power is widely diffused" between a variety of non-state actors and threats that have international consequences.<sup>16</sup> US conventional dominance deters competition on the first chessboard, so international challenges emerge on the other two boards, posed both by states and by increasingly internationalized non-state entities. First we shall examine the state origins of international instability.

#### *State competition along the margins*

American military supremacy has so far contributed to deterring war among the great powers as well as attempts to unseat the US as hegemon. However, other states have innovated to work around US conventional dominance in pursuit of their strategic or security interests. Such states exploit the fluidity of Nye's third chessboard. States leverage relationships with non-state actors by financing, equipping, or in some cases creating them, as a means to quietly shape regional orders in a manner that will avoid a meaningful military response by the superpower or its regional allies. In doing so, these states foment or exploit pre-existing state weakness in their neighborhood.

The example in the headlines is Putin's regional revisionist ambitions in the former Soviet bloc. Putin slowly but surely exploited and deepened the internal instability of

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph Nye, "The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 89, no. 6 (2010): 3



Ukraine to conduct a stealth invasion that ultimately facilitated the annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the ongoing campaign for secession by separatist militias in areas like Donetsk and Luhansk. Putin all but signed his name on this operation but because no Russian forces bearing Russian flags technically participated, NATO has struggled to find an appropriate response.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, the US and NATO likely had no appetite for another intervention. This was surely part of Putin's calculation. By scaling his invasion with salami tactics as the destabilization of eastern Ukraine by proxy, rather than the formal occupation of the territories, he dares a reluctant NATO to escalate the confrontation with a formal military response. By facilitating and prolonging an internal conflict born of state weakness, he leverages a comparative advantage: his preference for a dirty, indefinite period of state instability in Ukraine is a cheaper investment than putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again.

We see less bold, yet still effective iterations of the same model in other regions practiced by other powers, including US allies. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia all have as many fingers in the cookie jar of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Yemeni civil wars as Iran does. This type of strategy is not new, and was equally practiced by the United States and the USSR during the Cold War to sow instability in each other's sphere of influence. However, as this paper will later argue, what matters is not the practice's apparent resurgence, but the fact that the US struggles to reconcile its objectives as a guarantor of world order with this tool of Cold War competition.

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<sup>17</sup> Radio Free Europe, "Report Warns Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare' in Ukraine Could Inspire Others," *Radio Free Europe*, Feb 11 2015, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-hybrid-warfare-ukraine-could-inspire-others/26842566.html>.

*State economic competition*

Scholars debate the potentially destabilizing effects of the economic rise of China and other developing nations. China's economy is projected to exceed the size of the United States' economy by 2027.<sup>18</sup> Stoked by fears of American economic decline, some argue that the apparent economic dynamism in China will naturally lead to corresponding geopolitical ambition and continued military expansion in East Asia. Others, argue that the growth of China and other developing economies is actually good for the United States in the context of globalization.<sup>19</sup> The more emerging economies become integrated in the global economy, the better situated the United States is as a proponent of free trade and the holder of the world's reserve currency.

Though a consensus on the rise of China has yet to be reached, what is clear is that the US is not the only player of import on Nye's second economic chessboard. Consequently, the United States has profound interest in incorporating China as a responsible player in the international political economy. Further, if China's more muscular policy in the Pacific as it seeks to expand claims to disputed territory is a harbinger of a longer term trend, China's "good behavior" cannot be guaranteed. But more importantly, even though the US appears to lack a coherent strategy on managing China's potential expansion, the United States has at its disposal the tools to do so. As will be explained later, the post-Cold War norms and structures the US uses to translate its power into influence are fairly effective at dealing with the kind of challenge a potentially revisionist China

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<sup>18</sup> Gideon Rachman, "Think Again: American Decline," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2011, 1, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/think-again-american-decline/>.

<sup>19</sup> Fareed Zakaria, "The Future of American Power: How America Can Survive the Rise of the Rest," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 29.

poses. The US has developed and used the military tools to check expansionism in the East Asian/Pacific region since World War II. Economic containment and integration are old tricks the US would not have to relearn. By no means are these potential strategies guaranteed to be successful, but they are at least designed to deal with the kinds of economic and political challenges rising states pose to a superpower. The same cannot be said for new international threats.

### *The New International*

States no longer monopolize international space. While a variety of other actors like multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations increasingly enjoy globe-spanning operational capacity, more nefarious non-state organizations also operate globally. Global terrorism franchises have emerged as truly international organizations and pose unique challenges to states that require international collaboration to solve.<sup>20</sup>

Terrorism presents with different symptoms at the international level. Though international terrorist organizations rely on the same pockets of state weakness that allow local level terrorists to thrive, they are operationally different animals at the international level. Like local terrorist groups, international terrorist organizations attack civilians to achieve a political objective. However, international terrorists differ from local terrorist groups in that they do not predominantly focus their attacks on the institutions of the state

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, internationalized organized criminal networks and drug cartels pose very real, very scary concerns. However the threats posed by cartels are significantly less securitized both in terms of formal policy, and in the public eye than the explicitly political agendas of terrorist organizations. However, many analysts have noted the auxiliary role organized crime and narcotics trafficking plays in financially supporting terrorist organizations, insurgencies, etc. For example, the opium production activities of the Afghani Taliban merited a policy response, but not because of the opium itself, but because of the financing it provided the Taliban

in which they reside but rather on the “far enemy,” the United States, and the global institutions through which it seeks to shape global affairs. Al-Qaeda as an organization behaves in a very different manner than the IRA did. Al-Qaeda was designed to mobilize trans-continental attacks against the United States as a response to US policy in the Middle East and its ostensible sponsorship of secular authoritarian regimes in the region. Al-Qaeda further committed to a global scale of operations against the institutions of the Crusader West wherever they were found. The IRA, by contrast, was designed as a response to Protestant British rule in Ireland and was essentially limited to that particular issue and enemy.

International terrorist organizations are structured in a highly decentralized manner. They are not states, though states may sponsor them. By taking advantage of global interconnectivity, organizations like Al-Qaeda recruit globally, amass resources globally, and coordinate attacks globally. This diffuse network of international terrorism presents a challenge to the US backed post-Cold War order as it attempts to defeat an enemy that exists in dozens of states but has no allegiance to any of them, lacks a coherent base of operations, and perpetrates attacks from within civil society. No individual state can be blamed for such a group’s aggression nor can one group of individuals be apprehended to end the threat.

### **Transnational**

Transnational issues are challenges that span the boundaries of multiple states and that no state alone can solve. These issues are analytically distinct from international challenges because they are not a problem of relations between nations, though responses

are often coordinated by bi- and multi-lateral channels between states. Furthermore, they are distinct from internal concerns because transnational issues broadly affect multiple states, though each state must formulate its own internal responses. Examples of transnational challenges include climate change and pandemic disease, wherein no one state is uniquely responsible for the crisis, and the regional response demands collaboration by multiple affected states as well as with the international community. Some forms of terrorism can also be transnational, wherein one organization straddles the border of multiple states and organizes terror against each state, for example, ISIS occupies a space across the deserts of Eastern Syria and Northwestern Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, ethnonationalist movements may also be transnational concerns, like the Kurdish independence movement, which is situated in a Kurdish majority region that is intersected by the borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Transnational problems are poorly dealt with in a Westphalian system of sovereign states, because each state jealously guards its sovereignty and is reluctant to treat the terms of collective responses as binding to collective problems.

### **Problems of Statehood**

The internal, international and transnational challenges that most directly pose threats to the stability of the American world order all have their origins in problems of statehood—states that govern poorly, autocratically, or don't govern at all. The ever-shifting rogues' gallery of non-state security threats, civil wars, belligerent strongmen and state collapse undercut the stability of the post-Cold War order, and have their origins in

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<sup>21</sup> ISIS is also more than simply a terrorist organization, in that it seeks to actually take and hold territory and coordinates an insurgency.

ineffective or predatory state institutions. Each of these issues involves some internal dynamics, including some of the many facets of state weakness, as well as international level factors, such as the need for a coordinated response between states or the deliberate intervention by one state in the internal affairs of its neighbors. International actors take advantage of state fragility and poor governance to exert regional influence by sponsoring violent non-state actors, such as Russian sponsorship of Ukrainian separatists or Iranian sponsorship of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Ungoverned areas between states allow organizations like ISIS or narcotics cartels, terrorist networks and organized criminal groups to emerge in the vacuum and dare the international community to strike them down. With direct great power military competition checked by American conventional dominance and economic power principally held between a handful of interdependent trading partners, these problems of statehood pose the most immediate threat to the stability of regional orders and the credibility of American power as a whole. The challenges posed by these problems are best represented by what some have called the “new wars” of the post-Cold War era.

#### *Non-state Actors and Security Threats*

Mary Kaldor articulates a compelling picture of the “New War” defined by the ecosystem of non-state violent actors who compete for influence and their complex linkages with criminal syndicates, state sponsors, and exploited international aid organizations. She argues that the proliferation of these organizations and their behaviors contributes to the emergence of a new type of warfare in which the state monopoly over

the legitimate use of violence has collapsed.<sup>22</sup> Citing the case study of the Bosnian civil war, and extrapolating her argument to the Iraqi civil war, she argues that people or groups with particularistic ideologies wage war against civil society to drive cleavages between communities and redraw territorial boundaries. They fund these efforts by extorting aid organizations<sup>23</sup> and relying on criminal organizations enmeshed in the global black market, as well as by courting the sponsorship of strategically interested states.<sup>24</sup> As a result, these wars are defined, not by the state-on-state military competition that characterized “Old War,” but by violent extremist organizations that fracture the communities in which they are embedded and frustrate international responses.

