

**Globalisation and Multilateralism: Challenges and Threats to  
the Political-Military Hegemony of the United States of America  
in the Contemporary International System**

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**Abstract**

In the past twenty years, the political-military hegemony of the United States of America has been challenged by new threats; some are systemic while others are the result of the direct action of its competitors, namely China, Russia and the European Union. This article argues that the U.S. is still the political-military hegemon of the international system, even though it has entered a phase of decline due to the pressures coming from the competing actors and from the changing structure of the international system. However, the biggest challenge comes from within its national political system that needs to be reformed in order to stop the process of hegemonic decline.

**I. Introduction**

After the end of the Cold War, we have witnessed two big changes in the international political arena, the beginning of a new phase of globalization and the inception of a new world political structure. Globalisation has expanded to the point of generating a new geopolitical picture of power. The structure of the contemporary international system is multilateral and more inclusive in comparison with the Cold War period that was essentially bipolar. Countries that were previously isolated from the international scene are now integrated into the new world system, participating fully in the workings of international organizations and regional alliances, whose function is to promote global governance by facilitating the political and economic relations amongst its members. The rapid and steady pace of technological progress has also played a key role in the spread of globalisation, especially because of the development of

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information technology capabilities and the diffusion of widespread, cheap, reliable telecommunication systems to almost every country on the planet.

Since the early 1990s, we have witnessed the consolidation and expansion of another global phenomenon – regionalism, which is the formation of regional blocs amongst neighbouring countries for security and economic purposes. The re-emergence of Russia as a superpower, China's political and economic expansion, and the formation of the European Union (EU) as a new geopolitical regional actor are variables that have changed the post-Cold War equation of power. All of these factors challenge the U.S. hegemonic position in the international system (Khanna, 2008).

This article analyses these issues, focusing on the political-military aspect of the confrontation of power among the main actors of the contemporary international system that are the U.S., China, Russia and the EU. The methodology used is both quantitative and qualitative. Military power can be weighted by the size and firepower of the military apparatus alone, but it would not explain all the other factors that come into play in the international power confrontation, such as the political. The political-military analysis of power proposed in this article examines the political and military factors combined together, conducting also a critical analysis of the historical period taken into consideration.

The research objectives will be achieved by making an initial quantitative measurement of the U.S. expenditure for defence, paired with a subsequent qualitative analysis of the foreign policy strategy put forward by the different U.S. administrations since the end of the Cold War.

The theoretical framework used for analysis is Gramsci's theory of hegemony and its subsequent developments, such as Robert Cox's Critical Theory, even though there will be a concrete effort to expand the ontological analysis towards other aspects of global hegemony as suggested by Owen Worth (2011). This problem will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## **II. Power, Imperialism and Hegemony as Foundational Elements of International Relations**

Power in international politics is studied by all international relations (IR) theories but there are three main schools of thought from which all IR theories originate -- the positivist, the normative and the post-positivist schools.

The oldest theory is positivism which inspired realism. For realists, the state is the fundamental ontological unit of analysis in IR, and power is the necessary tool for the survival of the state because the international system is fundamentally anarchical. In other words, the international system is formed by states that are the ultimate depositaries of the highest form of political and legal authority, therefore of power (Morgenthau, 1948). Neorealists share substantially the same ontological assumption, considering the state as the central unit of analysis, even though they came to a different conclusion on the causes of war. Neorealists identify the anarchical nature of the international system as the cause of war and insecurity, whilst realists blame human nature (Waltz, 1979). These theoretical perspectives have been defined as ‘problem-solving’, mainly because “it takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action” (Cox, 1981: 128). Problem-solving theories do not have an epistemological insight because they are not concerned with understanding how and why the world is structured as it is, or why we understand it in a specific way rather than another one. Therefore, they treat power as one fundamental ontological unit, as a tool necessary to guarantee either the stability of the international system or the survival of the state (*e.g.* Kindleberger, 1986), making no analytical distinction between imperialism and hegemony (Morgenthau, 1948: 36-37).

The second big school of thought is the normative one that has inspired liberalism. Although liberalism can also be classified as belonging to the positivist tradition, it shows some substantial differences when applied to the study of politics and IR, because contrarily to realism it tries to describe reality as ought to be, rather than as it is. For this reason, it has also been dubbed as idealism. Liberals too recognise the state as one of the fundamental units of IR, just not the only one. Liberals also value international intergovernmental institutions that serve to tame the anarchical nature of the international system through international law and norms. For liberals power is almost a consequence of politics rather than its fundamental essence; henceforth it can be studied, understood and regulated through the application of norms. So is hegemony, which is understood as one of the expressions of power. Liberals explain hegemony as the capacity of one international actor to lead and co-opt others into regimes of international cooperation governed by international law (Keohane, 1984).

The third big school of thought is the post-positivist that has evolved through time to inspire different theoretical perspectives (Herrera Santana, 2017). In the discipline of IR, there are three main paradigms that are influenced by post-positivist analytical thinking. The oldest is the Marxist from which originates critical theory; the second is the postmodernist; the third is

the constructivist. Although they all offer a very interesting and suggestive interpretation of power, only critical theory focuses on the concept of hegemony as one of the fundamental units of power, due to the intellectual connection with Gramsci's work. According to Gramsci (1977), hegemony is diametrically opposed to imperialism or dominion. Hegemony is the capacity to subdue a subject in a substantially peaceful fashion, whilst imperialism is the imposition of dominion upon the resisting actor, always done in a violent and repressive fashion. Gramsci explains how the modern capitalist industrial states use hegemony to support their fundamental structure, using politics, economics and culture to manipulate public opinion and create the impression of a convergence of interests between the ruling and working classes. Imperialism comes into play when hegemony fails, which is when the hegemonic political rhetoric is incapable to manipulate and co-opt the counterpart. Nevertheless, in the hegemonic political discourse, the use of these means of negotiation and manipulation do not exclude the existence and the importance of the military might, which is always necessary to guarantee the security of the hegemonic project. This is particularly true in a world made of competing political actors, where trust is not a currency that can be spent easily without dire consequences for the survival of the hegemonic power. Furthermore, military power is an essential tool to impose the imperialist dominion when hegemony fails (Cox and Sinclair, 1996: 212-217).

