

# Hegemonic constraints : the implications of September 11 for American power

Goh, Evelyn

2002

Goh, E. (2002). Hegemonic constraints : the implications of September 11 for American power. (RSIS Working Paper, No. 34). Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/91020>

---

Nanyang Technological University

*Downloaded on 23 Aug 2022 05:29:49 SGT*

**No. 34**

**HEGEMONIC CONSTRAINTS:  
THE IMPLICATIONS OF SEPTEMBER 11  
FOR AMERICAN POWER**

**Evelyn Goh**

**Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies  
Singapore**

**OCTOBER 2002**

*With Compliments*

This Working Paper series presents papers in a preliminary form and serves to stimulate comment and discussion. The views expressed are entirely the author's own and not that of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies.

**The Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS)** was established in July 1996 as an autonomous research institute within the Nanyang Technological University. Its objectives are to:

- ☞ Conduct research on security, strategic and international issues.
- ☞ Provide general and graduate education in strategic studies, international relations, defence management and defence technology.
- ☞ Promote joint and exchange programmes with similar regional and international institutions; organise seminars/conferences on topics salient to the strategic and policy communities of the Asia-Pacific.

### **Research**

Through its Working Paper Series, *IDSS Commentary* and other publications, the Institute seeks to share its research findings with the strategic studies and defence policy communities. The Institute's researchers are also encouraged to publish their writings in refereed journals. The focus of research is on issues relating to the security and stability of the Asia-Pacific region and their implications for Singapore and other countries in the region. The Institute has also established the S. Rajaratnam Professorship in Strategic Studies (named after Singapore's first Foreign Minister), to bring distinguished scholars to participate in the work of the Institute. Previous holders of the Chair include Professors Stephen Walt (Harvard University), Jack Snyder (Columbia University) and Wang Jisi (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). A Visiting Research Fellow Programme also enables overseas scholars to carry out research in the Institute.

### **Teaching**

The Institute provides educational opportunities at an advanced level to professionals from both the private and public sectors in Singapore and overseas through the Master of Science in Strategic Studies and Master of Science in International Relations programmes. These are full-time courses conducted by an international faculty from July - June each year. In 2002, the Institute inaugurated a PhD programme in Strategic Studies/International Relations. In addition to the graduate programmes, the Institute also conducts courses on geopolitics and regional security issues for the SAFTI Military Institute (Officer Cadet School, Advanced Officers' School and the Singapore Command & Staff College), the SAF Warrant Officers' School, as well as the Defence and Foreign Ministries. The Institute also runs a one-semester course on '*The International Relations of the Asia Pacific*' for undergraduates in NTU.

### **Networking**

The Institute convenes workshops, seminars and colloquia on aspects of international relations and security development which are of contemporary and historical significance. Highlights of the Institute's activities include a regular Colloquium on Strategic Trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the annual Asia Pacific Programme for Senior Military Officers and the biennial Asia Pacific Security Conference (held in conjunction with Asian Aerospace). Institute staff participate in Track II security dialogues and scholarly conferences in the Asia-Pacific. The Institute has contacts and collaborations with many think-tanks and research institutes in Asia, Europe and the United States. The Institute has also participated in research projects funded by the Ford Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. The Institute serves as the Secretariat for the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, (CSCAP) Singapore. Through these activities, the Institute aims to develop and nurture a network of researchers whose collaborative efforts will yield new insights into security issues of interest to Singapore and the region.

## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that at the heart of the post - September 11 world lies several critical issues surrounding American power: its unprecedented primacy, the way in which it is exercised, and how it is perceived and received around the world. On the one hand, September 11 not only failed to alter American preponderance of power in the international system, but in fact reinforced US credibility, power projection and military involvement abroad. On the other hand, this 'new' terrorism and the American response have undermined critical elements of US 'soft' power in the international arena, even as its 'hard' power has been reinforced. Notwithstanding its unipolar status, the terrorist assaults on the American homeland demonstrated dramatically that the US faces significant unorthodox challenges beyond the realm of great power competition. September 11 and the US responses to it have impacted significantly upon the vital 'soft' foundations of American power: the appeal of American values and culture; the perception that US hegemony is benign; and the apparent legitimacy of the exercise of American power. The terrorist attacks triggered off a questioning of American character and behaviour by their dramatic challenge to US values and ideology. At the same time, this process has served to highlight the negative and sometimes malign effects of American projections of power. Furthermore, Washington's reactions to the attacks have fuelled controversy and have sensitised the international community to questions regarding the legitimacy of American actions and policies. These trends, if they continue, will, in the longer term, serve to constrain the exercise of American power by limiting the choice and effectiveness of foreign and security policies. These constraints will operate at two levels: at the international level, Washington will experience increased friction and costs in dealing with its allies and other friendly states; and at the domestic level, the Bush and subsequent administrations will have to take into account rising public unwillingness to pay the more extreme price of external interventions.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. Evelyn Goh is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies. She completed her D.Phil. in International Relations at Nuffield College, Oxford, in 2001. Her main research interests lie in the areas of US foreign policy, US-China relations, and the international relations of East Asia. She is currently revising her doctoral thesis, *From 'Red Menace' to 'Tacit Ally': Constructing the US Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974*, for publication. She has published articles on the diplomatic history of US-China relations. Among her current projects are the application of linguistic analysis to Sino-American diplomatic negotiations in the 1970s, and a study of the role of middle powers in US-China relations. She has also published on sustainable development and environmental security in the Mekong River Basin. Dr. Goh teaches two modules on the analysis of defence and security policies, and US foreign policy on the MSc (Strategic Studies) and MSc (International Relations) programmes.

