Superpowers and International Governance: A 'Might Is Right' Story?

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International governance has frequently been imposed by outright force, or more subtly by means of political, economic and military pressure. The modern world of superpowers has been no exception. In fact, their sheer overwhelming political and economic power and military might has rendered the temptation to enforce their will while ignoring or sidelining the views of other countries apparently irresistible. Nevertheless, examples from both the Cold War era and the post-Cold War world demonstrate that even superpowers cannot do as they wish. The structure of the international system as developed since 1945, along with the influence of democracy, a growing global acknowledgment of the importance of a culture of consensus and cooperation in international affairs imposes powerful constraints. This often, though not always, ensures that might is not always right. Increasingly, individual great powers do not get away with behaving like a bull in a china shop. This includes the United States (invasion of Iraq) and Russia (Crimea, Ukraine); both countries have faced significant negative consequences for their violations of international law and the conventions of global governance.

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"Global [or international] governance is a slippery term. It refers not to world government … but to something more practical: the collective effort by sovereign states, international organizations, and other non-state actors to address common challenges and seize opportunities that transcend national frontiers."[1]

"Governance is the act of governing, and thus involves the application of laws and regulations, but also of customs, ethical standards and norms."[2]

Governance – The Ultimate Challenge

Throughout history, governance and thus the management of relations within a state and among states has been a profound challenge for contemporary ruling authorities. This applied to the small Athenian city-states almost 2500 years ago and it was an even more profound problem for the multi-tribe Roman Empire and its modern successors such as the European colonial empires of the relatively recent past. Not surprisingly, the modern nation states that began to be formed in Europe in the 17th century were also confronted with this problem. After all, within their borders, European nation states often encompassed a variety of different ethnic minorities and smaller national entities.

The imposition of entirely new rules on the international community agreed in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia essentially meant that a government could for the most part do as it wished without being troubled by outside criticism or interference in its domestic governance. This has largely continued to be the case. Only relatively recently, in the post-Cold War world, can a certain loosening of this concept be observed, mostly due to genocide and appalling human rights violations in the 1990s (i.e. during the Yugoslavian civil wars). The concept of "responsibility to protect' has been developed in response. Still, a large number of states, in particular authoritarian ones, have rejected this development.

1Patrick, S. (2014) 'The United World: The Case for Good Enough Global Governance,' *Foreign Affairs*, 93(6), p.2.

2 World Health Organization (no year) 'Global Governance,' Available at: http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story038/en/ (Accessed: 10 April 2015).

Among them are China and Russia, but also much smaller entities such as North Korea, who jealously guard their sovereign right to do essentially as they please inside their own borders, aided by non-independent and compromised judicial systems. They insist on domestic autonomy and thus independence from any global norms and standards.[3]

In the global arena, however, it has proven much more difficult to agree on a system for international relations that resembles the relative simplicity of the Westphalian system regarding a state's domestic affairs. A rudimentary code of behavior has been painstakingly developed over the centuries, which attempts to regulate inter-state relations to some extent. The laws of war are one such example, as are the subtle rules and customs that have governed diplomatic relations among for at least two centuries now. Adherence to detailed trading rules and the freedom of the seas are also part of this attempt to impose a mutually beneficial order on an anarchic outside world - as policymakers and many scholars have frequently viewed international relations since the days of Thomas Hobbes.[3] The lawful application of international rules of governance to impose order on an unruly world is a challenge with which nation states are still grappling.[4]

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In modern discourse, the ideal notion of international governance tends to be defined as "a process of cooperative leadership that brings together national governments, multilateral public agencies, and civil society to achieve commonly accepted goals."[5] These "common goals" of course are very much the sticking point. Before this century, the central authority of states was relatively uncontested by NGOs, civil society and other non-state actors.

Yet, even reaching agreements among governments that did not

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3 For an influential book, see Ikenberry, G.J. (2000), *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars.* Princeton: Princeton UP.

4 For an interesting overview from a realist point of view, see Kissinger, H.A. (2014), *World Order.* New York: Penguin. See also Krisch, N (2005) 'International Law in Times of Hegemony: Unequal Power and the Shaping of the International Legal Order,' *The European Journal of International Law* 16(3), pp.369-406; and D'Aspremont, J. (2011), 'The Rise and Fall of Democracy Governance in International Law: a reply to Susan Marks,' *The European Journal of International Law* 22(2), pp.549-570.