Despite the fact that hegemony and imperialism are the opposite of each other, they are both a part of the same element, power (Gramsci, 1977: 1638). Therefore, both hegemony and imperialism, though antithetic, must be understood as the two possible manifestations of political power. Power is the ultimate ingredient of the state, regardless of its development stage. This conceptualization of power falls into line with the Hegelian philosophical tradition that decomposes history into three basic elements: thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Gramsci, 1977). In Gramsci's analysis, hegemony, imperialism and power are the three foundational elements of the state. By the same token, when translated to the international political level of analysis, they can also be considered as the three foundational elements of all political and socioeconomic relations.

It could be argued that Gramsci's theory of hegemony is only valid when used in the realm of domestic politics because it serves to explain the dialectic confrontation between social classes; therefore it is unfit to describe international political events. However, if we make a hermeneutic reading of Gramsci's texts, we can ascertain that he theorised hegemony and imperialism as universal features of power, henceforth they cannot be relegated exclusively in the domestic dimension of political analysis. Nevertheless, this problem has already been

resolved by the members of the international critical school of thought, led by Robert W. Cox, Stephen Gill, Mark Rupert and Kees van der Pijl, who have introduced Gramscian analysis in the study of IR. Furthermore, as explained by Owen Worth (2011), Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and historic blocs provide an alternative reading of state-centric power that can help to overcome the positivist tradition, proposing new sources of explanation and new lines of research.

A further problem that arises when using critical theory as a framework of analysis in international relations is the striking similarity with some aspects of liberal idealism. Idealism and Marxism have common historical and philosophical roots that on many occasions have produced similar analytical results. Gramsci was already aware of this connection back in 1917, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution of October that brought down the czarist regime in Russia to establish the Soviet Union. In one article written for the socialist Italian newspaper *Avanti!*, Gramsci explains that part of the original Marxist thinking was the continuation of Italian and German idealistic thinking, which in Marx was contaminated by positivist and naturalist elements (Mordenti, 1996: 45). There are enough elements to prove that this influential relation between the two philosophical traditions has continued to these days. Specifically, there are some striking similarities between the concepts of hegemony and imperialism theorised by Gramsci and the concepts of 'soft power' and 'hard power' theorised by Joseph Nye (2005). Nye describes 'soft power' as the power of attraction used by a political actor (generally a state) to form alliances with another actor with lesser power. When applied to contemporary international relations, Nye thinks of soft power as the main political tool the U.S. should use to attract other countries on its side, in order to increase its security, the stability of the international system and the prosperity of the participant countries, falling into line with the liberal political discourse.

A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries-admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness-want to follow it. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change by threatening military force or economic sanctions. This soft power — getting others to want the outcomes that you want — co-opts people rather than coerces them. Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others (Nye, 2005: 5).

According to Nye (*loc. cit.*), the opposite of 'soft power' is 'hard power' which is the expression of coercive power: "Everyone is familiar with hard power. We know that military and economic might often get others to change their position. Hard power can rest on

inducements ('carrots') or threats ('sticks')". As can be observed, there are a lot of similarities between the explanations of power given by Gramsci and Nye, even though they lived different historical periods, and for this reason, they give a different insight on the historical and political reality that surrounds them. These similarities between the neo-Gramscian international critical theory and idealism have been labelled awkward and inconvenient because they can cause confusion, analytical redundancy and theoretical reductionism (Worth, 2011: 374). Yet, they cannot be ignored and to an extent, they can be used to define the common grounds, as well as, the substantial differences between the two schools of thought. This exercise could also help to identify the new ontological perspective needed to revive the Gramscian analytical discourse, bringing it out of the *cul-de-sac* in which it has landed in recent years (Worth, 2011: 374). It could also be the inspiration for new lines of research reviving its analytical validity.

The underlying idea of this article is that to revive Gramscian analysis in IR is necessary to promote the dialogue with all the other theoretical perspectives, rediscovering the dialectic vocation that has distinguished this school of thought since its early days. Any kind of theoretical isolationism can only impair the ability to develop new ideas and to discover new phenomena. In particular, an open confrontation with the postmodern and the constructivist paradigms could be really helpful since they have demonstrated a great degree of originality in the development of new lines of analytical enquiry and theoretical development, especially with regards to the topic of power in IR.

### **III. U.S. Expenditure for Defence: the Quantitative Aspect of Political-Military Hegemonic Power**

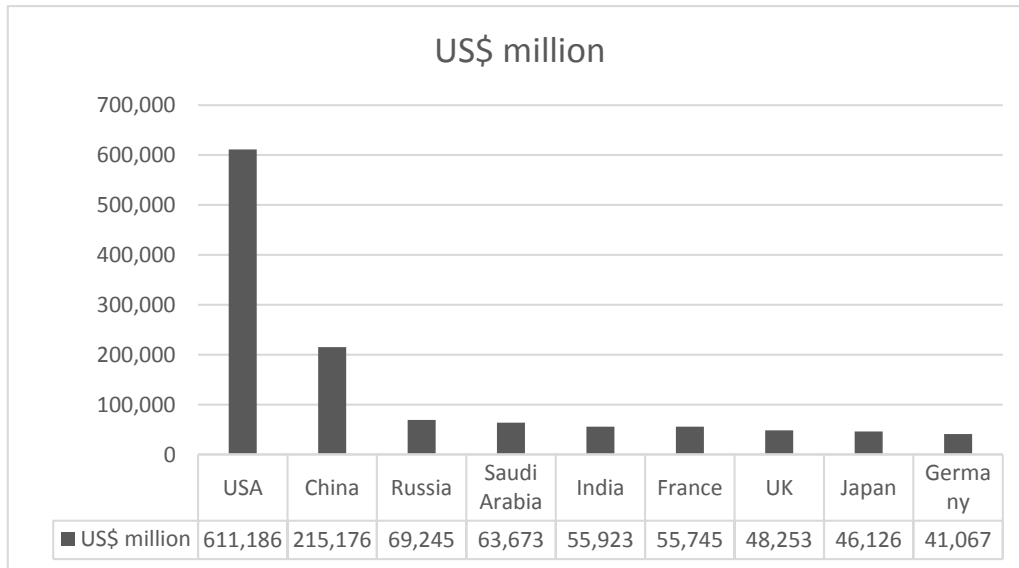
Since the mid-1990s defence spending has been one of the most important balance sheet items for many countries, especially for those in North America, Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. However, the countries that have spent more in absolute terms are the U.S., China, Russia and the EU<sup>2</sup> (SIPRI, 2017). Even after the end of the Cold War, the US was by large the world's biggest spender in defence during the 1990s. From 1992 onward the US alone was responsible for 40 percent of the global military expenditure, only 14 per cent less than what it spent during a typical Cold War year (Cox, 2005: 268).