Such organizations are hard to influence largely because, had they occupied social and territorial spaces within the reach of a local or global power, they would not exist. These organizations are a product of and contributor to problems of statehood because they draw funds and resources from the international level, undermining or outright challenging the basic governability of swaths of territory within and across states. Entities like the Islamic State, the Taliban, and to a lesser extent Boko Haram, fall within this category, as do ethnonationalistic groups like the various Kurdish organizations, the Bosnian Serbs in the 90s, and tribal organizations that span states. These organizations behave in ways that are difficult to categorize. In pursuit of their political agendas, these organizations coordinate terrorist attacks, wage insurgencies, and field militias, as well as rely on organized crime to extract resources. In some cases, they attempt to govern.

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era, Third Edition*, 3 ed. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5

<sup>23</sup> Often by deliberately performing atrocities to draw in the international community then taxing the relief workers or holding them hostage

<sup>24</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 94

A good example of this hodgepodge of nasty tendencies is the Afghan Taliban. This organization relies on the support of regional tribes, as well as the patronage of the Pakistani security services, and enjoys de-facto freedom of movement across Afghanistan's eastern border. It has overseen the highest rate of opium production in Afghanistan in recent memory for which it collects a hefty premium, offers a shadow system of government, and continues to fight an insurgency against the Kabul government, utilizing both guerilla tactics and terrorist-style bombings. Can we really say the Taliban is simply a terrorist organization or simply an opium cartel? Such distinctions blur together in regions of weak, failed, or predatory statehood. Consequently, international or regional responses to organizations like the Taliban struggle to respond comprehensively, precisely because the organizations they are responding to are so fluid and take great advantage of spaces that remain unordered by the post-Cold War global system. These unordered spaces emerge as a result of problems of statehood, and project issues that would otherwise constitute the internal affairs of a state onto the international stage, presenting a problem for the US strategic goal of stability. For example, if Afghanistan functioned as a state, it could intervene independently against the Taliban, or develop a response through state-to-state relations with Pakistan. However, because Afghanistan suffers from serious weaknesses of state institutions, instead the international community and the United States have taken responsibility for both state building and the intervention against the Taliban.

Problems of statehood are problems precisely because they do not lend themselves to treatment by the outdated Cold War era norms and structures that underpin the contemporary international order. This third chessboard, on which a soup of actors and dynamics engage one another without any real ordering structure, poses challenges to US



attempts at influence because of its fluidity. This fluidity was deliberate, or at least acceptable, during the Cold War era. As a result, some terrorist groups, like Al-Qaeda, some ethnoreligious or nationalist insurgencies, like ISIS or the Taliban, emerged in these chaotic regions in which Cold War conditions warped or undermined the development of effective governance. In turn, these centrifugal forces contributed to the internal collapse of fragile post-colonial states, and became dynamics in civil wars and regional proxy conflicts in places situated along the fault lines of the US Soviet competition, like the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. These challenges of statehood and the problems they cause are not new, nor are they solely the consequence of US Cold War policies. Kurdish ethnonationalism, for example, has its roots in the First World War and the colonial mandates that quartered the Kurdish majority region. However, the practices endorsed and required by a grand strategy of Soviet containment contributed to, accepted, and in many cases exploited these problems of statehood. Continued reliance on such Cold War era practices undermines the ability of the United States to translate its power into influence to confront challenges to stability that emerge from these problems of statehood because such practices evolved to use rather than solve problems of statehood. Before outlining the origins of this deficiency of influence, we must assess the alternative explanations for declining US influence and, arguably, power.

## CHAPTER TWO: ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

The proposed causes for the apparent waning of American influence in the post-Cold War order can be broadly grouped into two categories to which I assign the monikers “boat” theories and “sea” theories. The causes of waning American influence can be roughly equated to the trials of a ship lost at sea. The predicament of being lost was either caused by a problem with the boat, (an incompetent captain, a leaky hull) or the behavior of the sea. Boat theories explain waning American influence in terms of a decline in American power—relative or absolute, inevitable or self-inflicted. Sea theories explain the current mess in terms of a sea change in global politics; the emergence of new classes of actors and dynamics that shift the very nature of international affairs. This chapter will explain that declinist “boat” theories are unsound, while “sea” theories provide sound descriptions of the status quo, but are insufficiently explanatory. Instead, while American power has not declined, the Cold War era instruments by which it is translated into influence are not optimized for its new post-Cold War objectives.

### **Declinism**

Three interlocking arguments underpin theories of American decline. Economic and political stagnation at home, coupled with the increasing economic and military clout of China, confirms and evidences a “natural law” of hegemonic decline. Such decline is precipitated by “imperial overstretch” as America’s military adventures outstrip its economic capacity to support them. Each facet of this argument is ultimately unpersuasive.

### *Absolute Economic Decline*

The fears of domestic economic decline were stoked by the 2007-2009 recession. During the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, almost 9 million jobs were lost and around 19 trillion dollars of household wealth evaporated.<sup>25</sup> Real GDP contracted by over 5 percent and unemployment levels reached 10 percent.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile China's juggernaut of an economy, aided by the CCP's massive mobilization of stabilizing capital, slowed from over 10 percent growth to around 9.5 percent.<sup>27</sup> This disparity seemed to highlight the waxing power of China and the waning power of the United States.

Despite the intensity of the economic pain felt in 2008 and the lingering malaise, in objective terms the United States has been steadily recovering. Unemployment has fallen to 5.5 percent, with an average of around 300,000 new jobs created every month for the last six months.<sup>28</sup> This largely refutes the fears debated as recently as 2012 of a higher structural unemployment rate around 6.5-8 percent.<sup>29</sup> Rather, the economy has returned to the upper bound of what the Fed predicts to be normal long-term unemployment.<sup>30</sup> Other concerns that wages have yet to catch up with job growth, as well as the relatively high proportion of discouraged workers who have yet to reenter the work force, are expected to

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<sup>25</sup> US Department of The Treasury, "The Financial Crisis Response in Charts," (April 2012): 1.

<sup>26</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," *Databases, Tables and Calculators by Subject* (April 2015)

<sup>27</sup> Graeme Wearden and David Stanway, "China Slowdown," *Guardian*, 20 October 2008, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/21/china-globalrecession>.

<sup>28</sup> Neil Irwin, "Job Growth Was Fantastic Last Month. So Why Aren't Wages Rising More?" *The New York Times*, March 6, 2015 accessed March 5, 2015 via mobile app.

<sup>29</sup> Gary Burtless, *High Unemployment: Cyclical or Structural?* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute, May 22, 2012), accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/05/22-structural-unemployment-burtless>.

<sup>30</sup> Irwin, "Job Growth Was Fantastic Last Month," 2015

improve as jobs continue being added to the economy.<sup>31</sup> US GDP grew 2.4% over 2014, its largest growth since the recession.<sup>32</sup> In short, the economy has performed well since the recession, and more importantly has not suffered the kind of fundamental blow that might cripple America's geopolitical position.

### *Rising China*

But what of China? Even if the United States isn't falling, declinists argue, China is rising, which amounts to the same thing in terms of the United States' relative global power. Indeed, to many, China poses the most credible alternative to American supremacy. As Gideon Rachman explains, "The famous projection by Goldman Sachs that China's economy will be bigger than that of the United States by 2027 was made before the 2008 economic crash. At the current pace, China could be No. 1 well before then."<sup>33</sup> Further, China has been throwing its economic weight around, forging economic partnerships across Africa and within the troubled areas of the Eurozone, as well as enjoying more influence with other rising economies like India and Brazil on issues like climate change or sanctions on Iran.<sup>34</sup> Worse still, China simply leads the vanguard of a cohort of rising regional powers set to displace the anemic economies of America's closest allies. The top five largest economies of 2050 are projected to include four developing countries—China,

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<sup>31</sup> Dionne Searcey, "After a bounce, Wage Growth Slumps to 0.1%" *New York Times*, March 6, 2015 accessed march 6, 2015 via mobile app

<sup>32</sup> Samantha Sharf "US 2.4% Economic Growth Strongest Since Recession," *Forbes*, Jan 1, 2015, accessed March 6, 2015 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/samanthasharf/2015/01/30/u-s-economy-grew-2-6-in-fourth-quarter-2-4-in-2014/>

<sup>33</sup> Rachman, "Think Again: American Decline," <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/think-again-american-decline/>.

<sup>34</sup> Rachman, "Think Again: American Decline," <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/03/think-again-american-decline/>.