5 Boughtonm, J.M. and Bradford, C.I. Jr. (2007), 'Global Governance: New Players, New Rules,' *Finance & Development: a quarterly magazine of the IMF* 44(4), p.2. Available at: http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2007/boughton.htm (Accessed: 11 April 2015).

have to worry about the influence of non-state actors, consensus on shared goals and objectives was elusive and at best only partially possible. The Versailles peace conference convened after the end of World War I lasted over six months and was attended by more than 30 national delegations. In the end, all significant decisions on war reparations, de-colonization, the redrawing of national borders and the creation of new nation states were dominated by the 'Big Four' of the day: Britain, France, the US and Italy. They imposed their might in numerous instances, overruling many smaller entities and special interests. But even the Big Four frequently struggled to agree amongst themselves. While Britain and in particular France insisted on a punitive peace agreement for Germany, American President Woodrow Wilson saw the long-term folly of such a strategy, though ultimately he made considerable concessions. In return, he obtained agreement on the creation of an entirely new global instrument of governance.[6]

At Versailles, therefore, agreement on the establishment of Wilson's cherished League of Nations was reached. The League was a multilateral global body for discussion and joint decision-making. It proved to be a weak instrument, however, rarely taken seriously by the world's major powers in subsequent years.[7] The exclusion of Germany and Russia from the new world order proved disastrous. The absence of international rules of governance that states were willing to uphold, even in times of crisis, proved fatal, hindered by nationalism, revenge and ideology. Economic dislocation, national resentments and social discontent were added to the mixture in the 1920s and the early 1930s. To a significant extent the seeds of the tensions and conflicts of the 1930s and their culmination in the Second World War were planted by the failed attempt to design a constructive new global order based on integration rather than exclusion in the aftermath of World War I.

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The post-World War I world had been a world without superpowers. There was no clear hegemonic power that could impose its leadership on the other main participants of the international

6 See Keylor, W.R. (2014), 'Realism, Idealism, and the Treaty of Versailles,' *Diplomatic History* 38 n(1), pp.215-18; Shepley, N. (2011), *Britain, France and Germany and the Treaty of Versailles: how the allies built a flawed peace*. Luton, UK: Andrews (Ebook).

7 See Housden, M. (2012), *The League of Nations and the organization of peace. H*arlow, England: Pearson Longman.

system. Britain, the superpower of the 19th century, no longer was able to fulfill this role. The United States was not yet in a position (and lacked the will) to take over the baton. That would only happen, gradually, during the years following 1940, and then much more clearly after 1944.

The Uneasy Stability of the Cold War Superpower World

New efforts toward international governance were launched after the Second World War. This time the United States did not hesitate to impose its will to develop a hegemonic system of international governance. Yet, Washington's writ was confined to what came to be called the West in its broadest sense, which included Western Europe, most of Latin America, the Middle East and most but not all of Asia, including Australia. Yet, China and neutral India were not part of America's sphere of interest. Africa was very much a contested continent between the emerging power blocs.

Stalin's Soviet Union was the other dominant power. It ruled over most of Eastern Europe. Initially Moscow was closely aligned with China, occupied with wooing the so-called non-aligned countries in the developing world, such as India, Pakistan and a number of Middle Eastern and African states, such as Egypt.

Both hegemonic powers – the US and the USSR - developed grand strategies for stabilizing and expanding their respective spheres of influence. After some time of thinking in terms of 'rolling back' communist rule, the U.S. settled on a "strategy of containment."[8] So did the Soviet Union, at least with regard to Europe. The communist dominated Eastern European buffer states were meant to protect the East from any German (or possibly American) revanchist ambitions. Although western territorial revanchism only existed in the fertile imaginations of Soviet leaders, it was a genuinely perceived threat, at least in the 1950s and 1960s.[9] In other continents, Moscow attempted to apply political and military pressure and test the water for expanding its influence, including by supporting proxy wars. However very few countries changed sides for good, as Cuba did in the late 1950s. None of the few who did were of crucial importance in the

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8 The classic work is still Gaddis, J.L. (2012), *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. New York: Oxford UP.