Currently, the U.S. is the country with the highest defence spending equal to \$611,186 million (UNODA, 2015; SIPRI, 2017; World Bank, 2017). Thus Figure 1 indicates that China, the

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<sup>2</sup> Although the European Union is not a single country, for the specific analytical purpose of the calculation of the global defence spending it is considered as a unitary actor.

second biggest spender by far, allocates only about a third of the funding, confirming the hypothesis that the U.S. has still the most powerful military apparatus. However, it is estimated that by 2025 China could spend the same amount of money or perhaps even more than the U.S. on military hardware, bridging the technological and quantitative gap with the American counterpart (Dyer, 2013).



**Figure 1** Top ten state defence budgets in 2016 (prepared by the author based on SIPRI, 2017; World Bank, 2017; UNODA, 2015).

From the same data emerges that the aggregate defence expenditure of the main EU countries is equal to \$187,892 million dollars, which is lower than China's but higher than Russia's. However, despite the fact that EU countries are also members of NATO, their military power cannot be automatically considered as complementary to that of the U.S. The reason for this is the internal political divisions within the EU that are being aggravated by the recent decision of the UK to leave the EU. Furthermore, the recent statements of U.S. President Trump, who asked the EU to provide for their own defence in a quite undiplomatic fashion, may have serious political consequences, causing divergences in the formulation of the EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP). The result could be a diminished capacity for NATO to coordinate and react in the event of an international crisis or a military conflict. An example of this was the 2003 Iraq war when France and Germany did not support the NATO 'coalition of the willing' for purely political reasons.

From the analysis of the global defence spending data emerges a further interesting reading regarding the Middle East countries. Saudi Arabia is the fourth top defence spender in the world and the first in the Middle East. This fact carries political implications of some relevance

because Saudi Arabia is at the same time one of the political opponents of Israel and a historical hegemonic client of the U.S., which in turn is one of the main consumers of oil in the world and therefore of Saudi oil. Since the oil economy is reaching its peak, both for the finite nature of oil as a natural resource and for the tendency to develop clean renewable energy sources that carry less dependency on external providers, the strengthening of the Saudi military power can be interpreted as a sign that the historical hegemonic relationship with the U.S. is approaching its final stages.

According to the same data, Iran has spent \$12,719 million dollars on armaments, slightly less than Spain. The future implications of this escalation of military spending in the region are unpredictable, especially if we consider the level of Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict (2015-2017). A strengthening of the Russian presence in the Middle East may become a Trojan horse against U.S. political-military hegemony, providing an alternative to the countries that do not want to align with the American political line.

#### **IV. Bush, 9/11 and the War on Terror**

After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. was left with no major contenders to its hegemonic position. Thus for a period of roughly ten years, the U.S. took on the role of global policeman intervening as an external arbiter in many international crises such as the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), Somalia (1993), Haiti (1994), the Balkan War (1995) and Kosovo (1999) (Cyr, 2000: 97). The terror attacks of the 11th September 2001 changed this situation, marking the beginning of a new historical phase (Cox and Schechter, 2002: 265-267). The novelty of it is that unlike traditional conflicts, the contenders are not just states, but states and non-state actors alike. In the new international political scenario, the non-state actors are terrorist organisations. Therefore, the characteristic of this confrontation is the asymmetry of political-military power displayed by the contenders, which is determined by the difference in political legitimacy and military capability between the state and the non-state actors (Zakaria, 2008: 1-4).

In reality, this is not the first time that states have faced terrorist organisations. The novelty is the global character of the confrontation and the religious motivation that in the past was never a big factor on its own. In fact, from the late 1960s throughout the early 1980s, the world scene was populated by many terrorist organisations but none of them had pure religious motivations. In some circumstances, religion was one of the distinctive elements between the fighting parties, such as in the case of the PLO confronting Israel and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) confronting the British government, but it was never the rationale for conflicts. Also, although

those organisations acted internationally, the majority of them had targets that were confined to their national dimension. For example, the target of the PLO was the liberation of Palestine from the Israeli occupation, the goal of the IRA was the emancipation of Northern Ireland from British rule, and the goal of ETA was the secession of the Basque Country from Spain.

In the 9/11 attacks, the perpetrator was Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organisation led by Osama bin Laden, who in the early 1980s was a protégé of the U.S. trained by the C.I.A. to fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda is not a vertically structured organisation but rather a loose network formed by many terrorist firms, groups and cells ready to act and strike at any time. The political target of Al-Qaeda and its associates is not national but rather international and potentially global. Their declared mission is to establish the rule of Islamic law in all the former countries of the Ottoman Empire, in order to subsequently expand to other regions of the world. The political structure that they envision is the Islamic Caliphate, which is divided into smaller territorial units called Emirates or Sultanates that are led by either an Emir or a Sultan (Habeck, 2012).

Given their mission that is essentially political and their military capability to strike, these unconventional political actors can be considered hegemonic contenders of the U.S. What makes them relevant and dangerous for the political-military hegemony of the U.S. is their capacity to attract people, especially among the members of the Islamic community that have been target of unfair political practices and discrimination for many years. The strength of these actors is also determined by the geographical spread that they enjoy since their militants do not have a specific nationality but they come from everywhere, even from Western countries. This characteristic makes them more difficult to find and neutralise.

In October 2001, the U.S. declared war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in retaliation for the terrorist attacks of 9/11. From the outset, this military mission was very atypical and received a lot of criticism from political analysts and military advisers. The biggest atypicality was the proportion of the attack that was too swift and massive, considering the nature of the enemy and the magnitude of the 9/11 attacks. It was also risky to send troops on the ground without the right preparation, considering the Soviet experience (1979-1982) which struggled and eventually failed to control the country due to the harsh topography of the territory. Although the initial attack in 2001 could be considered a military success, since the war objective to oust the Taliban regime was achieved in a short time and with few casualties, the political outcome has been very different. Since the establishment of President Karzai's government (2001-2014), the Allied forces have faced a number of obstacles to secure the

support of the local population necessary for the country's governance and security. The situation has been particularly difficult in the tribal areas far away from the capital Kabul, where religious fundamentalism is most rooted and where the poorest areas of the region are located. In these areas gun smuggling and opium cultivation are widespread, representing an important source of income for the local economy.