India, Indonesia, and Brazil—with the US settling for third place after China and India and with nearly a third less output than China.<sup>35</sup> A crucial part of American global influence is the rest of the west—rich, developed nations who bought into American hegemony as founding members of the post-Cold War order. As previously peripheral countries like Brazil and India, with a new capacity to choose their own economic and geopolitical path, replace staunch American allies, multi-polarity looms.<sup>36</sup>

Despite that grim picture for the US, there are compelling reasons to doubt the doubters. American shares of the global economy, especially the most profitable areas, remain highly competitive with China's. When measuring the United States' ostensibly falling share of the global GDP, declinists fail to include the dominance of American transnational corporations, whose value is not incorporated in simplistic assessments of American national measurements. While measurements of global GDP put the United States' share at under 25%, US transnational companies dominate across the board in terms of market share. American firms control 40% or more of the profit in 12 of 25 sectors and leads in 6 more by comfortable margins.<sup>37</sup> As an example, despite China's status as the largest global exporter of electronics, it controls only 4% of the profit of that trade. 90% of the companies whose products it exports are foreign and the US profit share of this industry is 39%. Similarly, American-owned transnational corporations dominate many domestic

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<sup>35</sup> PwC, *The World in 2050* (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015), accessed April 23, 2015, <http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/the-economy/assets/world-in-2050-february-2015.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, "The Decline of the West: Why America Must Prepare for the End of Dominance," *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2012, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-decline-of-the-west-why-america-must-prepare-for-the-end-of-dominance/254779/>.

<sup>37</sup> Sean Starrs, "American Economic Power Hasn't Declined--it Globalized!," *International Studies Quarterly* 57 (2013): 817-30., 823

markets in China.<sup>38</sup> All this indicates that China's impressive growth is largely contingent upon its comparative advantage as one node in the transnational networks that allow American companies to produce massive profits. That relationship does not put China in a position to lead at the frontier of innovation. "No one doubts that China is rising, but China is rising in the era of globalization, and the nature of China's integration into transnational modular production networks is shaping the nature of its rise."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, all this lends credence to the idea that the "rise of the rest," including those potentially recalcitrant rising economies like Brazil and India, is actually good for the United States in the context of a globalized world. Their growth will occur within the context of globalized cross-border flows of goods and services, while "the power to profit from these flows remains highly vertical with the United States at the summit."<sup>40</sup>

Add to this equation the position of power the United States enjoys as the backer of the default currency of globalized trade and the United States' position looks even better. Further add the enormous structural challenges in the Chinese economy—every dollar of growth is financed by 3 dollars of credit, interest rates for that credit will soon be triple GDP growth, and the foreign exchange inflows that provide the liquidity to finance that credit have stopped—and China's position looks more like paper tiger than a new superpower.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, a rising China hasn't truly challenged American influence or the American post-Cold War world order. It has competed with the United States on the margins, with

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<sup>38</sup> Starrs, "American Economic Power Hasn't Declined – It Globalized!" 822, 823

<sup>39</sup> Starrs, "American Economic Power Hasn't Declined – It Globalized!" 822

<sup>40</sup> Starrs, "American Economic Power Hasn't Declined – It Globalized!" 827

<sup>41</sup> Victor Shih, "Chinese Debt: Is it Sustainable?" (lecture, The Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, Claremont, February 24th, 2015).

its military buildup in East Asia, a few vetoes in the Security Council on things like climate change, and cyber-espionage but it is not the source of the problems the United States currently focuses on. The US “rebalancing” to Asia, a return to great power politics, was slowed by the non-state actors causing chaos in the Middle East and West Africa. China is not at the roots of, or responsible for, funding the Islamic State—indeed, things would be simpler if it were, because then the United States could use its state based channels of power to negotiate a decrease in Chinese support for the organization.

### *Imperial Overstretch*

If not American decline, could the apparent waning of American influence simply be a symptom of a greater dynamic of “imperial overstretch,” wherein the US can no longer support the costs of its hegemony? Imperial overstretch as applied to the United States appeared in Paul Kennedy’s ambitious text, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*. Though often referenced, it bears repeating here:

*The United States now runs the risk, so familiar to historians of the rise and fall of previous Great Powers, of what might roughly be called “imperial overstretch”: that is to say, decision-makers in Washington must face the awkward and enduring fact that the sum total of the United States’ global interests and obligations is nowadays far larger than the country’s power to defend them all simultaneously.*<sup>42</sup>

Though published in 1987, this argument has been resurrected in numerous discussions of American decline. Today, American interests and obligations do seem to be tested everywhere. If anything, the United States appears to have added interests and obligations since 1987. However, there are good reasons to believe that American power has also kept

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 515

pace. In fact, America is managing to do less, in relative terms, with more. As Nye explains, “defense and foreign affairs expenditures have declined as a share of GDP over the past several decades.”<sup>43</sup> Kennedy’s core argument, that a great power’s expenses exceed its revenue, do not apply to the case of the United States. Our military and security commitments have not outstripped our economic capacity to pay for them. After all, the Bush administration successfully waged two prolonged wars without raising taxes. Further, the percentage of federal discretionary spending that goes to the Department of Defense has shrunk from a peak of 64% in 1986, around when Kennedy proposed the thesis, to under 50% in 2013.<sup>44</sup> If anything, the United States is less burdened by foreign affairs interests and obligations as a proportion of its budget and its overall GDP than during its competition with its rival, the Soviet superpower.

So, neither domestic economic decline, nor a Chinese miracle, nor the natural law of imperial overstretch seem to stack up as the real source of the apparent decline of American influence. Economically, America can still rely on resilient domestic growth, and outright international dominance in the realm of transnational corporations. Economically and geopolitically, the United States has less to fear from China’s growth than the declinists argue, and China is not even the main problem anyway. Fears of “imperial overstretch” do not seem to square with the facts, as the United States spends less per dollar of discretionary spending and less per dollar of GDP on its post-Cold War foreign policy. Why then, with all these tremendous advantages and uncontested global leadership, can’t America seem to get anything done?

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<sup>43</sup> Nye, “The Future of American Power, Dominance and Decline in Perspective,” 5

<sup>44</sup> Office of Management and Budget, “Historical Tables,” *Budget of the U.S. Government* (fiscal year 2013): 122, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2013/assets/hist.pdf>



## Leadership Deficit

The neo-conservatives answer, “Because America isn’t leading hard enough.” Decline, they argue, is self-inflicted and the willful absence of bold American leadership causes the apparent mess described in Chapter 1. The boat is not leaking—the captain is sinking it. Krauthammer argued at the conclusion of the Cold War that, rather than returning to normalcy, America needed to embrace its super powers status and the “strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them.”<sup>45</sup> The alternative to explicit American supremacy was chaos populated by belligerent, potentially nuclear-armed small powers. Contemporarily, Kagan and other neoconservative commentators echo the sentiment. Arguing forcefully against declinism, Kagan declares that rather than step back and manage a transition to multi-polarity, America must use its still vast power to double-down on dominance to sustain the post-Cold War liberal world-order it created. American power, especially military power, is indispensable to guarantee the security of democracy, human rights, free trade, the enforcement of collective security, and defense against weapons of mass destruction.<sup>46</sup> It is therefore a deficit of American international leadership that has allowed the status quo to slip towards chaos, rather than a decline of American power. The solution, then, is not the multilateralism and caution of the Obama administration, but an assertive American hegemony.

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<sup>45</sup> Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” 33

<sup>46</sup> Robert Kagan, “Superpowers Don't Get to Retire,” *New Republic*, May 26, 2014, 1, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117859/allure-normalcy-what-america-still-owes-world>.

The trouble is, the United States has tried that stance, and it does little to bring order. Instead, the neo-conservative thesis has made things worse where it has been applied. The US has often resoundingly failed the test of success Kagan proffered: “whether the unsatisfying end result is better or worse than the outcome if there had been no action.”<sup>47</sup> The most notable example is Iraq. Saddam Hussein was not a good guy however, the toppling of Iraq and the centrifugal forces unleashed by the invasion did more to destabilize the regional order than his oppression and militarism ever did. The strategic consequences of the American invasion of Iraq have been well documented elsewhere: the invasion allowed Al-Qaeda and Iran into the country exacerbated sectarian tensions in an otherwise educated society, created an ongoing civil war from which instability spills into the rest of the region, and broadly discredited the conceit that American global leadership was a good deal for the globe. These failures were not for a lack of “strength and will” on the part of the United States. The neo-Wilsonian obligation to make the world safe for democracy had been largely accepted into mainstream political thought, thanks in part to energetic lobbying on the part of neoconservatives like Kagan himself.<sup>48</sup> American military confidence had been validated by the stunning conventional victory during Desert Storm.<sup>49</sup> Yet the United States functionally failed to establish a workable Iraqi democracy, not because it lacked the power or leadership to do so, but because it lacked the tools to translate that power into the outcome it desired.

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<sup>47</sup> Kagan, “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire,” 2015

<sup>48</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, Updated ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81

<sup>49</sup> Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 50

So the declinists and the neo-cons are both wrong. American obligations are not so great that our waning power cannot support them, nor is American power so overwhelming that it can succeed at any task it chooses. What about the international system then? Has it changed in such a way to undermine American influence, despite extensive American power?

### **The Sea**

Deep shifts in the nature of global affairs are blamed for the apparent decline of American influence. The world, according to these theories, has become fundamentally resistant to order and influence. New actors and dynamics have made life difficult for large, powerful geopolitical actors, while allowing previously puny characters with comparatively meager stores of power to frustrate and disrupt the agendas of the formerly dominant, including the United States. However, though these theories provide a valuable description of these new actors and dynamics, they struggle to identify or illuminate their underlying causes.