9 Mastny, V. (1996), *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: the Stalin Years*. New York: Oxford UP.

Cold War battle of the superpowers.

Washington's increasing dominance in global affairs at that time relied on setting up and running international institutions that reflected America's understanding of how the world ought to be governed: democracy, capitalism and a liberal social order with significant cultural freedom and diversity were the main pillars of this system. In the 1950s and 1960s, almost by accident, American "soft power" was recognized as one of the most compelling forces in building willingness to cooperate with the US, both indirectly and more directly.[10] Intra-western 'guided multilateralism' and benign hegemony became the other main characteristics of US leadership. The US began to create an informal empire that quite aptly has been viewed as an "empire by invitation" (at least with regard to its western European allies).[11]

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As early as 1944-45 the US had convened the Bretton Woods conference, the Dumbarton Oaks conference and the San Francisco conference. The World Bank, the IMF, the UN (with its important Security Council) based in New York along with the OECD and eventually the GATT were the crucial results. In 1949 NATO was founded under clear American leadership due to the country's unrivalled military might. A few years later the US threw its weight behind the emerging process of European integration that led to the EEC/EC and in its modern incarnation the EU (since 1993). Soon similar – albeit less successful - efforts in other parts of the world, such as Asia, received significant US support.

The Soviet Union relied on more direct and much more dictatorial methods in imposing its political and economic will. COMECON and the Warsaw Pact were the key among the mechanisms that Moscow established to govern its large sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and beyond. Both relied upon the Soviet Union's willingness to use economic and military force or the threat of force. Moscow lacked "soft power" tools to strengthen its international appeal or indeed expand its hegemony within its sphere of interest in Eastern Europe.

10 The classic work is Nye, J. (2004), *Soft Power: the means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

11 Lundestad, G. (1999), '"Empire by Invitation" in the American Century,' *Diplomatic History* 23(2), pp.189-217.

The respective spheres of influence and governance had been established and, to a large extent, mutually accepted by the mid - to late 1950s, lending an element of stability to the bipolar Cold War world. The détente in the 1970s and the treaties signed at the 1975 Helsinki conference formally recognized and institutionalized this bipolar world, much to the chagrin of the political right in the US (where the rise of neo-conservatism was beginning to really take off).12 Although China had broken with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s and had gradually become a more independent actor on the world stage, throughout the Cold War China remained a poor developing country and was in no position to challenge either of the two superpowers. It required the Nixon administration's 'opening to China', aimed at balancing and channeling the Soviet Union, that enabled communist China to come into its own.

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The threat of mutual annihilation by nuclear weapons, abundantly available to both superpowers since the 1950s, created the additional - and perhaps decisive - layer of stability that governed the Cold War world. The US demonstrated the destructive potential of an atomic weapon when it bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 to end the war in the Pacific against Japan. In doing so, it also demonstrated both its new-found might and willingness to use it. The Soviet Union achieved its first successful atomic test explosion in 1949, followed by the British, that most loyal of American allies, in the mid-1950s, and then both France and China in the 1960s. The Cold War world was characterized by the uneasy stability of mutual fear and the threat of potential global annihilation.[13]

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Not surprisingly, in that sort of world, truly international governance did not exist. There was just the United Nations and its Security Council with its five permanent members (US, USSR, Britain, France, China) that initially seemed to offer a promising

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12 Wenger, A., Mastny, V. and Nuenlist, C. (eds) (2008), *Origins of the European Security System: the Helsinki Process Revisited, 1965-1975*. London: Routledge, 2008; Mastny, V. (1992), *The Helsinki Process and the Reintegration of Europe, 1986-1991: analysis and documentation*. New York: New York UP.