Long after the official end of the war, various groups of insurgents connected to the Taliban have continued to operate relentlessly. The insurgents have unceasingly sabotaged the central government and attacked the Allied forces. The result has been the destabilisation of Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan which has been involved in the conflict. This outcome represents a double strategic defeat for the U.S. because besides Afghanistan, they have gradually lost the support of Pakistan, which has been a hegemonic client of the U.S. since the Cold War days. The political situation in the region has degenerated to the point that in February 2017, General John W. Nicholson Jr. strongly suggested to the Senate Armed Service Committee to reconsider the political posture of the U.S. towards Pakistan and possibly also the support given in terms of economic and military aid (Gordon, 2017). He also asked for a few thousand additional troops, warning that the U.S. forces and its NATO allies were facing a situation of 'stalemate', despite the fact that in 2014 NATO troops were officially withdrawn from Afghanistan (Gordon, 2017). General Nicholson's suggestion was finally turned into policy in early 2018 when the US State Department suspended most of its security assistance to Pakistan (Ryan, *et al.*, 2018).

Overall the war in Afghanistan has yielded a very poor political result. Sixteen years after the beginning of the conflict, U.S. forces are still in the country, trying to stabilise a situation that does not seem to be improving. Afghanistan continues to be plagued by drug trafficking, arms smuggling and jihadist activity, whose sole purpose is to destabilize the region in order to take control of the territory. The outlook for 2017 was to extend the mission to 2018, provided that the military tensions on other fronts will not divert necessary essential resources from Afghanistan. This prospect has been confirmed by the recent statements made by General Nicholson. The first was in February 2018, when in response to the augmented level of attacks against civilians, he said that the US cannot allow the Taliban to win the war (Kramer, 2018). The other statement was made in March 2018 in an interview with the BBC, where he openly accused the Russians of supporting the Taliban by smuggling weapons to them over the Tajik border (Rowlatt, 2018). This last statement opened a new question over the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan because if the NATO coalition would be able to prove that the

Russians are supporting the Taliban, then the continued presence in the region would become a strategic priority to avoid the geopolitical expansion of Russia in the region. On the other hand, the critics of NATO's presence in the region accuse the US and its Western allies of using any pretext to maintain an imperialistic presence in a region of the world that allows them to keep a strategic and a geopolitical advantage on Russia and China (Sheik, 2018).

So far, this is the longest war the U.S. has fought in its history. This prolonged use of U.S. military force abroad against local people represents an imperialist imposition of power; therefore it is a huge loss of U.S. hegemony in the region and surely amongst the majority of the global Muslim community. Furthermore, the military action against Afghanistan has shown the incapacity—and to a certain extent the unwillingness—of the Bush administration to deal with the terrorist menace in a more efficient and fruitful fashion, displaying a lack of political leadership that is a primary source of hegemonic power.

Despite the different analytical perspective, the events of 9/11 recall the idea of 'Liquid Modernity' theorised by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) in all its pervasive significance. Bauman spoke of a society that is in a continuous transformation and that eventually liquefies all forms of solid, structured ideas of order and power, as well as any attempt to control it in a definitive solid format (Bauman, 2000). Thus, society is liquefying from the inside, melting all the previous known paradigms of institutional organisation and production—such as the welfare state or the Fordist model of production—so is the reality of international relations whose liquidity causes the melting of all the established power structures (Bauman, 2000: 56-59). Henceforth, when there is no other state capable to challenge the current structure of the international system based on U.S. hegemony, an unconventional actor like Al-Qaeda emerges to propose an alternative vision of the world based on an antagonistic political, economic and cultural model. In this case, the alternative model is the Islamic doctrine that is profoundly different from the centralist Western paradigm of power.

### **V. Bush, the Neocons and the Invasion of Iraq**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2003, after a long and troubled international debate, the U.S. launched the Operation Iraqi Freedom whose main goal was to neutralise the menace represented by the alleged program of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) developed by the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein (Dale, 2009; King and Hamilos, 2006). The initial deployment of U.S. troops was approximately 150,000. The operation was joined by the UK (40,000), Australia (2,000) and Poland (184). Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain deployed a small number of

noncombat forces (MEDEA Institute, 2017). On May 1, 2003, a little more than a month later, President George W. Bush declared that the mission had been fulfilled through a public statement that caused much controversy. The controversy was sparked by the fact that both Iraq and Afghanistan were far from stable after the official end of the war (Dale, 2009).

The distinctive element of the 2003 invasion of Iraq was the political motivation. The great majority of the wars fought by the U.S. since the end of the Cold War have been politically-armed missions as a response to an aggression against civilians or against the sovereignty of a country. For this reason, those military interventions obtained the political support of the international community, and in some cases, the issuing of U.N. resolutions that authorized the use of force, as established in Chapter VII, Article 51, of the U.N. Charter (Wirtz and Russell, 2003). So it was for the Persian Gulf War of 1991, for the intervention in the Balkan War in 1995, and to some extent for the war against the Taliban regime in 2001 which was guilty of hiding and protecting Osama bin Laden. Contrariwise, the 2003 invasion of Iraq did not receive the support of the U.N. In this case, the use of force was used according to the Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive war to attack a sovereign country that had neither a demonstrated link with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 nor with Al-Qaeda.

Initially, the Bush administration justified the attack against Iraq by claiming that Saddam Hussein was developing an atomic arsenal. The allegations were based on two reports from the British and Italian intelligence but since the beginning, the evidence against Hussein seemed weak and unsubstantiated, and in the end was proven to be false (Bonini, 2006). Despite the lack of evidence and the 'Nigergate' scandal that eventually overwhelmed the Bush administration over a supposed traffic of yellowcake uranium from Niger to Iraq, costing the job and a jail sentence to a close aide of Vice President Cheney, the U.S. finally invaded Iraq (Safire, 2004; The Washington Post, 2004).