## **HEGEMONIC CONSTRAINTS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF SEPTEMBER 11 FOR AMERICAN POWER**

One year on from the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, ‘September 11’ stands as an indelible item in the lexicon of international politics. It is identified by policy-makers and analysts across the world as a historical landmark delineating a new era, albeit an era the exact nature of which is still up for debate. This conceptual indecision about world politics attending the aftermath of September 11 is reflected in US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s innocuous characterization of it as the ‘post-post-Cold War’ period.

More importantly, the discourse regarding the implications of the event for US foreign policy and American power suffers from a fundamental conceptual obfuscation. Analysts by and large agree that September 11 not only failed to alter American preponderance of power in the international system, but in fact reinforced US credibility, power projection and military involvement abroad. On the other hand, critics have warned that effective counter-terrorist measures must go beyond military might, and that Washington ought to cultivate international cooperation in condemning terrorism, intelligence monitoring, and policing financial networks that support terrorist organizations. What is missing, however, is a cogent analysis that is able to reconcile these two trends and argue persuasively the case for why the US should consider carefully its prerogative and capability to employ unilateral policies and military force in order to destroy enemy bases and to deter further attacks.

This paper argues that at the heart of the post-September 11 world lies several critical issues surrounding American power: its unprecedented primacy, the way in which it is exercised, and how it is perceived and received around the world. Notwithstanding its unipolar status, the terrorist assaults on the American homeland demonstrated dramatically that the US faces significant unorthodox challenges beyond the realm of great power competition. September 11 and the US responses to it have impacted significantly upon the vital ‘soft’ foundations of American power – its values and ideology; its benign image; and the perceived legitimacy of US world leadership. In the longer term, this will work to constrain and undermine the effectiveness of the exercise of American power. In view of

this, the deployment of conventional ‘hard’ military power to combat the ‘new’ terrorism must necessarily be circumspect because of the phenomenon of ‘blowback’, or the unintended consequences of a state’s foreign policy actions. These considerations produce an assessment which privileges the implications of September 11 in exacerbating the international and domestic constraints to American hegemony.

### **American Power and September 11**

What implications did September 11 have for US power? At the immediate level, the dramatic terrorist attacks on the American homeland destroyed the belief that its splendid geographical isolation guaranteed the US a fundamental degree of security. The attackers successfully demonstrated that the US is a vulnerable superpower. It was this realization which has led to an American response characterized by bafflement at having been thus attacked; anger at having been humiliated; a concern with protecting the credibility of American power; and a desire to prove the effectiveness of American power.

Indeed, the successful campaign in Afghanistan as part of Bush’s ‘war against terrorism’ are more than sufficient demonstrations that “vulnerability to terror has few effects” on the credibility, effectiveness and primacy of US strength in “more traditional interstate affairs”.<sup>1</sup> Washington remains able simultaneously to project its power in multiple areas; and anti-terrorism has lent almost unprecedented impetus to domestic support for unilateral action and steep increases in defence spending. Furthermore, the war in Afghanistan was a demonstration of vastly superior American military technology: it improved on the 1991 Gulf War and 1999 Kosovo campaign in showcasing the “new American way of war, one built around weapons operating at extremely long ranges, hitting targets with unprecedented precision, and relying as never before on gigabytes of targeting information gathered on the ground, in the air, and from space”.<sup>2</sup> The international war on terrorism has also seen the new, renewed or intensified American

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen G. Brooks & William C. Wohlforth, ‘American Primacy in Perspective’, *Foreign Affairs* 81(4), (July/August 2002), pp.21.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, ‘Bull’s-Eye War: Pinpoint Bombing Shifts Role of GI Joe’, 2 December 2001; Steve Vogel, ‘Daisy-Cutter Dropped on Cave at Tora Bora’, 10 December 2001, *Washington Post*; Eric Schmitt & James Dao, ‘Use of Pinpoint Air Power Comes of Age in New War’, 24 December 2001, *New York Times*. For a more critical commentary on the wider applicability of US strategy in Afghanistan, see Lawrence Freedman, ‘A New Type of War’, in Ken Booth & Tim Dunne, eds., *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2002).

involvement and deployments in the key strategic regions of Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, realist scholars, who focus on relative military power in the international system, are correct in arguing that American military power has been reified and American primacy reinforced. On the other hand, they undervalue two critical ways in which September 11 has influenced American power. First, writers like William Wohlforth, who argue that US unipolarity remains stable and unchallenged, continue to retain the conviction that geography insulates the US.<sup>4</sup> Yet, September 11 unquestionably showed that the unipolar power is as vulnerable as any other state to unconventional attacks. The point of contention lies in differing assessments of the relative significance of such threats to American strength. This relates to a second issue: if we accept the realist emphasis on the existing situation of unprecedented unipolarity, then the more important challenge to US power may well be unconventional forces such as transnational terrorist networks, rather than potential hegemonic rival states. Precisely because of the huge power disparity between the US and 'second-tier' regional powers, Washington can concentrate on sustaining and improving the effectiveness of its exercise of power to maximize its national interest. This is precisely why the asymmetrical terrorist challenge takes on added potency, because it has considerable potential to (a) undermine the foundations of American power; and (b) constrain the exercise of American power.