13 See Rhodes, R. (2007), *Arsenals of Folly: the making of the nuclear arms race*. New York: Knopf; also still useful Rhodes, R. (1996), *Dark Sun: the making of the hydrogen bomb*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

global instrument of governance. Yet, the superpower conflict and the ability of any of the five to wield a veto placed major constraints on the UNSC's decision-making powers. After all, Moscow vowed not to repeat the mistake it made when it boycotted the Security Council during the vote on the UN's police action in Korea in response to North Korea's invasion of the south in the summer of 1950. As a result, the UN quickly became into an impotent mode of global governance.[14] 'Might is right' was indeed a decisive factor in the way the superpowers ran their respective spheres of influence during the Cold War. This applied to the Soviet Union above all, but also to the United States, though Washington exercised its global power in more limited and subtle ways.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union's hegemony and dominance in its sphere of influence faced four major challenges: uprisings against Soviet rule occurred in East Germany in 1953, in Hungary 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and in Poland in the early 1980s. With the exception of Poland, during all these dangerous challenges to Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, Moscow waited to see how the crisis developed, and then reacted with overwhelming force. Moscow sent in tanks and troops and forcefully put down the uprisings causing hundreds of fatalities. Might was indeed right, and superseded any ambitions for the more democratic and indeed a more capitalist way of life to which the peoples in these Eastern European states aspired. In December 1981 the communist authorities in Warsaw proclaimed martial law as a preventive measure, and in order to regain control. The Soviet Union narrowly decided not to intervene militarily. In the case of Yugoslavia and Romania, Moscow tolerated a degree of autonomy. The difference was that neither Tito nor Ceausescu had threatened to leave the Warsaw Pact and attach themselves to the West, as had seemed to be the danger in East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland.[15]

The United States, by contrast, never intervened militarily with regard to its European allies. This, of course, would have run

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14 Rose, E.T. (1971), 'The United States, the United Nations, and the Cold War,' *International Organization,* 25(1), pp.59-78; Kirgis, F.L. (1995), 'The Security Council's First Fifty Years,' *The American Journal of International Law* 89(3), pp.506-539.

15 See for example Kenez, P. (1999), *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP; Hosking, G. (1992), *A History of the Soviet Union, 1917-1991,* final ed London: Fontana.

deeply counter to Western values and intra-Western notions of cooperation, and would have meant the end of US hegemony in Western Europe. Outside Europe Washington was not shy, however, in seeking to bring down foreign governments that seemed on the brink of communism or had already gone communist by means of clandestine coups (Guatemala, Egypt, Iran, Cuba, Chile, South Vietnam, Nicaragua, etc). Outside its Western European sphere of influence, Washington could be as ruthless and authoritarian as the Soviet Union at its peak.[16] Within Washington's informal empire in Western Europe a similar kind of 'imperialist' behavior was impossible, however.[17] Still, the US-dominated system of governance in the Western world was frequently employed to bring the allies to heel.

Outside its Western European sphere of influence, Washington could be as ruthless and authoritarian as the Soviet Union at its peak.

A striking early example is the Suez crisis of 1956. Britain and France, incensed by the nationalization of the important canal by Egyptian dictator Nasser, bombed Egyptian coastal towns and prepared for an invasion of Britain's old Suez canal base, which had been returned to Egypt only a few years before. US President Eisenhower was outraged. He had not been consulted and he feared that it would turn the people of Egypt and the Middle East against the West and open the region to Soviet influence. Moreover, there were only weeks to go until the American election and Eisenhower was campaigning on a platform of peace and international reconciliation. The President adamantly refused to help when the British asked for a dollar loan to pay for additional oil resources. There had been a run on the pound since the beginning of the crisis. Soon Britain was forced to abandon the operation for financial reasons, just days before the Suez Canal would have been re-captured. Eisenhower was ruthless in his imposition of US dominance over its most loyal ally. London was forced to cave in a most humiliating way.[18]

Yet, this scenario was very much the exception. Usually the US imposed its might in a more subtle and diplomatic way. For instance, when the allies began complaining about the lack of nu-

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16 See for instance Rabe, S.G. (2012), *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America.* New York: Oxford UP; Livingstone, G. (2009), *America's Backyard: the United States and Latin America from the Monroe Doctrine to the War on Terror*. London/New York: Zed Books.

17 See Lundestad, G. (1997), *'Empire' by Integration: The United States and European Integration, 1945-1997.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.