Apart from the official motivations offered by the Bush administration to convince the world public opinion on the justness of the military mission, the true reasons were geopolitical and geoeconomic. Iraq is an oil-rich country located in a strategic geographical position, it has access to the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and it borders Turkey, Iran, Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. To this, it must be added that all the senior members and advisers of the Bush administration—including the President—had some direct involvement in the companies that operated in the invasion, the reconstruction and the exploitation of the natural resources of both Afghanistan and Iraq, like Halliburton and Blackwater (Minnis, 2003; Scahill, 2009).

The invasion and destruction of a politically stable country like Iraq, which is situated in a very unstable region of the world, has only favoured the strengthening of terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda. These terrorist groups do not have a well-defined logistical base; therefore they benefit from the creation of pockets of political chaos where they can set up a stable base necessary to raise the level of conflict. This hypothesis has been confirmed by the formation of new jihadist organisations, like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which at some point became stronger than Al-Qaeda because it had acquired a solid territorial base in the territories comprised between Iraq and Syria that after the beginning of the Syrian civil war precipitated into chaos. To defeat terrorist organizations that base their power on the desperation and lack of hope created by war, poverty and ignorance, it is necessary to use a diplomatic strategy rather than a military one. It is only through the use of political tools such as financial aid, information, schooling, intercultural and interreligious dialogue that the population's support for the terrorists can be undermined and finally terminated (Stares and Yacoubian, 2007).

The 2003 Iraqi War has also had important socioeconomic and financial consequences. In order to finance the mission, the Bush administration accumulated a large debt that became critical by 2008 when the subprime crisis exploded in all its magnitude, igniting the biggest financial crisis of our century that put in jeopardy the overall stability of the global financial system. The financial crisis initiated by the uncontrolled spending made for the Iraqi war has had also a strong socioeconomic impact on the American nation, affecting the weaker strata of the population that saw their living standards fall sharply in the matter of months (Webb, 2011; Wright, 2011). Moreover, the war in Iraq has also been the cause of many casualties, reawakening the spectrum of the Vietnam War with a new generation of people affected psychologically, emotionally and physically by a war that was both unlawful and useless in terms of political and economic benefits to the U.S. and world alike.

In light of these developments, it becomes a difficult task to disagree with the critical theorists who accuse the U.S. of being at the centre of a new world order, substantially based on its military predominance and its ability to either repress its enemies or co-opt its allied countries by the use of hegemony:

The post-Cold War conflicts (war in the Gulf, in the Balkans and in Afghanistan) have had the common feature of suppressing threatened disturbances to this vision of global order. US military power assumed leadership in NATO-centred coalitions to re-establish order. The fact of US predominance in military power enabled the United States to require economic as well as military and political support from

allied powers. The relative decline of US economic power compared to its position in the post-war era, along with the supremacy of US military power, converted the aid relationship of the early post-war years into a tributary relationship. The US administration commanded decisions about the use of military power to which allies contributed economically and sometimes militarily. (Cox and Schechter, 2002:35).

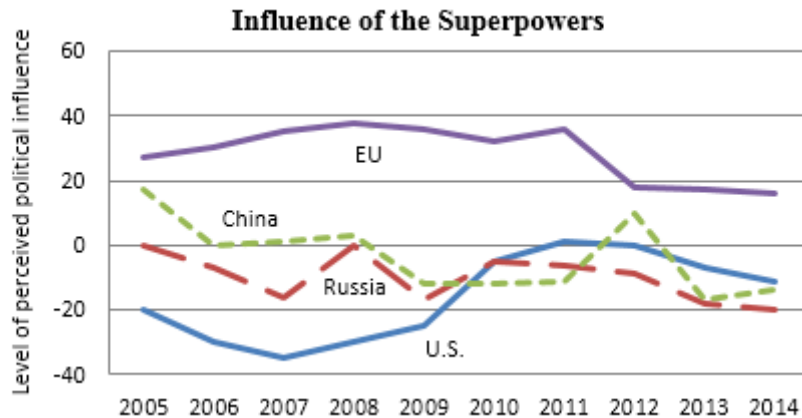
## **VI. The Obama Period**

The election of Barack Hussein Obama in 2008 marked a radical change in both U.S. domestic and foreign policy. In order to run for the presidential election on the Democratic ticket, Obama had to win the consensus of the *caucus* in the primary election against Hilary Clinton. Back in 2008, Obama represented the symbol of hope and change for the majority of the U.S. citizens for three main reasons: the economic-financial crisis that erupted in the summer of 2008; the loss of confidence in the Bush administration and the ‘Neocons’ over the handling of the War on Terror; and a chance to put in power a fresh face perceived as distant from mainstream power politics. In fact, if the Americans had chosen Hilary Clinton, who at that time was the only candidate with the adequate political capital to confront Obama, the U.S. would have had members of the Bush and Clinton families in the presidency for twenty-four consecutive years.

On the contrary, Obama represented the new because he was the first African-American man in American history to become President. The son of a Kenyan student with a unique family history and a middle name that recalls his family Muslim background, Obama was also one of the youngest people ever elected to the highest office. Nonetheless, his election was more than the symbol of the political emancipation of the African-American people. He impersonated the progress and evolution of the U.S., projecting the image of a modern democracy that is capable to overcome the worst moments of crisis by breaking up any predetermined scheme without giving up hope; basically, the ultimate reincarnation of the American dream.

Obama’s election carried also a huge positive symbolic value for the rest of the world that was reflected in the perception of the world public opinion (see Figure 2). After Obama’s election the perceived level of influence of the U.S. went up to the highest point in a decade, which translated in international political terms means a stronger hegemony. The first symbolic political act of Obama in this sense was the speech given in June 2009 at Cairo University in Egypt, which is considered to be one of the most prestigious universities in the Muslim world. The speech was received positively by all sides for its honesty and its intention to reconcile the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and all the Muslims around the world, which were

addressed by Obama not just as a unitary monolithic group of people but as the sum of all the nationalities, communities and individuals that compose the Muslim world (C-Span, 2009).



**Figure 2** Influence of the superpowers as perceived by world public opinion: prepared by the author using data from Globescan/PIPA/BBC (2014).