### **'Soft' Power and the Foundations of American Hegemony**

State power may be disaggregated into two elements: 'hard' military and resource-based power (aggregate power); and 'soft' ideational and institutional power. Realists tend to focus on the former, but those who have looked beyond military strength to economic relations and institutions – loosely termed 'liberals' – are inclined to emphasize

---

<sup>3</sup> For some contemporary analyses, see Charles Fairbanks, 'Being There' and Andrew Bacevich, 'Steppes to Empire', in 'Bases of Debate: America in Central Asia', *The National Interest*, (Summer 2002), pp.39-53; John Gershman, 'Is Southeast Asia the Second Front?', *Foreign Affairs* 81(4), (July/August 2002), pp.60-74; Aaron Friedberg, '11 September and the Future of Sino-American Relations', *Survival* 44(1), (Spring 2002), pp.40-2.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks & Wohlforth, 'American Primacy in Perspective', pp.24; William Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security* 24(1), (Summer 1999), pp.28. Note however that his argument rests as much on the effect of geography on potential state challengers to US hegemony – Russia and China –

the latter.<sup>5</sup> ‘Soft’ power, according to Joseph Nye, derives from the “intangible” power resources such as culture, values, ideology and institutions. Such power is exercised through attracting others to subscribe to, and thus legitimise, the order established by the dominant power. This relates to more indirect, or “co-optive” means by which a state sets the agenda or structure the situations in world politics in order to “get others to want what it wants”. Thus, of critical importance is a state’s ability to influence the preferences of other states prior to a bargaining situation so as to shape others’ actions.<sup>6</sup>

In examining the implications of 9/11 for American power, it is crucial to consider the broader foundations of American power as highlighted by Nye and others. The US differs from previous imperialist great powers in terms of its relatively limited ambitions in the orthodox aim of controlling overseas territory. Rather, American grand strategy since the Second World War has been characterized as much by military deployments as by the construction of international norms and institutions consistent with the liberal democratic structures of American capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Liberal writers argue that even as the world’s sole superpower after the end of the Cold War, US power to shape the international system unilaterally is circumscribed by forces of globalisation and interdependence; while others suggest that in spite of its economic, military and technological primacy, the US cannot do without the cooperation of at least some major powers in dealing with any major global security issue.<sup>8</sup> Thus, there have been intensified calls for drawing a tighter “connection between America’s moral and geopolitical standing” if *pax Americana* is to be sustained.<sup>9</sup>

---

which are continental powers likely to trigger regional counter-balancing from their neighbours if and when they grow too strong.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, compare neo-realist Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979) with Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage* (London: Heinemann, 1912) and neo-liberal institutionalists Robert Keohane & Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph S. Nye, ‘The Changing Nature of World Power’, *Political Science Quarterly* 105(2), (1990), pp.181. See also Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> On this point, see particularly John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Samuel Huntington, ‘The Lonely Superpower’, *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1999), pp.35-49.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1990/1), pp.304.



This paper suggests that while the terrorist attacks of September 11 may have reinforced ‘hard’ US power, they have had significant negative impact on its ‘soft’ power. The concept of ‘soft’ power as used here has three elements:

- ## the appeal of American values and culture;
- ## the perception that US hegemony is benign; and
- ## the apparent legitimacy of the exercise of American power.

The terrorist attacks triggered off a questioning of American character and behaviour by the dramatic challenge to US values and ideology. At the same time, this process has served to highlight the negative and sometimes malign effects of American projections of power. Furthermore, Washington’s reactions to the attacks have fuelled controversy and have sensitised the international community to questions regarding the legitimacy of American actions and policies. Taken together, these consequences of September 11 work to undermine the critical ‘soft’ aspects of American power.

#### *Values and ideology*

‘September 11’ is permeated with symbolic content. It was perhaps inevitable that for Americans, these terrorist attacks against civilians in their homeland were taken personally as assaults against what America is and what it stands for. President George W. Bush’s initial reaction, for instance, was to label the attacks “evil, despicable acts” and “acts of war”, targeted at “our way of life, our very freedom”, “because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.”<sup>10</sup>

Working from this interpretation, America reacted with righteousness and bewilderment: the initial puzzle revolved around ‘who could; and how could they, hate us so much?’ One immediate means of explaining the events was to characterize them as evil, irrational acts of madmen and fanatics, inspired by religious fundamentalism and envy of material success and power. Over the last year, the attention of commentators and analysts has turned to explaining the ‘root causes’ of such radicalism. This approach tends to view the US as having been targeted as a powerful symbol of the exploitative and

repressive ‘Other’ and/or as an instrument whose provocation and retaliation will serve to further the fundamentalist cause.

In this reading, the values and ideology under challenge may not be primarily America’s. The central ideological battle is that between the radical and moderate elements within Islam, and the problem lies with what Francis Fukuyama terms the “Islamofascists”, who are radically intolerant, with “a broader sense of grievance that is far deeper and more disconnected from reality than elsewhere”.<sup>11</sup> In essence, it is political problem within the Muslim world itself, and the US has been dragged into an Islamic civil war by fundamentalists such as Osama bin Laden are engaged in an Islamic civil war with the aim of furthering the Islamic revolution within the Arab world by undermining and overthrowing pro-Western governments.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, however, there is recognition that the appeal of radical Islam amongst the masses is also fuelled by a developmental crisis in which American values and ideology are implicated. This crisis results from a process of “failed and incomplete modernization” in which many Muslim societies have reaped more uncertainty and chaos from their contact with the West, and live under regimes which are associated with or supported by Western powers but fail to provide for their people.<sup>13</sup> Thus, there is resentment amongst politicised Muslim communities against the perceived hypocrisy of the US in preaching democracy and freedom while propping up repressive regimes.