18 See for example Kyle, K. (1990), *Suez*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

clear cooperation, the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s was conciliatory. The Multilateral Nuclear Force was proposed, with European co-leadership, and the NATO Nuclear Planning Group was established, allowing the European allies a say in the West's strategic plans for its nuclear capability. Yet it soon turned out that these were empty concessions designed to placate the allies. Ultimately the American nuclear umbrella within and out-with NATO remained solely under US authority. No genuine partnership with any of the European states, not even Britain, existed in the nuclear arena. There were never any genuine European co-decision-making powers regarding the actual use of a nuclear bomb in a crisis situation.[19]

Similar examples in other fields can be easily found. On the whole, in military terms the US rarely conceded. President Carter, for instance, insisted on the development of a 'neutron bomb' in the late 1970s, overriding very strong European objections. In the mid-1980s President Reagan pushed for the modernization of short-range nuclear missiles deployed in Europe, despite European protests. In the end, Carter gave up the 'neutron bomb' for largely domestic political reasons, not because of European concerns. The end of the Cold War rendered the modernization of NATO's short-range missile arsenal superfluous in the 1980s; it was not European protests that had changed Reagan's mind. Thus, the US seldom genuinely compromised; instead Washington always made sure that its hegemony in military and above all nuclear questions remained uncontested.

In the economic sphere this was less often the case. Here the US was more prepared to compromise; not least as the European allies were much stronger in this field and American international competitiveness had been on the wane since the 1970s. Above all, economic disagreements were much less important in existential terms. In all truly existential questions, however, the US found ways to remain in charge of the West throughout the Cold War.[20]

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19 Heuser, B. (1997), *NATO, Britain, France, and the FRG: nuclear strategies and forces for Europe, 1949-2000.* Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.

20 See Larres, K. (2009), 'The United States and European Integration, 1945-1990,' in Larres, K. (ed.), *Companion to Europe since 1945.* Oxford: Blackwell/Wiley, pp.151-182.

The Post-Cold War World

US hegemony and its dominance over Western international governance largely continued during the early years of the post-Cold War world. In fact, the collapse and disappearance of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the absence of any serious rival powers in the 1990s created a "unilateral moment" for the U.S. The last decade of the 20th century marked a triumphant end to the "American century," as the 20th century was justifiably called. In the 1990s Russia seemed to become an economically feeble but increasingly democratic partner for mighty America. There was briefly even talk of Yeltsin's Russia joining NATO. The EU was established in 1993 by the Maastricht Treaty and, while developing into an increasingly serious economic competitor to a briefly booming America, in foreign and defense policies and in all matters military and NATO-related, the US still ruled supreme. Despite the political scandal involving President Clinton's ill-judged sexual behavior in office and an increasingly gridlocked Congress, on the whole America's self-confidence and notions of international omnipotence were at their peak during the last decade of the 20th century.[21]

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There were signs, however, indicating that the US was increasingly beleaguered in terms of the nation's foreign policy. International governance proved a chimera, lacking a single authority. The Middle East remained a quagmire with Iran and Iraq still deeply hostile to the US, though for different reasons. They also despised each other. Despite some hopeful signs, the Israel-Palestinian peace process was still leading nowhere and in Africa the Clinton administration suffered severe setbacks that, for example, led to a pullout of its small contingent of troops from war-torn Somalia. During the genocide in Ruanda in the mid-1990s, the US remained on the sidelines, underestimating the unfolding human catastrophe there and – as now is increasingly apparent – deliberately looking the other way. Washington did not want to get involved in yet another intractable foreign policy problem.

Throughout the immediate post-Cold War years, it did not appear as if the world's only remaining superpower was anywhere

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21 See for this hubris, Krauthammer, C. (1990), 'The Unipolar Moment,' *Foreign Affairs* 70(1), pp. 23-33; Krauthammer, C.(2002/03), 'The Unipolar Moment Revisted,' *National Interest*, pp. 5-17.

Throughout the immediate post-Cold War years, it did not appear as if the world's only remaining superpower was anywhere close to being in charge of global governance. Despite its potentially huge political, economic and military might, in many instances during the 1990s, the US appeared to be as powerless as its much smaller and weaker peers.

close to being in charge of global governance. Despite its potentially huge political, economic and military might, in many instances during the 1990s, the US appeared to be as powerless as its much smaller and weaker peers.[22] Still, this was hardly acknowledged in the US or in the West at large. Instead the notion of American 'unipolar global position' retained its appeal, not least in the US itself.