However, the election of Barack Obama did not erase fifty years of history characterised by a strong realpolitik and many cases of human rights violations. The illegal invasion of Iraq and the subsequent scandal of the Guantanamo prison camps are the two biggest spots in recent U.S. political history. In particular, Guantanamo has become the symbol of the U.S. renewed imperialism and reckless violation of human rights. Obama declared on more than one occasion that he would close the camp, ending a period of shame and illegality that had affected the hegemonic image of the U.S. worldwide, but the Guantanamo prison camp was never closed due to the strong bipartisan opposition encountered in the Congress. The Guantanamo prison camp remains open to present date, even though Obama was able to reduce the number of detainees from over two hundred to only forty-one (Rosenberg, 2017).

## VII. The Pivot to Asia

On the 11th of October 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the Pivot to Asia foreign policy strategy with a ground-breaking article in *Foreign Policy* magazine. According to Ms Clinton: “The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the centre of the action” (Clinton, 2011).

The obvious target of this strategy was to balance the two biggest political actors in the region, China and Russia, which are in a phase of geopolitical expansion. In particular, China’s hegemonic aspirations have become a threat to the security, autonomy, independence and territorial integrity of their neighbouring countries, including the U.S.’s traditional allies in the

East Asian region, nominally Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. One of the manifestations of China's expansionist policy is the current dispute with Japan over the Senkaku Islands in the South China Sea (Calder, 2006). The other is the territorial dispute with the South East Asian nations over the Spratly Islands that has been opposed by the majority of the ASEAN countries.

With the Pivot to Asia, the Obama administration rescued two very peculiar concepts of American political history: the 'democratic messianism' and the 'manifest destiny'. With the former they put back into a central position the idea of the need for a normative approach in international relations, maintaining a degree of coherence with the liberal ideals of international peace through institutionalism and global governance. With the latter they reaffirmed the idea that the U.S. is a 'Pacific nation', and as such their involvement in that part of the world can be considered legitimate as a mean to the end of promoting peace, democracy and prosperity (Flournoy and Davidson, 2012). At the same time, the Pivot to Asia policy put pressure on China's hegemonic ambitions on the Asian continent, contrasting a "Chinese reformulation of the Monroe Doctrine" (Bassets, 2012). From a strict political-military perspective, the application of the Pivot to Asia was reflected in the increased U.S. military deployment in the East China Sea in response to the threats issued by the North Korean leader in early 2016 (Ryall, 2016; Stevenson, 2016).

In sum, considering all the variables at play, the Pivot to Asia was a well-played strategic move that reinforced the global political-military hegemony of the U.S. because it served to contain the expansionist policies of Russia and China by using economic competition and global trade as main foreign policy tools, maintaining at the same time a strong strategic military presence in the region (Kissinger, 2011).

### **VIII. The Historic Deal with Cuba**

In December 2014, Obama made a historical announcement saying that the U.S. would restart diplomatic relations with Cuba (Epatko, 2014). The plan was articulated in thirteen points that included amongst others: to re-establish diplomatic relations between the two countries; to re-establish a U.S. embassy in Havana; to ease travel restriction; to expand trade relations; to allow U.S. financial institutions to operate in Cuba by opening accounts at Cuban financial institutions; to lift restriction on the use of U.S. debit and credit cards in Cuba; and to update and improve the level of telecommunication in Cuba (Epatko, 2014).

Although the speech made by Obama reflected his liberal political inclination, it also showed a good dose of pragmatism and a clear display of hegemonic leadership. From his words

transpired the awareness that the U.S. is too big of an enemy for Cuba and that the situation of political isolation to which the U.S. relegated Cuba for more than fifty years was anachronistic and pointless. It was anachronistic because communism was no longer a menace to U.S. security, and also because the U.S. had re-established political relations with China and Vietnam —both former enemies and still governed by communist parties— a long time ago, whilst they still continued to ostracise Cuba. It was pointless because the measures put in place against Cuba lasted for more than fifty years but they did not produce any results besides harming the Cuban people. Furthermore, the U.S. was the only country left to implement those measures against Cuba (Epatko, 2014).

Obama also stated the clear intention to establish a growing level of cooperation on issues like health care, migration counterterrorism, drug trafficking, and disaster response. In addition, he announced the review of Cuba designation as a state sponsor of terrorism according to facts and law, considering that terrorism had changed greatly since the Cold War days and that the new threat comes from terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Overall, the deal worked in favour of both Cuba and the U.S. It favoured Cuba because it finally lifted the embargo on the island that had caused economic isolation, underdevelopment and unnecessary sufferance to the Cuban people. The U.S. was also greatly benefitted by the deal because it helped to strengthen its hegemony in the region by resolving a long-standing political crisis with a country that is only 160 kilometres away. Furthermore, the establishment of a regime of cooperation with Cuba can only generate wellbeing and prosperity for both nations.

### **IX. The Nuclear Deal with Iran**

In July 2015, the U.S. together with China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the EU signed a nuclear deal with Iran, named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (US Department of State, 2015). The main points of the deal are that all the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council agree on lifting all the U.N. Security Council Sanctions against Iran in exchange for the definitive suspension of the Iranian nuclear programme for military and defence purposes. The deal was negotiated and signed within the legal framework of the U.N. and therefore has international legal validity and is legally bounding for all the signing parties.

The defining point of the agreement is specified in the opening pages of the official document as follows: “Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons” (US Department of State, 2015). As a result of the deal, there have been also other signs of relaxation between the two countries. The first was an exchange of prisoners,

and the second was the settlement of a legal claim made in 1979 by Iran against the U.S. for a 1.7 billion dollars furniture of weapons paid in full but never received (Jaffe and Mufson, 2016). However, the nuclear deal has been criticised by many as a form of entitling Iran nuclear research without effectively obtaining the decommissioning of all its nuclear facilities and infrastructure.

One of the most vociferous opponents of the deal was the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who condemned it as “a stunning historic mistake” that gives Iran the possibility to build a nuclear arsenal (Booth and Eglash, 2015). The counter-argument is that a no deal would eventually bring the U.S. and Iran to war, or in the best case scenario, to a prolonged diplomatic political crisis. Although there cannot be any assurance of the fact that Iran will maintain the terms of the deal for the future due to the possibility of a change of government, the same is true for the U.S.