### *Chaos Theory*

Robert Kaplan argued in his influential 1990s article “The Coming Anarchy” that the social fabric of the planet was coming apart at the seams. He painted a compelling, if bleak, picture. Poverty, urbanization, environmental degradation and disease in the developing world have created conditions ripe for crime, religious extremism, and ethnotribal militancy. With time, as conditions worsen, these phenomenon will shatter fragile states, end state monopolies on violence, rewrite the post-colonial map, and render

crime and war widespread and indistinguishable.<sup>50</sup> The challenges the United States faces today, as described in Chapter 1, are just one point on this trajectory towards chaos. American power may be unchanged but a world dominated by criminal gangs, terrorist cells, and tribal militias would render that power useless – attempting to wield influence in such an environment through the traditional instruments of power would be like attempting to nail Jell-O to a tree.

The closest Kaplan comes an explanation for these worrying trends is his invocation of scarcity. He cites Homer-Dixon, who first articulated a relationship between environmental scarcity and sources of conflict. Homer-Dixon explains two causal mechanisms linking scarcity and conflict: “group-identity conflicts” develop between host communities and migrants fleeing scarcity, and “deprivation” conflicts as severe scarcity undermines state institutions and increases economic deprivation which causes conflict between the haves and have-nots.<sup>51</sup> However, Homer-Dixon’s scarcity-conflict link has been contested both theoretically and empirically. It is unclear whether conflict is caused by environmental degradation or both conflict and degradation are a consequence of poor government. Scarcity might exacerbate problems of governance and indirectly exacerbate conflict, but not cause it. This makes sense: California is suffering the worst drought in 1000 years, yet social tensions between privileged and underprivileged ethnic groups have not escalated to conflict. Effective governing institutions restrain elites from capturing relevant resources, while resilient economic opportunities accommodate migrant

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic*, February 1994, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Homer-Dixon, “Environmental Scarcities and Violent Conflict: Evidence from Cases,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 7

populations without significant incident. Scarcity, then, is neither a necessary nor sufficient causal condition for conflict. Rather, both have their roots in poor governmental and economic institutions.<sup>52</sup> The question therefore is not why or whether scarcity causes conflict, but why the United States lacks the capacity to respond to the failures of governance that enable scarcity-related conflicts. The chaos Kaplan describes does not in itself explain the inability of the US to translate its power into influence. Instead it describes failures of US influence. Why then does a hegemon endowed with unprecedented power fail to build stability out of chaos?

### *The End of Power*

Moises Naim answers the above question with a bold claim that “state power is no longer what it used to be.”<sup>53</sup> In *The End of Power*, Naim articulates an alternative structural explanation for why things are spiraling out of control: power itself is decaying. More specifically, the barriers to power, and therefore the ability for established players to hold, keep, and use it, are declining. The forces of globalization—more people, who are more mobile and have access to more resources, information, and education—have given rise to *micropowers* who disrupt and undermine the efforts of large power players like states.<sup>54</sup> Terrorist organizations take advantage of the technologies of globalization, the ease of international mobility, the increased availability of information and education, to launch attacks that shatter large states’ sense of security. Insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan

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<sup>52</sup> Ole Magnus Thielson, “Blood and Soil? Resource scarcity and armed internal conflict revisited.” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2008, <http://jpr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/45/6/801>, 803-804

<sup>53</sup> Moises Naim, *The End of Power: from Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be*, Reprint ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2014) 158

<sup>54</sup> Naim, *The End of Power*, 51

successfully deny victory to the large, vertically integrated American military, using asymmetric tactics, horizontal organization structures, internet recruiting, and cheap IEDs constructed from technologies and instructions made widely available by globalized trade and communication.<sup>55</sup> So, Naim would argue, the United States may retain vast power, but being powerful no longer accomplishes what it used to.

The forces, agents, and dynamics Naim outlines are important and certainly of concern to American policy-makers. Globalization is a factor in the emergence of disruptive non-state actors and transnational dynamics that characterize Nye's third chessboard. However, it does not necessarily spell the end of power, nor fully explain contemporary challenges to order. The "More, Mobility, Mentality" revolutions Naim credits with this transformation of power are not one-way streets. The large power players also gain from globalization. A good example is the petro-states. Massive windfalls from the globalized oil trade allow these rentier states in the Persian Gulf to maintain power entirely through coercion and distribution without any meaningful downward accountability. This power was tested against the globalization-empowered, internet-fueled micropowers. Naim describes. Using a combination of this wealth and the security apparatus it can afford, these states, like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain, successfully prevented or put down the disruptive effects of the Arab Spring.

Furthermore, many governments and militaries never had the influence Naim says they have lost in this process of globalization. Guerrilla forces have been denying victory to large, coordinated armies for millennia. That they are continuing to do so is not indicative of the disruptive effects of the revolutions Naim describes. The capacity for

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<sup>55</sup> Naim, *The End of Power*, 109

governments to control restive populations in culturally distinct hard to reach places has always been tenuous and it is unclear whether globalization is in fact making it more difficult.

Finally, the timing is wrong: globalization predates the end of the Cold War and the creation of the Internet, the dates Naim set for the beginning of this decay. The movement of peoples, their access to resources, and the global proliferation of information and education began as a process decades earlier. The internet, though a revolutionary technology, is not the source of every major global dynamic of the past 20 years. Similarly, the causes Kaplan describes, environmental degradation and urbanization, far predate their putative effects. What both theories cannot explain is why these challenges, the collapse of state institutions, the apparent rise of violent non-state actors to structural levels of concern, emerged as specifically post-1989 problems. Why here, why now, and why can't the United States seem to do anything about it?

### CHAPTER THREE: COLD WAR ORIGINS

Contemporary problems of statehood—whether states govern well, democratically, or at all—predated 1989 and in many ways have their roots in the strategy and tactics of the two superpowers during the Cold War. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, the sole remaining superpower, the United States, was left to manage a system that had been developed for the purposes of surviving the Cold War. The problems facing global order now are, in fact, the costs of developing a system that is not designed to solve those problems, but exploit them to gain an advantage in the game of superpower politics. To understand why the United States lacks the tools to translate the unipolar power of its Cold War victory into post-Cold War influence, its Cold War objectives and the tools used to accomplish them must be re-examined.

The United States pursued a strategy of containment, which attempted to militarily, economically, and ideologically stonewall the expansion of the Soviet Union and international communism. Containment subordinated certain normative goals, like democracy and sovereignty, as ends to be pursued through more strategically practical means, like the norm of free trade, or the structures of military and economic encirclement. Statehood itself, especially in recently independent post-colonial societies, was manipulated by the superpowers to order their spheres of influence and accomplish their strategic objectives. In the case of the US, the development of state institutions in many of these societies was warped or undermined to contain the Soviet Union. Ultimately, these tactics supported a successful strategy—the Soviet Union collapsed—but the previously



acceptable costs of these practices now challenge the United States post-Cold War strategic objectives.

### **Objectives:**

The overriding objective of the United States during the Cold War was to defeat the Soviet Union and international communism while avoiding nuclear catastrophe. The United States relied on George Kennan's strategy of containment. Kennan explained that the Soviet Union viewed the world in terms of the global struggle between communism and capitalism and therefore the United States and the West could not afford to view the world any differently. US grand strategy should explicitly practice the military, economic, and ideological containment of communism and the Soviet Union.<sup>56</sup> The US also strove to increase the quality of life of Americans, both as a repudiation of communism and because a strong domestic economy was required to sustain the costs of waging the Cold War.

Defeat of the Soviet Union became the overriding organizing principle of American foreign policy following the USSR's acquisition of the hydrogen bomb. The nuclear arms race shrouded competition between the two superpowers with life and death significance. Nuclear missteps posed an existential threat to both participants and the world as a whole. Stakes that high helped clarify foreign policy priorities.<sup>57</sup> Policy programs that supported the US effort to outcompete the Soviet Union were viewed as helping the US avoid an

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 285

<sup>57</sup> At least in some areas, especially including nuclear diplomacy, evidenced by the response to Cuban Missile Crisis as compared with the "group think" that had characterized earlier foreign policy decisions made by the Kennedy administration.

existential threat, however indirectly. Such policies were preferred over those considered less relevant to that goal.

Furthermore, the nuclear threat helped reconcile the tension in American foreign policy between practicality and Wilsonian principles. Kissinger explains that the strategy of containment was deeply troubling to some American policymakers who believed that “Washington might accept a balance of power as a fact; it could not adopt it as a policy.”<sup>58</sup> The Wilsonian goal, defense of capitalist democracy, seemed at odds with the moral ambiguity of balance of power politics. Therefore, the actual practices of containment were justified in terms of an American fulfillment of a universal moral responsibility to counter the global threat of international communism and the Soviet Union, rather than in terms of US rational self-interest. This inherent tension between means and ends in US foreign policy persists, but is now unfocused by the strictures of Cold War competition. As this paper will argue, the apparent contradictions between American principles and American pragmatism are now difficult to reconcile in the absence of the organizing framework of the Cold War and the clarity provided by the high stakes of a nuclear arms race.

## **Tools**

In its competition with the Soviet Union, the United States promoted a set of international norms and built an arrangement of structures that were designed to ideologically, economically, and militarily contain communism and the USSR. The tools employed by the United States to achieve its Cold War objectives ultimately created the post-Cold War order, and form the basis of the contemporary norms and structures by

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<sup>58</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, 284

which the US translates its power into influence. While contemporary American objectives have evolved, the norms and structures upon which the US-backed world order was founded have not. To understand the contemporary mismatch, we must first examine the way these norms and structures functioned in the Cold War context.