The rosy vision of America's unilateral power dramatically changed with the terrorist acts of 9/11 in 2001. The rise of fundamentalist Islam in the form of Al Qaeda and more recently, ISIS, Boko Haram and Al-Shabbat, confounded the US and the rest of the West. The drawn out and very costly involvement in the ongoing wars with Afghanistan and Iraq together with the deep economic recession of the years 2007/08-2010/11 undermined US political and economic credibility on the world stage and sapped its confidence. Washington also fell out with some its closest European allies, Germany and France. Relations recovered slowly, with lingering suspicion about American unilateralism.[23]

In addition, international rivals for global dominance emerged in the form of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). While commentators and analysts soon began talking about a new multilateral world with the US being just one of five or six major global powers, this was always an unrealistic scenario. Instead, it was the rise of China and the threat of a hostile new bipolar world that made the US anxious.

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Not only China did emerge as an increasingly serious economic competitor and rival to the US in international trade relations, it also embarked on a rapid military program to transform itself into a formidable regional and potentially global player. In particular, China is throwing its weight about in South-east Asia (as well as in other continents, such as Africa). Regarding Asia, China clear-

22 See Layne, C. (1993), 'Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,' *International Security* 17(4), pp.5-51; Layne, C. (2006), *The peace of illusions: American grand strategy from 1940 to the present.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

23 Larres, K. (2003), 'Mutual Incomprehension: U.S.-German value gaps beyond Iraq,' *Washington Quarterly* 26(2), pp.23-42.

ly wishes to contain US power in its backyard. Beijing wants to make sure that the US accepts the South China Sea, and perhaps most of the Pacific area, as China's sphere of influence. What Beijing desires, it seems, is for Washington to maintain a respectful distance from China's borders. The US resists with this aspiration, as do most of China's neighbors. Even former enemies such as (communist-run) Vietnam as well as the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar and most other South East Asian nations look toward the US to balance China's new found power and confidence.[24]

Regarding China's claim over a number of islands in the South China sea, so far might has not proven to be right. There is serious resistance to China's claims. Chinese behavior in international economic relations has also been pushed back. Copyright infringements, poor environmental standards, sub-standard and sometimes dangerous goods, poor working conditions, cyber attacks and industrial espionage have given rise to significant international resistance. To some extent it has led to the implementation of reforms. China's new power is not unconstrained by any stretch of the imagination. The potential superpower of the 21st century has been exposed to the rules of international governance, and to something like a culture of consensus and cooperation. This culture is perhaps gradually becoming more prevalent in international relations.[25]

Russia, the old superpower and the successor state to the Soviet Union, has also experienced that 'might is by no means right' in international relations in the 21st century. President Putin's annexation of Crimea early in 2014 and Russia's support of the separatist rebel forces in Eastern Ukraine have garnered much global criticism. The US and the EU have imposed severe economic sanctions and this surprisingly united transatlantic approach to Moscow has severely damaged the Russian economy. Putin was also unlucky that the imposition of the sanctions coincided with a massive drop in prices for oil and gas, Russian's most important sources of export revenues. Compared to 2013, Russia has become an internationally isolated and globally much

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24 See Mearsheimer, J. (2010), 'China's Challenge to U.S. Power in Asia,' *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3(4), pp.381-396.

25 See the pertinent analysis of Cox, M. (2012) who is skeptical about the assumed decline of the U.S. and the West: 'Power Shifts, Economic Change and the Decline of the West?' *International Relations* 26(4), pp.369-388.

less influential country that is on the brink of bankruptcy. The gradual re-integration of Russia into world governance and the world economy (perhaps by its gradual re-admission to the G8) is necessary to de-escalate tensions in the long run.[26] Still, the crisis over Crimea and Ukraine has made clear that 'might is not right' in the post-9/11 world.

But what about the sole remaining superpower? Can the world community keep the US in check and contain its still overwhelming military and economic and political power? After all, the US still has not become a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC), founded in 2002, which has evolved as an important instrument of global governance. Still, to some extent, the might of the US still faces significant international (as well as domestic economic) constraints. As the most obvious case, let's consider the Bush administration's invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003. The unprovoked 'war of choice' against Iraq split the transatlantic alliance and caused a deep crisis.[27] Washington's refusal to submit to a second UN Security Council resolution on whether or not Saddam Hussein was in violation of various previous UN resolutions and therefore ought to be deposed undermined US credibility and global standing.