Moreover, international reactions to the US ‘war on terrorism’ suggest that the US has lost some ground in the international ideological balance of power. Fred Halliday makes a distinction between the coalition of states which support the US ‘war’, and popular opinion within these states. He goes so far as to suggest that there has been a consolidation of “a global coalition of feeling against the US”, a reinforcement of anti-Americanism since September 11.<sup>14</sup> Halliday and others detect a “pervasive bloc of

---

<sup>10</sup> ‘Bush’s Remarks to the Nation on the Terrorist Attacks’, 12 September 2001; ‘After the Attacks: the President’, 13 September 2001, *New York Times*.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Fukuyama, ‘History and September 11’, in Booth & Dunne, *Worlds in Collision*, p.32.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Scott Doran, ‘Somebody Else’s Civil War: Ideology, Rage, and the Assault on America’, in James F. Hoge & Gideon Rose, eds., *How Did This Happen? Terrorism and the New War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Fareed Zakaria, ‘The Return of History: What September 11 Hath Wrought’, in Hoge & Rose, *How Did This Happen?*, p.316.

<sup>14</sup> Fred Halliday, ‘A New Global Configuration’, in Booth & Dunne, *Worlds in Collision*, p.236.

resentment” against the ease and force with which the US is able to retaliate against relatively powerless states and populations, and reassert its hegemony.<sup>15</sup> The effects of popular objections in Latin American and Asia, not to mention the Middle East, to the Afghanistan campaign, and the potential war on Iraq, should not be underestimated, as such domestic political considerations pose significant constraints to the degree of support allied and friendly states can offer the US.

Of course, this might be reduced to the envy of power *per se* that can be expected to dog any major power. The difference in this case is that material envy is combined with resentment which bears a deep-seated ethnic and religious element, and has been exploited by fundamentalists to advance an ideological cause. In the process, even as Bush portrays his ‘war’ on terror as a crusade to defend the principles of “liberty and justice” shared by Americans and the rest of the “civilized” world, American values and ideology are being dragged under international scrutiny, to its detriment.<sup>16</sup>

### *Benignity*

In trying to explain the acts of violence on September 11, ‘root causes’ may be divided into two elements: the socio-political conditions promulgating extremist actions and their supporters; and aspects of the victim’s character and behaviour which provide foci for grievance and attack. The intensified scrutiny of US foreign policy in the wake of September 11 has served to highlight the negative effects of American projections of power. This process affects the foundations of US power precisely because the persistence of US hegemony after the Cold War can be explained by the way in which it is perceived to be benign by many key states.

Wohlforths’s structural account of American unipolarity explains why no countervailing coalition has formed against the US, but it does not explain why there is an active preference for US involvement and deployments in regions like Europe and East Asia, where even Beijing now professes an acceptance that the US military presence is a

---

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.241; Booth & Dunne, *Worlds in Collision*, p.2-3. The latter argue eloquently that “it is the lack of power that besets Islam”. The fear and envy of power operates between Islamic communities and the US because America’s structural power “tends to provoke the hostility of those who are not listened to, or who do not get their way, ever”, whether in the domestic or international context.

stabilizing factor. Instead, we have to turn to accounts that emphasize state identity, threat perception, and the construction of shared interests and institutions, rather than balance of power *per se*.<sup>17</sup> These approaches offer the insight that American power is generally viewed as acceptable and preferable because the US is perceived as a non-threatening hegemon exercising strategic restraint and maintaining international institutions whose norms are ascribed to by other states. While other states cannot ultimately prevent unilateral action by the US, American intervention in the world would be much more costly if not supported, or if opposed, by friends and allies. In this sense, exercising ‘soft’ power is a cheaper and more sustainable option in American foreign policy.<sup>18</sup>

The terrorist attacks of September 11, presented and understood to some extent as retaliation for American strategic policy in the Middle East, have served to highlight dramatically the fact that some groups feel strongly enough that US foreign policy actions are malign and malicious, to react in a significant way.<sup>19</sup> This may increase the potential costs of American intervention abroad considerably. Put another way, the exercise of American power sometimes carries collateral consequences. Chalmers Johnson has made this point forcefully employing the concept of ‘blowback’, a term coined initially by the CIA to refer to the unintended consequences of secret American interventions.<sup>20</sup> Johnson and others argue that many apparently unprovoked attacks on American interests and citizens are in fact retaliatory responses by terrorist groups or rogue regimes as a result of US actions. For instance:

## The 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie was retaliation for a 1986 Reagan administration aerial raid on Libya which killed President Qaddafi’s stepdaughter.

---

<sup>16</sup> George W. Bush, ‘State of the Union Address’, 29 January 2002, Washington, DC, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>, p.6.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization* 46(2), (Spring 1992), pp.391-425.

<sup>18</sup> See Huntington, ‘The Lonely Superpower’; Richard N. Haass, ‘What to do with American Primacy’, *Foreign Affairs* 78(5), (September/October 1999), pp.37-49; Richard N. Haass (Director of Policy Planning, Department of State), ‘Defining US Foreign Policy in a Post-Post-Cold-War World’, Arthur Ross Lecture, Foreign Policy Association, New York, 22 April 2002. This point is acknowledged even by Krauthammer and Brooks & Wohlforth.