### *Norms*

Norms are the shared values and standards of behavior that populate a given system. Norms are efficient for a superpower because they make behavior predictable, and because they guide the behavior of other actors towards goals beneficial to the superpower, or at least away from behaviors that challenge its interests. Abrogation of established norms signals that the agent in question is no longer a compliant participant in the superpower's bloc. In the context of the Cold War, both the United States and Soviet Union promulgated and enforced several norms. Some of the United States' norms were intended to ideologically compete with those proselytized by the Soviet Union. Others were intended to justify policies that more directly contained or countered Soviet expansion.

The United States styled itself as the defender of democratic capitalism and individual rights and liberties in contrast with the totalitarian, collectivist communism of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc. Therefore, the American bloc was characterized by nations that embraced free trade principles and capitalist norms, i.e. minimally interventionist domestic economic regimes, and broadly liberal international trade practices. Capitalism was articulated as a more just system than communism, because it allowed for individual choice and the empowerment of civil society vis-à-vis the state. Capitalism and free trade were an advantageous normative arrangement for the United

States to defend, because the more capitalist societies there were, the more nations the United States could trade with and the more wealth could accrue to the First World bloc.

The United States also promised the defense of democracy and the principles of self-rule. Though criticized as lip service, commitment to the triumph of democracy was a deeply held belief of Cold War presidents and members of the American foreign policy establishment. The defense and promotion of democracy was an obligation firmly rooted in the Wilsonian tradition of American foreign policy and the justification for US participation in both World Wars. It reflected the self-image of the United States as a “shining city on a hill” and its autobiography as a bastion of liberty removed from the oppressions of the Old World. Furthermore, it was the “principle” upon which American attempts at shaping global order were founded in contradistinction to the imperialistic self-interest of the Soviet Union. Global democratic governance would, in the Kantian tradition, spell the global end of war.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, profession of support for democratic norms was useful to the United States by legitimating domestic and foreign Cold War policies in the context of an ostensibly universal moral framework.

However genuine the commitment to promoting democracy, the exigencies of geopolitics frustrated even the most idealistic of its practitioners. Though American rhetorical support for democracy did not significantly wane throughout the Cold War, political, economic, and military support for dictatorships and authoritarian, yet capitalist, regimes was often supplied in the name of national security and the containment of communism. Examples abound, ranging from the CIA coup against democratically elected

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<sup>59</sup> Of course, Marxism also contended that global peace would be achieved only after all nations adopted communism and the state withered away. Both sides claimed to fight for peace and not self-interest.

but economically nationalistic Iranian Premier Mossadegh, to US support for the coup that brought the vicious but anti-communist Chilean Pinochet regime to power, to post-WWII support for the South Korean military dictatorship. Throughout the Cold War, protestors and dignitaries at home and abroad questioned whether the sincerity of US commitment to democracy extended to those democracies that embraced leftist ideologies. It seemed that being anti-communist was more important in terms of meaningful American support than being pro-democracy. Moreover, a debate emerged over whether the human costs of the American defenses of democracy, particularly the bloodshed of the Vietnam War, outweighed the political ideals for which those sacrifices were made. Realists accepted these sacrifices as the inherent costs of survival in the game of great power politics. Meanwhile, a critical mass of Wilsonians reconciled the dissonance of principles and practicality by interpreting the short-term sacrifice of democratic principles as a necessary evil in pursuit of long-term democratic peace.

A similarly tense relationship emerged over American support for the norm of state sovereignty. Westphalian state sovereignty is implicitly accepted today as a factual identity—states are those governments that have sovereignty—rather than a contestable norm. In 1945, Stalin explicitly denied the sovereignty of states in the Westphalian sense, that independent governments impose their own social systems, declaring instead that: “Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach. It cannot be otherwise.”<sup>60</sup> The Truman Doctrine formally declared the American policy of containment in 1947, and committed the United States to the defense of “democratic states” whose sovereignty was threatened by “external or internal authoritarian forces.” However, as elaborated above, the

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<sup>60</sup> Josef Stalin, quoted in Kissinger, *World Order*, 281

Truman Doctrine and the geopolitical arrangement to which it responded also compelled the United States to interfere in the domestic affairs of sovereign nations to bring down or preempt the development of communist or anti-American social and political systems. Like democracy, American defense of the norm of state sovereignty was a mixed bag, and largely contingent upon the ideological character and geostrategic relevance of the state in question.

### *Structures*

Structures are the mechanisms by which power is organized and used in a given system. The United States developed a diversity of structures to support its strategy of containment. For clarity, it is useful to focus on the development of three categories: the state-based organizational structure of the international order, the international economic regime, and the interlocking system of military alliances. Each of these, supported by normative justifications, contributed to the success of the strategy of containment, while sowing the seeds for contemporary challenges to US influence.

The state is not a naturally occurring animal. States' shape and makeup are highly contingent on both "domestic" social forces and external environment.<sup>61</sup> Post-colonial states in regions like the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia spent their formative years particularly susceptible to the turbulence of superpower competition. This meant they developed outside the Western European model of the "national state." Many of those new states made up the members of the Third World—states that did not explicitly align

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126-55.

themselves with either the West (First World) or the Soviet bloc (Second World). An entire discipline discusses the neocolonial effects of US and Soviet interference in the development of these new states, so a brief summary of the effects on state building should suffice here. A basic pattern emerges. In the decade or so following WWII, the colonial government exits and is replaced largely by the domestic bourgeoisie: well-educated wealthy local elites who received their newfound authority by virtue of their privileged position under the colonial regime. Furthermore, the new state inherits or adapts institutions from the outgoing colonial regime. These institutions are usually extractive economic instruments or disproportionately powerful military and security apparatuses, both by accident (the colonial government had little need for any other type of institution) and by necessity (the new/post-revolutionary state must consolidate its power and generate output). Enter the superpowers. Because the Soviet Union and the United States have begun a life or death, comprehensive struggle of ideological, economic, and military dimensions, these newly independent states become a strategic resource in the competition between the two superpowers. Moreover, the internal composition of these states remains a secondary question for the superpowers insofar as binding them to either pole can accomplish each superpower's overriding security objectives. In short, in the case of US support for these new states, democratic legitimacy and robust institutions sounded great, but Washington settled for the basic extraction/protection apparatus as long as it provided for the United States' strategic needs to support containment. Namely, these included cheap inputs and natural resources, profitable markets for manufactured goods, as well as participation in an anti-communist regional military and political order and strategic locations for hosting the

military resources, bases, fleets, nuclear missiles that contained the Soviet sphere of influence.

In fact, a state apparatus with a high level of insulation from civil society provides an advantage to a superpower patron due to its considerable autonomy. Providing preferential oil rights or housing military bases is significantly easier for a state to do without downward channels of accountability or a robust civil society empowered to deliberate on matters of state. Democracies are less reliable strategic partners. Because the legitimacy of democratic governments relies on popular representation, unpopular concessions to a distant superpower's strategic interests are unsustainable. The client government will simply be booted out of office in the next election. Furthermore, democracies respond to domestic policy demands that are generally unpredictable and may run counter to the patron superpower's needs, such as Mossadegh's nationalization of Iranian oil. Finally, democracies are easier for a superpower's rival to destabilize by funding and equipping partisans, especially if these democracies contain multiple ethnic, religious, or tribal groups, (as many post-colonial societies did). To defend against this external meddling, it was better for the superpowers to cut potential opposition populations out of the decision-making process altogether, which required an anti-democratic repressive state apparatus.

As a result, both the Soviet Union and the United States attempted to buy or build authoritarian states along the peripheries of their spheres of influence while backing usually violent opposition forces in each other's pocket autocracies. The proxy wars involving these opposition forces in turn warped the developmental trajectory of many new states. Capitalist autocrats could credibly argue to the United States that substantial military and



economic support was required to defeat the communist guerilla force; that force, in turn, would appeal to its Soviet backers for more military and economic support. Or alternatively, in the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the *mujahideen* insurgents could appeal to the US for more aid. These prolonged internal conflicts weakened the states in question due to the wastage of people and resources, the weakening of the state monopoly on violence (where it existed at all), and the superpower-backed expansion of inward-facing security apparatuses like the army, secret police and government militias.

Policy-makers understood the costs of these perverse state-building incentives, and further understood that they were a price the United States was willing to pay to accomplish its strategic objective. The containment of the Soviet Union based on this organizing structure was ultimately effective. As nasty as Pinochet's Chile was, it kept Soviet influence out. As nasty as the Shah's Iran was, it kept Soviet influence out and oil flowing until 1979. In all these cases of newly emergent weak states, the priority was not the healthy development of representative democracy and resilient national institutions. Instead, the United States was able to rely on the sympathetic regimes propped up in hollow but technically sovereign independent states as a foundation upon which to support a set of global political, economic and military networks to constrain the Soviet sphere of influence. The short-term sacrifice of democracy and liberty for a desperately needed advantage in the geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union was justified by the end goal of a final democratic victory and necessitated by the terrifying existential imperative to avoid a global preponderance of Soviet power. It was only following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the removal of this strategic and moral imperative that the dissonance between means and ends reemerged.