Following the surprisingly rapid collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, the US encountered even more serious problems. Terrorist attacks against US and other Western forces multiplied and fundamentalist terrorist groups began to flourish in Iraq where hitherto there had been none. Due to the destruction of its archenemy, Iran became the region's new great power and began to spread its anti-American influence. Tehran speeded up the development of an Iranian nuclear weapon that soon faced great international resistance. Punishing sanctions were imposed that only many years later – in mid-2015 - resulted in successful negotiations and a compromise deal concerning the containment of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The behavior of some of America's forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, the use of torture to extract information from captured enemies and the controversial Guantanamo Bay prison on Cuba

26 See also Szabo, S. (2014), 'Germany's Commercial Realism and the Russia Problem,' *Survival* 56 (5), pp.117-128.

27 Haas, R.N. (2009), *War of Necessity. War of Choice: A Memoir of two Iraq Wars*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

(which held prisoners for years on end without due process), have caused international outrage. It also led to a severe identity crisis within US political, military and intelligence circles. The US was also forced to embark on the difficult and very costly and time-consuming process of nation building in the two countries it had conquered. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement to President Bush – "if you break it, you own it" – proved to be quite correct. And extracting themselves from ownership has proven impossible. US troops remain in Afghanistan and have been re-introduced in Iraq, though in much smaller numbers.[28]

The behavior of some of America's forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, the use of torture to extract information from captured enemies and the controversial Guantanamo Bay prison on Cuba (which held prisoners for years on end without due process), have caused international outrage.

Still, the US did invade Iraq; it had not been prevented from doing so by the many voices opposed to this enterprise on the world stage at large and, even more importantly, among its closest allies. The powerful US was able to ignore all obstacles and President Bush did what he always intended to do: topple Saddam Hussein and punish the Taliban in Afghanistan for protecting Osama bin Laden. But was might right? This was hardly the case.

The US caused tremendous problems for itself, both domestically in terms of weakening its financial and economic power, and for the region as a whole, which in turn has damaged US foreign policy in global terms. Thus, would the US embark on a similar enterprise at present or in the near future? Probably not. The US has learned the hard way that even if it is sufficiently powerful to embark on a highly controversial foreign and military policy, ignoring the international community in the process, this is not a wise thing to do in the absence of a truly existential threat. The Obama administration has absorbed these lessons and adopted a significantly more cautious foreign policy. It relies much more on the traditional tools of international relations: diplomacy, containment, encirclement, political persuasion, soft power. Only relatively seldom does it resort to the use of outright military force.[29] The administration's 'drone warfare', however, has prov-

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28 Samuels, D. (2007), 'A Conversation with Colin Powell,' *The Atlantic*. Available at: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/04/a-conversation-with-colin-powell/305873/ (Accessed: 12 April 2015).

29 See for example Indyk, M. et al (2012), *Bending History: Barack Obama's foreign policy*. Washington, DC: Brookings; Bentley, M. and Holland, J. (2014), *Obama's foreign policy: ending the war on terror*. London: Routledge; Mann, J. (2012), *The Obamaians: the struggle inside the White House to redefine American power*. New York: Viking.

en to be highly controversial both at home and abroad. But imagine the global reaction if the US instead had continued invading countries such as Syria, Yemen, Pakistan and many others.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the world's most powerful and influential countries have frequently been able to base their foreign and defense policies on the notion of 'might is right.' But this always has been a difficult path, entailing both direct and indirect opposition. This even was the case during the Cold War when both superpowers were much more constrained in their foreign policies than is often assumed. In the post-Cold War world, relying on a 'might is right' approach to international relations is even less feasible. This also applies to the United States, the world's only remaining superpower. A more politically aware and better informed global public, the rise of a number of important new great powers and the experience of the Iraq War and its disastrous consequences have become crucial limitations. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article, in the post-9/11 world, the United States as well as China, Russia and the other emerging great powers are much more constrained in their pursuit of expansionist and uninhibited foreign and military policies than is frequently assumed by the media and the general public.