<sup>19</sup> This is not to suggest that the US foreign policy record was previously unblemished. American interventions in the Vietnam, Nicaragua and Panama – to name but a few – were also controversial.

<sup>20</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000); Chalmers Johnson, ‘Blowback’, *The Nation*, 15 September 2001.

€# The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York was carried out by a group of mujahideen which had been armed by the US in its support for the Taliban in Afghanistan, but who then turned against American policies in the Gulf War and vis-à-vis Israel.

€# The 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were masterminded by Osama bin Laden, who had played an important role in the American backed rebel movement in Afghanistan, but who subsequently turned against the US in 1991 because he viewed the stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia during and after the Gulf War as a violation of his religious beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

Explicit in the ‘blowback’ thesis is the recognition that terrorist organizations are spurred not only by resentment against US preponderance and values *per se*, but also against what America *does*. Their cause and their momentum are nurtured and sustained by the accumulation of perceived concrete grievances against the way in which American power and ideology have been brought to bear against selected groups over time. As the most interventionist power in the international system after the Cold War, the US “makes itself the target for states or groups whose aspirations are frustrated by US power”.<sup>22</sup>

From the 1990s onwards, fundamentalist networks in the Middle East have tapped into popular resentment against the US which coalesce around nodal issues such as American support for Israel, US intervention in the Gulf War, US bases on Saudi territory, US-led sanctions against Iraq, and the US missile attacks on a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan in 1998.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of September 11, American attacks on an already devastated Afghanistan to bring about a regime change reinforced the ‘bully’ image. In this sense, American actions act as fuel for radical fires and fodder for recruits to the cause: whether intended or unintended, elements of American foreign policy may be used to promote a

---

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Blowback*, p.9-13. See also Ivan Eland, ‘Does US Intervention Overseas Breed Terrorism?’, Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 50, 17 December 1998, in which Eland lists 64 terrorist attacks against US targets between 1915 and 1998, which he suggests resulted from interventionist American actions overseas.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Betts, ‘The New Threat of Mass Destruction’, *Foreign Affairs* 77(1), (January/February 1998), pp.28.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Robert Fisk, ‘Osama bin Laden: The Godfather of Terror?’, *The Independent*, 15 September 2001.

sense of victimhood and to encourage a propensity for extremist action in the name of a 'just cause'.

Therefore, 'blowback' from American foreign policy and overseas intervention constitutes one of the fundamental 'root causes' of terrorism. Washington is certainly aware of this link. A 1997 Defense Department report acknowledged that

Historical data show a strong correlation between US involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States... the military asymmetry that denies nation states the ability to engage in overt attacks against the United States drives the use of transnational actors.<sup>24</sup>

After September 11, however, analysts and academics in the West have been reticent about drawing the connection between American foreign policy practices and anti-American terrorist activity. A notable exception is Noam Chomsky, who has consistently pointed out this linkage, and has argued vehemently that by the Defense Department's own definition, the US itself practices state-sponsored terrorism.<sup>25</sup>

Even without treading Chomsky's activist path, however, the impact of controversial US policies and actions in the Middle East and other parts of the world on rallying fundamentalist groups and causes, should be clear. More than that, it is essential to recognize that there may be concrete policy bases for the apparently rising tide of anti-Americanism. As one observer put it:

There is simply too much distrust, dislike, or just plain hatred of a country that has become so callous in its pursuit of economic power and arrogant in its political and military relations with the rest of the world and so brazen in declaring its cultural superiority over the rest of us... The only response that will really contribute to global security and peace is for... the United States to re-examine and substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting for a change arrangements that will not

---

<sup>24</sup> Defense Science Board task force report on responses to transnational threats to Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology, 1997, quoted in Eland, 'Does US Intervention Overseas Breed Terrorism?', p.2.

<sup>25</sup> Noam Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001). See also Noam Chomsky, *Culture of Terrorism* (Boston: South End Press, 1988); Alex George, ed., *Western State Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

stand in the way of the achievement of equity, justice, and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalized peoples.<sup>26</sup>

From Washington's point of view, the barometer to watch is the extent to which the international community buys into the substantive grievances of networks like al Qaeda. There have already been calls to redress US policy in Middle East, especially towards Israel/Palestine and bases in Saudi Arabia. If these voices grow in number, volume and intensity, they will work to undermine the normative assumption of benignity that has underlain the successful phase of US hegemony thus far. For America's friends and allies, this consideration operates especially within the critical political processes of legitimising support for US policy, in both the domestic and international arenas. These processes in turn impact upon the perceived legitimacy of American actions and the United States' status as a global leader.

### *Legitimacy*

Legitimacy is the value that justifies the relationship between governed and governor. More broadly understood as the right to exercise the power of leadership or governance, it is based on consent, and a perceived concordance with shared values and identities, and existing norms. Central to the concept of legitimacy are rights as well as duties, the principle of reciprocity, and mutual expectations. For the governor, legitimacy also implies constraints on the exercise of power involving ideas of accountability and responsibility.<sup>27</sup>

We may distil three elements of legitimacy for this analysis. First, a state's action may be considered legitimate if it conforms to accepted international norms and rules. Second, the concept of legitimacy is under-girded by the principles of reciprocity, mutuality and respect. Third, the legitimacy of a state's action is derived in part from the process by which the state seeks support by constructing the case for the desirability of the means and ends it wishes to pursue.