Building on the foundation of a state based system, the United States constructed an international financial, monetary, and trade regime designed to support capitalism and free trade. Initially the United States served as the ‘hegemon,’ guaranteeing the solvency of international finance with dollars, the only remaining currency with the necessary global strength and reach following the post-war collapse of the British pound-sterling. Furthermore, the United States became the locomotive of the global economy as one of the few economies to emerge from WWII in better shape than before it. The Bretton Woods institutions included the major international aid and development organizations that were responsible for Third World development projects throughout the Cold War, including the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (also known as the World Bank). Additionally, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) established ground rules for lowering barriers to free trade. These systems were designed to cordon off the closed communist economies of the Eastern bloc, and incentivize bandwagoning with the growing US economy.

This liberal economic regime was resilient. Following the adjustments of the original Bretton Woods accords in 1971, Ruggie argues that the norms and rules of the US-backed liberal economic order persisted in the new regime, despite the fact that the American economic ‘hegemony’ no longer anchored these systems.<sup>62</sup> Liberalism became “embedded” in the economic order of the non-communist world as major participants bought into the rules of the road. This economic arrangement persists today.

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<sup>62</sup> John Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 379-415

These economic structures played a key role in quarantining the communist economies. A founding economic tenet of the Soviet bloc economies was some element of centralized command and control over economic decision-making, as well as closure to the capitalist west. Elimination of tariffs and the acceptance of market principles for development and currency exchange was obviously not an option for the aspiring socialist economies. The underlying logic of containment implied that, if denied access to external sources of capital, the economic model of communism would ultimately collapse due to its inability to generate self-reinforcing growth over the long term. By maintaining an economic system that preserved the buy-in of other rising economies in the last stages of the Cold War, while denying the Soviet Union access to new markets, the United States and the rest of the West sustained growth rates that outstripped the Soviet Union's. Furthermore, the economic model supported by this system provided the requisite extractive capacity to field and maintain a global posture of military containment.

Following the upheaval of World War II, the United States also worked to craft an interlocking set of new regional military orders through a network of several alliance systems. Paramount among them was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, supported by auxiliary alliance systems in the Middle East and South East Asia.<sup>63</sup> NATO was designed to counter the potential for Soviet aggression in Europe. The famous Article Five of the treaty commits member nations to the collective defense of the whole. Most important to the collective defense of the original war-ravaged European members was the backing of the American military. The United States constituted the primary financier and supplier of the organization. Furthermore, the United States extended its nuclear umbrella

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<sup>63</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, 286

across the alliance network, committing to a nuclear response to an attack on the collective. NATO pooled some military forces and conducted joint training and exercises in anticipation of a potential Soviet invasion of Europe.

These auxiliary systems typically committed the United States to the defense of members, such as the mutual defense treaty with Taiwan and South Korea. The United States also supplied a great deal of military aid to such states, to harden their posture against aggressors in the Soviet bloc. Interventions on behalf of these regional orders defined much of Cold War US military policy, with prolonged wars in South Korea and Vietnam as well as smaller scale interventions elsewhere. These interlocking military alliances positioned US forces all over the world, and empowered the militaries of allies through access to training, funding and materiel from the United States. Moreover, these alliances were designed to deter the Soviet Union. In that respect they were fairly effective—the Soviet Union did not attempt a conquest of Europe while US backed regional military orders helped contain the advance of communism, with the obvious exception of Vietnam.

## **Conclusion**

The norms and structures organized by the United States during the Cold War served the specific purpose of translating the United States' economic and military power, as well as its persuasive universalist ideology, into global influence to deter and contain the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc. American strategy during the Cold War was not the only reason for the fall of the Soviet Union; poor strategic decision-making on the part of the regime's final generation, coupled with an exhausted economic model, and the

emergence of genuine political reformers contributed significantly to the deconsolidation of the communist giant. But in any case, by 1989, the United States had achieved its strategic objective, and the tools by which it had pursued that objective had accomplished their purposes. The structural organization of the international community had offered independent state units that were responsive participants in US Cold War strategy. International economic institutions had prevented Soviet access to sources of growth, and financed the forward military posture reinforced by interlocking military alliances that spanned across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. A normative arrangement of capitalism, democracy and sovereignty, though often contradictory with the practical imperatives of superpower politics, contributed moral and social legitimacy to the endeavor, both domestically and among core members of the Western bloc. The United States had survived the nuclear terror of the Cold War, and emerged as the sole remaining superpower, endowed with unprecedented economic, military, political, and ideological sources of power. Yet a new set of problems began almost as soon as the Cold War was won.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

The norms and structures that won the Cold War are obsolete. They are uniquely adapted to the particular brand of superpower competition that defined the Cold War and are not designed to stabilize and maintain a world order that resulted from winning it. As described in Chapter 3, the US containment strategy produced problems of autocratic governance and state weakness, which were accepted as a strategically necessary cost. Victory validated the norms and structures of the American system while shifting the strategic goals of that system to maintaining a world order rather than fighting for one. Now, the problems of statehood caused by containment challenge this objective of stability, but render the United States' normative and structural foreign policy tools ineffective, or unable to support one of the facets of stability, like democracy, without sacrificing another, like sovereignty. As a result, despite its enormous relative power at the end of the Cold War, the United States has been unable to translate its power into influence over the problems of governance and state weakness. It must realign its tools with its objectives, or vice versa, to sustain world order.

This chapter will first demonstrate the costs imposed on the post-Cold War world order by the practices of containment. Next it will describe how victory in 1989 validated and expanded the continued use of Cold War era channels of influence, despite the shift in strategic objectives. Then it will articulate how these systems fail to adequately address the challenges to that objective imposed by the enduring costs of containment policy. Finally, it will explain that the validation of these obsolete systems and the change in objective have

created conflicts between the divergent goals that comprise the United States strategic interests.

### **The Costs of Containment**

Competition between the United States and the USSR laid the groundwork for today's challenges. Each superpower bolstered authoritarian regimes within their own spheres of influence while attempting to destabilize their counterpart's client states by supporting violent internal challengers. In doing so, the superpowers nurtured brittle or authoritarian state institutions, as well as a proliferation of evolved, well-resourced insurgencies and disenfranchised, impoverished and angry popular movements. This dynamic led to contemporary problems of statehood: weak and fragile states, predatory and autocratic states, as well as powerful violent non-state actors. When the United States strategic objective shifted at the end of the Cold War from saving the free world to maintaining and expanding it, these problems of statehood became securitized as threats to the stability of the new liberal order, rather than the price of containment.

#### *Autocracies and Fragile States*

The United States propped up dictatorships across Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, while the Soviet Union did the same. As a result, at the conclusion of the Cold War following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a substantial part of the globe was governed by venal autocrats with bloated militaries and security services who dominated states with weak civil societies, and a tenuous grasp on the monopoly of violence. And, with the Soviet Union gone, the Wilsonian goal of a liberal world order of free, sovereign and democratic capitalist states was finally possible. The

autocracies and destabilized states were no longer necessary for containment nor were they strategically or ethically justifiable. In fact, they were counterproductive.

Consequently, the thorniest problems for the hegemon in the post-Cold War era were not from rising challenger states like China, or aggression by a humiliated Russia. Both were hemmed in by the regional military alliances set up during the Cold War, and sufficiently entangled by the international liberal economic regime that had been expanded following its conclusion. The troubles began most immediately in places that occupied the most turbulent battlegrounds of US-Soviet competition, places like Central and South America, Africa, the Middle East, South and South East Asia. In the decade following the Cold War, the United States committed military forces to intervene on behalf of the liberal world order to topple dictators, prevent atrocity, or deter aggression at least seven times: Panama, Iraq (twice), Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. During the Cold War, each of these states had been caught in the superpower's struggle for regional influence.<sup>64</sup> The 1989 invasion of Panama deposed dictator Manuel Noriega, who had been a pro-US Cold War asset since 1967, paid to help put down pro-communist Sandinista rebels in neighboring Nicaragua.<sup>65</sup> Iraq had been an erstwhile ally in the Baghdad Pact, and Saddam's autocracy had been backed against the Ayatollah during the Iran-Iraq war. Somalia's state failure had been precipitated by a civil war in which the Barre dictatorship, a Cold War ally of first the Soviet Union and then the United States, was ousted by an Ethiopia-backed coalition. The Barre dictatorship had been weakened when Ethiopia and Somalia had fought a war in the

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<sup>64</sup> Kagan, "Superpowers Don't Get to Retire," 2014

<sup>65</sup> Mark Tran, "Manuel Noriega - from Us Friend to Foe," *Guardian*, 27 April 2010, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010>.



70s, with Ethiopia backed by the USSR and Somalia backed by the US.<sup>66</sup> Haiti had suffered throughout the Cold War under the autocratic Duvalier family, which was tolerated by the US due to its anti-communist position.<sup>67</sup> The Bosnian crisis in 1995 was in part a consequence of the deconsolidation of Yugoslavia, which, under Tito, had played both superpowers off of each other. The Kosovo crisis was also an aftershock of this deconsolidation.

Each of these states played some role in the superpowers' global contest, however all posed liabilities to the undisputed hegemon at the conclusion of the Cold War. They were necessary evils in the fight to save the free world, but strategic threats to that free world once it had been saved. The liberal world order of sovereign democratic states had no place for autocrats and dictators like Noriega, military coups like in Haiti, or aggressive rogue states like Saddam's Iraq. Nor could the United States, whose 'benign' hegemony was predicated on its defense of the universal norms of human rights, abide by the massacres in collapsed or collapsing states like Somali, Bosnia, and Kosovo. As a result, immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States began flexing its now unchecked geopolitical muscle, consolidating the liberal world order by cleaning up the blemishes left over from its Cold War competition.