In any case, the deal was definitely a point in favour of the U.S. political-military hegemony because it showed a great level of leadership and diplomatic skills in convincing a long-standing enemy and rogue actor like Iran to change a sensitive domestic political issue, turning a strategic and security liability into a potential political asset. In facts, the deal represents a limitation of Iranian national sovereignty and a curb to its hegemonic regional aspirations because it regulates an issue of domestic policy with international implications, such as the acquisition of nuclear weapons for defence purposes. The counterargument could be that Israel’s disapproval of the JCPOA counts as a loss of U.S. political influence and therefore of hegemony in the region but this is a one-sided argument, especially considering that Israel is the only country in the region armed with nuclear weapons.

## **X. The Election of Trump: A Swirl Back to Conflictive Politics**

In November 2016 the American people went to the polls in what will be recalled as one of the most dramatic elections in U.S. history. For the second time in less than twenty years, the U.S. faced an election full of drama, controversy and allegations of wrongdoing. The first time happened in November 2000 when George W. Bush obtained a much-contested victory in Florida over his Democrat rival Al Gore. For the 2016 elections, the situation was even worse because besides the allegations of miscounting the electoral ballots, there were suspicions that Russia may have rigged the process to favour the Republican candidate Donald Trump over the Democrat Hillary Clinton. The gravity of this fact goes beyond anything we have previously witnessed in American history, especially considering that Russia is a hegemonic contender of

the U.S. The scandal has been named ‘Russiagate’ and it involves family members and close advisers of President Trump (Boot, 2017).

Russiagate escalated when President Trump declared to the press that he believes Putin, rather than members of U.S. intelligence agencies, saying that Russia did not interfere in the presidential election of 2016. Trump was reported saying: “Every time he sees me, he says, ‘I didn’t do that.’ And I believe, I really believe that when he tells me that, he means it. But he says, I didn’t do that”” (Zelizer, 2017). This declaration has raised serious concerns about Trump’s loyalty to the U.S. and his reliability as commander in chief of the armed forces. The political implications of the Russiagate are manifold and they go beyond the realm of domestic politics due to the responsibilities invested to the persona of the President of the U.S., such as the control of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the power to control the most powerful military machine in the world. The obvious result of this crisis is a loss of leadership amongst its NATO allies, and consequently of political-military hegemony in the international system.

### **XI. The North Korean Missile Crisis**

The North Korean crisis has been the other big thorn in the side of the Trump administration. North Korea has been working for more than ten years on a nuclear program for military purposes, making all the possible efforts to display publicly any new advancement. Sanger and Broad (2017) have described the North Korean crisis as a Cuban Missile crisis in slow motion, recalling the happenings of the so-called ‘Thirteen Day Crisis’ in 1962 between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. However, the differences between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the North Korean one are many. Also, the historical moment and the political scenario in which they are situated are completely different.

The first difference is indeed the historical period. The Cuban Missile Crisis happened during the Cold War, which was a period of ideological and power confrontation between two main actors, the U.S. and the USSR. China was the third big nuclear player and for a while represented a source of concern for President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) but it soon became clear that it was not a threat, rather a new player in the nuclear deterrence game (Sagan, 2017). The actual confrontation with North Korea happens in a very different international system where globalisation has fostered the replacement of the bipolar structure for a multipolar one. The U.S. is the *primus inter pares*, the biggest and most powerful military superpower, and the world leader in the political, economic and cultural fields. This brave new world is somehow more dangerous than the previous one, due to the higher number of players

that makes it more unstable. At present, we know for sure that there are nine countries that possess nuclear weapons, the U.S., Russia, China, the UK, France, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea. Iran could be the next one (Kristensen, 2017).

Secondly, in the Cuban Missile Crisis the negotiations were conducted by JFK and Khrushchev whilst Fidel Castro was left almost completely outside of the decision quarters, therefore reducing dramatically the possibility of an accidental escalation due to misperceptions, miscalculations or misunderstandings (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). In the North Korean crisis, the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un is on the first line because he has developed his own independent nuclear program. What complicates the matter even further is that North Korea is receiving support for the development of its nuclear program from abroad, implying the presence of some allies that support it. China is surely one of them; Russia is most likely the other one. Since neither China nor Russia would risk having a new rogue nuclear player close to their borders, their support for North Korea must imply a degree of leverage that is currently underestimated, even though cannot be compared with the level of control the Soviet Union had over the Cuban nuclear missiles.

Thirdly, although the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and the late Fidel Castro shared the same ideological persuasion, they are very different persons with very different backgrounds. On this point, one of the main differences is that Castro never asked the Soviets to deploy the missiles in Cuba, even though they convinced him to accept them (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 202). To the contrary, the North Korean leader has actively developed his own independent nuclear program, launching threats to his enemies at any possible occasion. Also, North Korean communism is a very different form of ideology from the one developed in Cuba, both for historical and cultural reasons. North Korean communism was since its beginning heavily influenced by traditional Asian cultural values and by the Maoist experience. Furthermore, during the reign of Kim Jong-Sun (grandfather of Kim Jong-Un), North Korea gradually drifted away from any other known format of communism, to create its own brand of dynastic communism where the adoration and veneration of the leader were the central tenets. This political model resembles the traditional Korean society of the Joseon imperial period, rather than any other communist state.

Fourthly, the Cuban Missile Crisis lasted only thirteen days and in the end, Cuba did not become a nuclear state. The Soviets agreed to negotiate the retirement of the missiles for a subsequent reduction of the military pressure from the U.S. and NATO on the USSR (Allison and Zelikow, 1999: 197-201). North Korea instead has already developed its own independent

nuclear program and it has not shown any sign of compliance with the American requests. For this reason, Trump was forced to reach out to the Chinese President Xi Jin-Ping in the hope that he could act on North Korea, projecting a very weak political image of the U.S. to the rest of the world whilst acknowledging China's political-military hegemonic leadership in the East Asian region (Merica and Landers, 2017).

The recent developments on the North Korean crisis have open new perspectives for peace in the region and a new range of possibilities in the outcome of the political-military crisis with the US and its regional allies, nominally South Korea and Japan (Nelli Feroci, 2018). After the recent meeting held in the demilitarised area between the two Koreas, Kim Jong-Un will meet with President Trump to negotiate the terms of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. It all depends on the outcome of this meeting whether the peace process between North and South Korea and the US will go forward. Surely North Korea has already broken its promises in the past and this opening could be an attempt to gain time in order to stall the US reaction to the previous escalation of tensions between the two countries. From an analytical point of view it seems very unlikely that North Korea will renounce its nuclear arsenal without the complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, which means that the US would have to remove their nuclear umbrella from the region losing their hegemonic position towards Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, therefore, favouring indirectly the affirmation of Chinese hegemony (Moscuza, 2018). Furthermore, what remains unclear is how the process of denuclearisation should happen, since in the Panmunjom meeting there were no clear references to this point, and, given the recent setbacks on the Iran nuclear deal caused by Trump's foreign policy.