---

<sup>26</sup> Walden Bello, 'Endless War?', Focus on the Global South commentary, September 2001, [http://www.focusweb.org/publications/2001/endless\\_war.htm](http://www.focusweb.org/publications/2001/endless_war.htm)

In the context of the US position post-September 11, Washington's legitimacy concerns centre on the aims of: maintaining the international alliances which play an important role in US defence strategy; sustaining the existing favourable world order based on American values and leadership; and ensuring domestic trust and confidence in the central government.<sup>28</sup> Assuaging these concerns will depend in large part on whether Washington can persuade its various audiences of the moral and legal justification for its actions, particularly with respect to intervention overseas. The legitimacy of American exercise of power after the terrorist attacks of September 11 has been called into question on three fronts: legality, unilateralism, and interventionism.

First, American reactions to the events of September 11 has been judged on perhaps the most obvious measure of legitimacy, their adherence to international law. There are two key legal issues related to the 'war on terrorism': the right to resort to the use of force, and the means employed in the actual use of force. On the former, while there was general acceptance that the Taliban's harbouring of al Qaeda was *jus ad bellum* for the war in Afghanistan, questions have been raised about whether one can indeed declare war against an 'ism' which is transnational in origin, relatively intangible in manifestation, and by nature ineradicable.<sup>29</sup> A secondary criticism on the right to resort to force relates to the limits and inconsistency of the Bush administration's professed aim of retaliating against states and regimes that harbour terrorist organizations. If the war in Afghanistan is legally justifiable on these grounds, why is Washington not employing the same strategy or other sanctions against other states which also shelter and nurture these groups, most obviously Pakistan and Saudi Arabia?<sup>30</sup> The implication is that the US is guided by narrow short-term interests in its selective application of the right to employ force against weaker states which are of less strategic value.

---

<sup>27</sup> See Jean-Marc Coicaud, *Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Thomas Francks, *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Philip B. Heymann, 'Dealing with Terrorism', *International Security* 26(3), (Winter 2001/2), pp.24, fn.1.

<sup>29</sup> Grenville Byford, 'The Wrong War', *Foreign Affairs* 81(4), (July/August 2002), pp.34-43; Freedman, 'A New Type of War'.

<sup>30</sup> A Rand Corporation analyst's report to the Pentagon recently pointed out this inconsistency with regard to Saudi Arabia, asserting that the Saudis are active at "every level of the terror chain" – see Thomas Ricks, 'Briefing Depicted Saudis as Enemies; Ultimatum Urged To Pentagon Board', 6 August 2002, *Washington Post*. A group of relatives of victims of the attacks on September 11 have also filed civil suits against the house of Saud for financing al Qaeda. For a survey, see Hermann Frederick Eilts, 'US-Saudi Relations after the September 11 Debacle', *American Diplomacy* VII(2), (2002).



It was the legality of elements of the actual use of force in the Afghanistan war which provoked the greatest international criticism of the US. Domestic critics, led by the media, focused initially on the significant civilian casualties in the bombing campaign, questioning whether the military was employing sufficient caution to keep such ‘collateral damage’ to the minimum.<sup>31</sup> While the Geneva Conventions stipulate the minimization of civilian targeting as one of the rules of war, the body of rules which led to the harshest scrutiny of US actions was that providing for the treatment of prisoners. It is debatable whether the Taliban and al Qaeda forces captured during the war in Afghanistan could be classified as prisoners of war (PoWs) under international law.<sup>32</sup> In the event, Washington chose instead to label them ‘unlawful combatants’ or ‘battlefield detainees’. This carried the legal implication that they would not enjoy the full range of legal protection accompanying PoW status: American authorities could thereby extract more extensive information from the prisoners beyond the Geneva Convention provision that obliges PoWs only to provide information about their name, rank, date of birth and serial number; and Washington could avoid the obligation to grant judicial proceedings to the prisoners in the US.<sup>33</sup> Although the Bush administration gave detailed public assurances that the prisoners would receive “humane treatment”, publicity about maltreatment of prisoners, the conditions at Guantanamo Bay and the killing of large numbers of prisoners after an uprising at the prisoners’ camp near Mazar-e Sharif fuelled concerns about the legitimacy of the conduct of the war. In part, the problem lay with the lack of control over how prisoners captured by the Northern Alliance would be treated, but it was American prestige which suffered under the sharp international criticism.<sup>34</sup>

As Adam Roberts points out, observance of the rules of war is particularly important in the campaign against terrorism because the perception of compliance with basic international standards will increase public and allied support or acquiescence, while

---

<sup>31</sup> ‘Uncertain Toll in the Fog of War: Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan’, 10 February 2002, *New York Times*; Howard Kurtz, ‘War Coverage Takes a Negative Turn’, 17 February 2002, *Washington Post*.

<sup>32</sup> Al Qaeda fighters, particularly, as opposed to Taliban forces, did not meet the definition of lawful combatants: the affiliation of the combatant to a party to the conflict, operating under a responsible command system, wearing a fixed distinctive sign, carrying arms openly, and conducting their operations in accordance with the laws of war.

<sup>33</sup> Adam Roberts, ‘Counter-terrorism, Armed Force and the Laws of War’, *Survival* 44(1), (Spring 2002), pp.20-26.