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<sup>66</sup> Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa*, The Yale Library of Military History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 214 accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctt1npqhd>.

<sup>67</sup> National Academy of Public Administration, "Why Foreign Aid to Haiti Failed," *Academy International Affairs Working Paper Series*, (Washington D.C.: National Academy of Public Administration, 2006), 3

### *Violent Non-State Actors*

Similarly, the paramilitary organizations, insurgencies, separatist movements and other violent non-state actors funded, trained, and equipped by the superpowers during the Cold War had lost their strategic value by 1989. Though violent non-state actors had been exploited by the CIA and the KGB for the purposes of proxy warfare, the destabilizing effects of these organizations persist even after the proxy wars concluded in 1989. Indeed, US and Soviet competition “below the waterline” provided fertile ground for the proliferation and sustainability of violent non-state actors. First, the ineffective state institutions that developed over the course of the Cold War remained, and left violent non-state actors with plenty of freedom of movement. Vast swaths of territory within Third World states are functionally ungoverned, and lack the social and economic services that will meaningfully incorporate those populations into the fold of the state. Instead, ethno-sectarian insurgencies, tribal militias, drug cartels, and the like fill the gap, offering economic opportunity, power, and occasionally some semblance of governance. Second, the initial Cold War investment in resources for violent non-state actors remains in the system. Such start-up capital, some of it physical, like guns and money, the rest knowledge-based, like tactical training or battle experience, can be recycled by the initial organization in increasingly sophisticated iterations. But they can also be recycled by any other organization it competes or cooperates with, even if the two organizations are distinct in terms of goals or operations. Thus, in regions left un-ordered by ineffective Cold War era states structures, paramilitary organizations can contract with drug cartels, exchanging protection services for financing. The outcome is that in the former battlefields of US-Soviet competition, a dedicated extremist organization will find no shortage of guns,

money, potential recruits, holdfasts and potential partner organizations. For example, as a result of US support for the *mujahideen* insurgency that opposed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the fighters in those organizations formed the core of the Afghan Taliban. Operating in the mountainous ungoverned borderlands between Kabul and Islamabad, the Taliban was able to sustain a resilient insurgency against the United States that continues to this day. Furthermore, they aided and abetted Al-Qaeda, offering safe haven, training camps and materiel. Al-Qaeda then propped up local affiliates in other poorly governed or autocratic states across the Middle East and North Africa, channeling to these organizations its expertise, resources and objectives.

This poses a significant challenge for the United States and its liberal world order. These organizations threaten the sovereignty of the independent states on which the order is based—after all they were originally designed to do so. Further, some of these organizations see a strategic value in high-profile atrocity, specifically terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, ethnonationalist and ethnoreligious insurgencies like Boko Haram, ISIS, and the Taliban, as well as past groups like the various Bosnian, Croat, and Serb militias that terrorized the remnants of Yugoslavia in the 90s. Such extremist groups are highly motivated by particularistic exclusionary ideologies that justify and feed off of mass killings and human rights atrocities committed against civilian populations. During the Cold War such horrific acts could be rationalized away with the strategic imperatives of containment, and, when necessary, coldly weighed against the megadeaths of a nuclear showdown with an ascendant Soviet Union. However, these mass atrocities now directly attack the human rights and liberties that the liberal world order was supposed to protect and therefore challenge the guarantor of that order, the United States, to respond.

## The Validation of Victory

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the United States' economic and military power was vast in absolute and relative terms. The United States was responsible for 42% of global military spending in 1991, thanks in large part to the ramping up of US military spending on expensive, high tech systems during the 80's in a successful bid to outspend the USSR.<sup>68</sup> In the same year, US share of global GDP was around 24%. The next largest state economy was Japan's at around 10% with all other major economies in the single digits.<sup>69</sup> Though these statistics do not tell the whole story about the composition of US military and economic power, they represent the enormous relative power the United States enjoyed compared to the rest of the globe. Endowed with these immense capacities, the sudden collapse of its only real rival meant that any hard limits on the exercise of US power would have to be self-imposed. Actions no longer needed to be calculated in terms of their effect on the "Doomsday Clock" charting proximity to nuclear annihilation, nor in terms of the costs of Soviet reprisals and resistance on the geopolitical chessboard.

Such internal limits on military interventions—political will, deaths of American soldiers, economic costs—were also falling dramatically due to the massive technological advancement of the US military. Improvements in precision targeting and large scale

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<sup>68</sup> Dinah Walker, *Trends in U.s. Military Spending* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2014), accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/defense-budget/trends-us-military-spending/p28855>.

<sup>69</sup> World Economic Outlook data, IMF, *GDP based on PPP share of World total*, in the EconStats, Electronic Format. <http://www.econstats.com/weo/V012.htm>

mechanized warfare that had been a facet of the US-Soviet arms race significantly expanded the menu of options available to policy-makers, while lowering the political, human, and economic costs. The first Gulf War demonstrated the overwhelming conventional superiority of the American military. Long-range cruise missiles and airstrikes overwhelmed Iraqi forces, while US mechanized units routed the Iraqi army. Scholars like Ignatieff contend that these innovations have contributed to a shift in the way policy-makers and the public perceive war. Waging war at a distance, with hyper-advanced technology that minimizes troop exposure produces what Ignatieff calls “virtual war,” where the costs of violence are minimized and the war is viewed by policy makers and the public as a spectacle rather than a conflict with human costs.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, the collapse of communism validated the American-backed ideology of capitalist democracy. The test of history appeared to confirm the Wilsonian conviction that free trade and democracy were the optimal method of political and economic organization. History had ended.<sup>71</sup> *Pax Americana*, a liberal order of peace and collective security had begun, backed by a benign hegemon of historically incomparable strength. For some in the foreign policy establishment, the United States was finally free to finish historical struggle towards the liberal goal of global democracy and free trade after the dirty work of the Cold War. Therefore, both the first Bush and Clinton foreign policies focused on enlarging the community of nations and combating minor miscreants like Iraq and North Korea who threatened that collective security.<sup>72</sup> The United States therefore focused its energies on expanding membership in the economic and political organizations

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Picador, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, 316

that facilitated the triumph of market-based democracy over totalitarian communism. The World Trade Organization replaced the GATT in 1994 to focus on reducing barriers to global free trade, and expanded its ranks to include even such former command economies like China and many former Soviet bloc states. NATO enlargement similarly extended membership to former members of the Warsaw Pact.

This validation of the American system, backed by the strength and wealth of the sole remaining superpower, increased the ideational power of the United States. With communism discredited, capitalists (or communists who were willing to become capitalists) had the advantage in their domestic arenas. They could effectively signal compliance with the free trade norms of the new world order in order to gain new access to the community of nations. This was especially true in Eastern Europe, which, within the decade, had formerly leftist parties advocating for hyper liberal fiscal policies like the “flat tax” in order to broadcast their conversion to capitalism to western investors.<sup>73</sup> The Cold War system appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be able to accomplish the normative goals set out at the conclusion of World War II, to support the development of a community of democratic, independent sovereign states that respected the human rights of their citizens and traded freely among each other. However, the systems of containment were never designed to achieve those normative objectives, only to bring about conditions allowing for their possibility by bringing down the Soviet Union

## **System Failure**

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<sup>73</sup> Appel and Orenstein, “Ideas vs. Resources,” 2013

As a result of this validation, the norms and structures by which the United States translated its power into influence have not functionally changed since their Cold War formation. However, the objectives for which they are used have shifted. The new strategic objective is to maintain the stability of the post-Cold War liberal world order. That strategic objective securitizes problems of statehood, fragile states, autocracies, and violent non-state actors as threats to the foundations of the liberal order, specifically the norms of democracy, human rights, and sovereignty. The events of 9/11 escalated the threat these problems posed to American citizens, but the challenges problems of statehood posed to consolidating and sustaining the liberal world order were already clear in the minds of post-Cold War presidents and policy-makers. Yet the 1989 validation of the Cold War era American system meant that the United States responded to these threats with instruments that are designed to exploit or ignore problems of statehood rather than solve them.

The international institutions of the American system – like NATO, the WTO, and the UN – all require statehood for entry. However, strong statehood, or even universally recognized legitimate statehood, are not requirements. Thus, as these fundamental institutions of the new liberal world order were expanded across the international community, states were admitted that lacked key characteristics of statehood. Furthermore, these dysfunctional states were incorporated into the new world order as full, legitimate members of the community of nations. As a result, the global development agencies must disburse project funding via these compromised states' governments—governments that are corrupt, autocratic, or totally superficial—undermining the efficiency of those institutions and their projects. Further, the particular instruments of American foreign policy, trade benefits, development aid, and even military intervention and war all imply a

state partner or opponent, in particular a state that resembles the “national state” model.<sup>74</sup> The United States exerts power over these sovereign state governments to compel them to produce some objective in the territory they hold. However, when those former client states do not function according to the Westphalian model due to their warped Cold War development, the United States is unable translate its power over the state into influence over what happens within the state’s borders. Shallow state institutions are unable to produce a policy result across the country. Alternatively, disproportionately militarized or extractive state institutions are unwilling to pursue a desired outcome, even when it is in the interests of the state as a whole.<sup>75</sup>

For example, consider Pakistan and Bin Laden. Despite the fact that Pakistan was ostensibly the United States partner in the War on Terror, and a recipient of massive sums of US economic and military aid, the United States could not work through the Pakistani state to apprehend or neutralize Bin Laden. This was because the Pakistani state lacked the institutions to meaningfully assist the US, and moreover the ISI operated fundamentally independently from the state’s political leadership and could not be trusted.<sup>76</sup> Therefore the United States had no choice but to perform the raid unilaterally.