## **XII. The Reversal of the Obama Historic Deals with Cuba and Iran**

In June 2017 President Trump announced the reversal of the Cuban deal negotiated by the Obama administration with the Cuban leader Raul Castro. The announcement did not come as a surprise because it was one of the main political points of his electoral campaign, yet the consequences for the political-military hegemony of the U.S. in the region are many and all negative.

The first and more obvious is the rolling back into a situation of insecurity for the U.S. and the region as a whole. At the moment, Cuba is one of the few remaining communist countries, together with China, which besides being a main hegemonic competitor of the U.S. is also the second biggest economy in the world. The reversal of the Obama's deal could cause a drift of Cuba towards a renewed state of economic hardship and alienation from the logic of regional

cooperation and integration, leaving a window of opportunity for China to strengthen its political and economic relationship with Cuba. In such a scenario, it is not a remote possibility that in the near future China would seek to establish a military presence in Cuba, in order to balance the threat to its security represented by the U.S. presence in the East Asia region, specifically in Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. Furthermore, the return of economic sanctions would also cause hardship for the Cuban people, affecting the hegemonic image of the U.S. amongst them and therefore undermining the support of the public opinion for a political change.

In October 2017, Trump announced that he would not certify the compliance of Iran to the JCPOA nuclear deal signed in 2015. The decision was finalised on May 8, 2018 when the US officially pulled out of the JCPOA. Trump justified his decision saying that Iran is not “living up to the spirit” of the JCPOA (Holland and Bayoumy, 2017). He also dubbed the deal as “one of the worst and the most one-sided transaction the United States has ever entered into” (Holland and Bayoumy, 2017).

From the analysis of Trump’s words emerge three main reasons motivating the decision to boycott the JCPOA. The first is the almost irrational refusal of everything his predecessor Barack Obama has done, both in domestic and foreign policy. The second is Trump’s personal concern that Iran may in the near future become another rogue state on the list of U.S. enemies, same as North Korea. The third is the political pressure coming from Israel and the conservative pro-Israeli lobby within his government.

Trump’s decision to boycott the JCPOA has a clear negative impact on the political-military hegemony of the U.S. Firstly, the cancellation of the deal will push Iran away from the Western countries, reinforcing the axis between Tehran and Moscow. Russia could use this situation as an occasion to find a strategic geopolitical entry into the Persian Gulf, balancing the overarching U.S. military presence in the area. Secondly, this decision suppresses the newly established commercial relations between Iran and the signatory parties of the deal, due to the economic sanctions announced by Trump. The eventual political outcome of this will most likely be a reinforcement of Iran’s relationship with both Russia and China that can exploit this occurrence to establish an economic stronghold in the region, taking advantage of the vast oil reserves present in the country. Thirdly, the boycott of the JCPOA was a unilateral decision and the political consequence of this is already visible in the weakening of the U.S.’s leadership within NATO. The manifestation of this was the strong dissent shown by the European partners, in particular by the French President Emmanuel Macron, the German Chancellor

Angela Merkel, the British Prime Minister Theresa May, and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini. Fourthly, this decision projects an image of the U.S. that is highly self-reliant and incapable to lead or represent the needs and interest of its allies and clients.

Moreover, the lack of evidence to support the accusations against Iran revives the spectrum of the 2003 Iraq war, when the Bush administration used the pretext of a supposed Iraqi nuclear buildup to invade the country and oust Saddam Hussein. This behaviour can only reinforce the recurring image of the U.S. as an unstable and dangerous actor that cannot be trusted with the role of world political-military hegemon, due to its excessive power that could be misused at any occasion by the people in power.

### **XIII. Conclusions**

The U.S. remains the strongest military actor of the contemporary international system, even though the latest international political developments show a marked weakening of its hegemonic political image.

Under the mere military aspect, the U.S. emerged as the leading superpower because it still exhibits the highest quantity of military spending that corresponds to the biggest quantity of military hardware and to the latest technologies in the field. Furthermore, the aggregate military power of NATO is considerably higher than its hegemonic contenders, such as the SCO and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Politically, since the terrorist attacks of the 11 of September 2001, the U.S. has obtained contrasting results, which have been the direct consequence of the foreign policies adopted by the different administrations in power. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the level of public approval of the U.S. was definitely higher than in 2008 when the Republican administration of President George W. Bush left office. The situation changed with the election of Barack Obama that was capable of devising a new foreign policy based on the traditional liberal ideals of international cooperation, open diplomacy and respect of international law.

The Obama administration also brought about a new foreign policy strategy, shifting the political and military focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region with the so-called Pivot to Asia. With this new strategy the United States has once again proven to be the world political-military hegemon, capable to adapt to the changing international political scenarios in a rapid and efficient fashion, in order to protect its national interest and support its allies.

However, the climate of reduced tension and consociated international politics promoted by the Obama administration was suddenly disrupted in 2016 by the election of Donald Trump. Trump was capable to very quickly raise the international political tension bringing back the Cold War's spectrum of nuclear war. Trump has enacted a foreign policy based on the 'America First' concept, putting on hold all the international political and economic cooperation, including even that with the U.S.'s traditional allies like the EU, Mexico and Canada. This new development has weakened the U.S. world political-military hegemony, especially considering the growing military power of Russia and China that are also partners in the SCO.

The current outlook does not promise well for the global political-military hegemony of the U.S. and shows China in a phase of rapid ascension. If the U.S. does not change its internal political mechanism to guarantee a continuity in its foreign policy strategy, there is a concrete possibility that in the near future it will lose the role of world hegemon. However, by an analysis of the last seventeen years it emerges that the Republican administrations have a higher record of involvement in military conflicts and political-diplomatic crises, whilst the Democratic administrations have a tendency towards a more consociational foreign policy that favours the establishment of hegemonic relations with its allies and client states. Therefore, the root of the problem seems to be political rather than systemic and for this reason easier to resolve.

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