<sup>34</sup> Domestic criticism by civil liberties groups, members of Congress, and the courts have also begun to emerge recently, particularly over the related issue of the legality of certain implications of ‘homeland security’ measures implemented by the Bush administration, including the secret detention and deportation

the failure to comply would provide further justification for terrorist opponents to resort to force. At the same time, adherence to international law adds to the moral distinction between the US and its allies, and the terrorists.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Washington's refusal to accept the full application of the Geneva Convention on PoWs to al Qaeda prisoners was taken as another example of its selective approach to international norms especially in the context of the perceived rising tendency towards American unilateralism after September 11. In spite of the Bush administration's attempt to orchestrate an international alliance in its war against terrorism, this has been presented as an ultimatum – witness Bush's statement that "[e]very nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" – and has been regarded as Washington cashing in its superpower chips.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, the Pentagon and State Department have emphasized a more selective approach to gathering "revolving coalitions...depending on the activity and the circumstances", and asserted that Washington "will act alone when necessary".<sup>37</sup> Together with charges of the superpower seeking multilateralism *a la carte*, other analysts have argued that the US has been harnessing the resources of allies in order to expedite the effective unilateral exercise of American power.<sup>38</sup> In the year since the terrorist assaults, the Bush administration has also demonstrated its unilateral proclivities in a series of other areas, most notably its abrogation of the ABM treaty in order to pursue the Theatre Missile Defence system, its decision not to ratify the Kyoto protocol on climate change, the erection of steel tariffs, and its opposition to the International Criminal Court.

International perceptions of Washington's new penchant for unilateralism impact upon the broader normative legitimacy of US world leadership because it undermines the foundations of the social contract between the benign hegemon and other states in the

---

hearings for suspected terrorists within the US. See Charles Lane, 'Debate Crystallizes on War, Rights', 2 September 2002, *Washington Post*.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9, 14.

<sup>36</sup> George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People', Washington DC, 20 September 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/20010920-8.htm>; Halliday, 'A New Global Configuration', p.236.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, Department of Defense News Briefing, 25 September 2001, [http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2001/t09252001\\_t0925sd.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2001/t09252001_t0925sd.html); Haass, 'Defining US Foreign Policy in a Post-Post-Cold War World', pp.4-5.

<sup>38</sup> See Kumar Ramakrishna, '9/11, American Praetorian Unilateralism, and the Impact on State-Society Relations in Southeast Asia', Working Paper, June 2002, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, p.1-10.

system, which are premised upon cooperation and the pursuit of commonly-agreed social goods.

Third, more recently, the legitimacy of American actions and leadership has been challenged further in the debate about a possible war against Iraq. Critics see the Bush administration's determination to extend the war on terrorism to Baghdad as evidence of American hyper-interventionism. Their questions about the legality and legitimacy of such a war also impinge upon the related issues of American values and benignity. At its more extreme end, the interventionism critique identifies the dangers of the unfettered power of a primacist, neo-imperialists power that contravenes the values and norms which lie at the core of American national power. The potential Iraq campaign is seen as the opportunistic extension of the counter-terrorism umbrella as an excuse to pursue other strategic goals in the first of a line of possible interventions to bring about 'regime change'.

There are two broadly opposing views in the debate. On the one hand are the liberal internationalists, including many American friends and allies in European and other parts of the world, and prominent Republicans and Congressional leaders, who favour UN involvement and the resort to law. There is general agreement that UN sanction for such a campaign would provide some much needed "unique legitimacy" to the enterprise in terms of multilateralism and the invocation of international law.<sup>39</sup> However, at the heart of winning international support lies the issue of evidence. Washington needs to provide evidence of Saddam Hussein's link with al Qaeda, if the war is to be fought under the anti-terrorism rubric. If the Bush administration chooses to attack Iraq as a pre-emptive strike against Saddam Hussein's purported capabilities and intentions to deploy weapons of mass destruction, critics also demand evidence.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the domestic element of this group argue that George W. Bush is legally obliged not only to consult with, but also to obtain congressional approval, for a war on Iraq.<sup>41</sup> The more extreme end of this camp

---

<sup>39</sup> Kofi Annan, address to the United Nations General Assembly, 12 September 2002, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/SGSM8378.doc.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Brent Scowcroft, 'Don't Attack Saddam', 15 August 2002, *Wall Street Journal*; 'Top Republicans Break with Bush on Iraq Strategy', 16 August 2002, *New York Times*; 'You can be Warriors or Wimps; or so say the Americans', 8 August 2002, *The Economist*.

<sup>41</sup> 'Bush Meets with Congressional Leaders on Iraq', 4 September 2002, *New York Times*.

argues that a war against Iraq would be illegal, an unprovoked invasion in violation of national sovereignty as enshrined in Article 2 of the United Nations Charter.<sup>42</sup>

Ranged on the other side of the legitimacy debate over Iraq are the justifications advanced by some members of the Bush administration, based on the 'evil' nature of Saddam Hussein, the Munich analogy, and Washington's moral imperative for action, with or without its allies.<sup>43</sup> In substantive terms, it would appear that Washington has realized that the case for intervening in Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime because of his links to terrorism is weak.<sup>44</sup> Rather, the more convincing argument for the war is that made by those who portray it as a legitimate intervention in order to uphold international rules. In this account, Iraq has repeatedly flouted its international commitments not to develop nuclear weapons, and resolutions to allow UN inspectors to detect and destroy weapons materials, and the US is the only power able to provide the enforcement mechanism for these international rules by applying the ultimate sanction against Iraq for flouting the UN on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).<sup>45</sup> This was the essence of Bush's speech to the UN General Assembly on 12 September 2002, in which he challenged the international body to respond to the Iraqi dictator's "decade of defiance", or risk irrelevance; and presented US action as a means to enforce UN resolutions.<sup>46</sup> However, the Bush administration has provided no further evidence of Iraqi nuclear capabilities and intention to deploy WMD against US interests.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> E.g., 'Church Leaders Speak Against "Wicked" War', 5 September 2002, *The Times*.