This spiral towards US unilateralism in the absence of viable national partners is self-reinforcing. A weak state cannot partner effectively with the US to maintain stability within its borders. Alternatively, an autocracy threatens to visit unconscionable violence

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<sup>74</sup> States that emerged out of the Westphalian tradition of sovereignty, and are strongly associated with a distinct, reasonably unitary national identity.

<sup>75</sup> Jennifer Taw, “Distributive Domestic Response: How Local Politics Transform External Powers’ Foreign Policy Outcomes,” *Review of International Studies*, 37, no. 3 (July 2011): 1357-1382.

<sup>76</sup> This institutional arrangement is a consequence of the warped development of post-independence Pakistan as an occasional ally of the United States during the Cold War, especially when it was governed by generals.



on the population of itself or its neighbors. The United States directly engages as hegemon in the name of stability, breaking the norm of sovereignty and undercutting the moral legitimacy of its world order. Furthermore, this intervention, military, humanitarian, or otherwise, accelerates the breakdown of the state's domestic institutions, ultimately increasing instability, provoking further intervention. No better example exists than Iraq. After breaking the Iraqi autocracy to impose Iraqi democracy, gutted governmental institutions minimized Baghdad's control over the provinces, while militant Shia capture of the military and extractive apparatuses deepened sectarian conflict. Ultimately, this disintegration so threatened regional stability that the United States stepped back into the conflict to support the fight against ISIS. However, this most recent intervention suffers from the fact that its strategic partner, the Iraqi state, is utterly beholden to the Iranian backed Shia militias, none of which are much warmer or fuzzier than ISIS.

### **Conflict of Interests**

The Cold War had been ostensibly waged to protect universal liberal principles. Those principles were often pragmatically compromised, with the understanding that such policies were necessary evils, committed for the greater good. Winning the Cold War and ending history ended the immediate security concerns, both nuclear and otherwise, that focused and prioritized foreign policy into a "Grand Strategy." The new strategic objective, maintaining the stability of the liberal world order, is problematic. It contains within it a laundry list of normative objectives that all constitute the liberal world order, but lack a clear hierarchy. Free trade, democracy, human rights, sovereignty, and peace are all necessary to maintain the stability of the liberal world order, but how does the hegemon

decide which to protect, when and at what cost? Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, this new strategic objective has made the world appear more dangerous, because each of those secondary objectives seem to be embattled. Almost any crisis appears to be a threat to a fundamental norm of the liberal world order. Economic nationalism is a threat to the key liberal tenet of free trade. Autocracies threaten to roll back the hard fought victories won by democracy in the final years of the Cold War. These “rogue states” threaten international peace by supporting non-state actors who erode the sovereignty of states. Authoritarian regimes and extremist non-state militias abuse human rights and violate individual liberties. Worse still, according to many commentators on both the right and the left, any one of these crises challenges the “credibility” of US power and influence, which undergirds the whole system.

These dynamics were demonstrated by America’s early post-Cold War China policy. Economically, China was opening up in ways extremely beneficial to the US, and eventually even became a member of the WTO. However, the bloody authoritarian crackdown in response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests demonstrated that political and economic opening are not necessarily coupled. The Clinton administration initially, yet unsuccessfully, attempted to link the Sino-American economic relationship with Chinese steps towards political liberalization.<sup>77</sup> China rebuffed the United States, citing the norm of sovereignty, and claimed that its internal affairs are its own business, and that the two nations’ economic relationship needed to be fully insulated from China’s domestic politics. As a result, US relations with China for the last 25 years have

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<sup>77</sup> Kissinger, *World Order*, 316

been defined in terms of China's good behavior on issues of free trade, while the United States accepts that democracy in China is not forthcoming.

Similar tradeoffs emerge between preventing human rights atrocities or a rollback of democracy and preserving regional peace and stability. These tradeoffs are imposed by the fact that the systems by which the United States might protect human rights or democracy are Cold-War era systems that are likely to fail or backfire. Take the debate over intervention in the Syrian civil war. Proponents argued that the United States as arbiter of the liberal international order must intervene on behalf of the rebels to help bring down the repressive, autocratic Assad regime and prevent or punish mass atrocity committed upon civilians. Opponents argued that American intervention would do little to promote democracy or protect civilians, and merely escalate the civil war while increasing support to radical Islamists, citing the intervention in Libya which brought down Ghaddafi but did not bring in democracy, only chaos. Caught between these two no-win situations, the United States flirted with both and then chose neither. The United States did not have its priorities straight, though not in the pejorative sense; it simply did not have a clear hierarchy which prioritized democracy over stability, or vice versa. Furthermore, the tools at the United States' disposal – military intervention, economic sanctions, and direct support to the rebels – were not reliable tools by which to influence affairs in Syria because they were never designed to deal with a state in the midst of collapse and overrun by violent non-state actors. International diplomatic and economic sanctions did little to change Assad's calculus and thus produced no influence over his behavior. Military intervention could depose Assad, but at what cost to the structural integrity of the Syrian state? Given the consequence of the 2003 Iraq intervention, would a post-civil war Syria even be

conceivable if the United States were to directly intervene militarily? Providing aid to the rebels means injecting money and guns into a fluid whirlpool of violent non-state actors, many of whom may threaten US regional interests and promote instability elsewhere in the region.

So the United States struggles to achieve a multifaceted strategic objective with a set of tools that forces the US to choose between those facets, but without a clear hierarchy of which facets are more important than others. The United States is tasked with maintaining the liberal order with Cold War era systems that work through unreliable or counterproductive state channels and impose costs to one sub-objective, like democracy, in support of another, like stability. Yet the validation of these systems by victory over the Soviet Union and the heightened profile of problems of statehood that apparently threaten the foundations of the liberal world order, from democracy and human rights, to sovereignty and stability, means the United States will attempt to defend those foundations all at once with outdated systems. As a result, the United States, despite its vast power, fails to translate that power into the influence required to accomplish its strategic objective.

## CONCLUSION

Any new world order must contend with the detritus of the previous era. The post-World War Two system was left to deal with the consequences of colonialism and its collapse, consequences that persisted throughout the Cold War to today. The modern liberal order is no different. The consequences of Cold War era competition between the two superpowers has populated a large portion of the globe with fragile, autocratic or superficial states and the corresponding proliferation of empowered, violent non-state actors. However, the liberal world order is founded upon the proper functioning of those states and the subordination of those non-state actors to state institutions. The United States has shifted its strategic objective from containment, a highly specific, operational strategy, to maintaining the liberal world order, and everything that entails: protection of democracy, human rights, sovereignty, peace, stability and free trade. Yet it still relies upon Cold War era systems that were never designed to protect democracy, human rights, sovereignty, or peace, only to fight the Soviet Union in service of those future normative goals. As a result the United States finds itself wielding its enormous power through ineffective or counterproductive channels of influence to protect the normative pillars upon which the liberal order rests. It finds itself unable to fulfill its responsibility to protect with force without creating further chaos and abuse of human rights, coerce democratization through international sanction without deepening the miserable poverty of an autocrat's subjects, or build good governance in fragile states without channeling massive sums of development aid into a corrupt official's pocket or militia's war chest.

The shift in strategic objective brought about by the collapse of the “Evil Empire” in 1989 corresponded to a shift in mindset. The cold-hearted pragmatism of the Cold War is itself inimical to the idealism of a Wilsonian liberal order, while the normative pillars of that order are themselves threatened by the mechanisms and consequences of their protection. When it attempts to work through the rules-based system it ostensibly defends, the United States can get nothing done through corrupt, autocratic, or totally superficial state partners. When it works outside of the system, it undermines the rules of the rules-based system, and empowers and motivates brutal, resilient insurgencies, militias, terrorists and their support networks. Yet if the United States does nothing, the credibility of its power and commitment to protect the norms of the liberal world order is called into question. To escape this no-win situation the United States must either align its tools with its objectives or align its objectives with its tools. The former would involve clearly prioritizing the numerous normative objectives inherent in “maintaining world order” and committing the United States vast power towards developing structures that respond to the problems of statehood that challenge those objectives. That would require a fundamental reorganization of American instruments of foreign policy, including the role of the military and American support for instruments of international law, like the ICC, ICJ and the UN. The latter would involve reducing American objectives to those its tools are designed to accomplish, i.e. deterrence of great power conflict and expansionism of rival states. Such a shift would deprioritize the threats posed by terrorists and other violent non-state actors and the moral affront caused by autocrats and failed states, and would rely on the structural tools of economic and military containment that have functioned relatively well in Europe and Asia. Both options have their costs and the success of either is uncertain. However,

what is certain is that the United States cannot protect or sustain a liberal world order with the Cold War systems it fought with to build it.

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