<sup>43</sup> 'Rice lays out case for war in Iraq', 16 August 2002, *Washington Post*; 'Bush will act alone if need be, says Perle'; 9 August 2002; 'Attack Saddam now and let history judge, says Rumsfeld', 21 August 2002, *Daily Telegraph*; David Stout, 'Cheney Presses for Action on Iraq', 26 August 2002, *New York Times*.

<sup>44</sup> Another set of arguments relate to the continuing debate within the Administration of the 'unfinished business' of the 1991 Gulf War, an issue that has engaged Wolfowitz, Perle, and others against Baker, Powell and Eagleberger throughout the 1990s. However, this 'unfinished business' rationale arguably suffers from an even more serious legitimacy deficit for the reason that, having successfully fulfilled the 1991 UN mission to repel the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US cannot now choose to extend its mission more than 10 years later to bring about regime change in Iraq.

<sup>45</sup> A good presentations of this argument may be found at Bill Emmott, 'Saddam and his sort', 27 June 2002, *The Economist*. For a more nuanced argument for the moral and political necessity of first attempting to elicit a Security Council resolution for the unconditional return of inspectors to Iraq, see James A. Baker, III, 'The Right Way to Change a Regime', 25 August 2002, *New York Times*. Also, in apparent contrast to other members of the Bush administration, Secretary of State Colin Powell has expressed the view that in order to boost the legitimacy of a potential US attack on Iraq, the international community must try to have UN inspectors return to Iraq as a "first step", and the US must provide evidence of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. See Glenn Kessler, 'Powell Treads Carefully on Iraq Strategy', 2 September 2002, *Washington Post*.

<sup>46</sup> George W. Bush, address to the United Nations General Assembly, 12 September 2002, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html>.

<sup>47</sup> The White House instead issued a long catalogue of Iraq's infringement and non-compliance with UN resolutions since 1991, see 'A Decade of Deception and Defiance',

Neither has Washington provided firm assurances that it would only undertake the war against Iraq under some form of UN approval. Instead, the Bush administration also justifies its consideration of a pre-emptive strike on Iraq by recourse to America's right to self-defence as enshrined under Article 51 of the UN Charter.<sup>48</sup> As the UN General Secretary has pointed out, this justification is problematic if applied in a pre-emptive fashion outside of the defending state's national territory.

That the Bush administration is moving some way towards greater recognition of the need for allied and domestic support for the war reflects the understanding that the US, even as the world's sheriff, has to avoid excessive unilateralism and interventionism for political and diplomatic reasons. In terms of 'soft' power, this concern speaks to the themes of reciprocity, mutuality and respect, which underlie legitimacy. These are most often manifested in action in conjunction with shared interests, and in line with professed shared values and norms. In practice, it entails consultation, working through international institutions, invoking international norms – generally bothering to make a case seriously according to the established rules. Currently, the difficulty with the Bush administration's potential war against Iraq lies in the perception that it is once again attempting to harness multilateral support for a unilateral policy which will be carried out in any case.<sup>49</sup> When the US is perceived to be instrumental, or inconsistent, or to apply double standards regarding international norms, it undermines American values and their power to structure debates and interactions. Eventually, it begs the question of whether the US itself is becoming a revisionist power within an international system that it was critical in shaping.<sup>50</sup>

---

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/decade/book.html>. Two British reports were released in September 2002 assessing Iraq's WMD capabilities, one by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the other by the British government. Both provide some evidence that Saddam Hussein is determined to develop weapons of mass destruction and building up stocks of chemical and biological weapons; he is probably several years away from building a nuclear bomb, and is making slow progress in rebuilding his arsenal of missiles. However, neither has demonstrated convincingly that he poses a new and imminent threat. See IISS Strategic Dossier, 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Net Assessment' (London: IISS, September 2002); 'Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government', available at <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page6117.asp>.

<sup>48</sup> 'Interview with Colin Powell', 7 September 2002, *New York Times*; Baker, 'The Right Way to Change a Regime'.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Kagan, 'Multilateralism, American Style', 14 September 2002, *Washington Post*.

<sup>50</sup> The Chinese have been the most consistent advocates of this criticism, based on US unilateralism and violation of the principle of sovereignty on a range of issue from arms sales to Taiwan, to the NATO intervention in Kosovo. See Xiang Lanxin, 'Washington's Misguided China Policy', *Survival* 43(3), (Autumn 2001), pp.7-23; Report to Congress of the US-China Security Review Commission, July 2002, Chapter 1, p.3.

Ultimately, the concern with values, benignity, and legitimacy that constitute US ‘soft’ power arises from and resides within the liberal democratic ideology with which America closely identifies itself. Liberal political theorists argue that an “undemocratic hegemony” would fatally undermine the values and ideas at the foundation of the American-built international structure. A “democratic hegemony”, in contrast, is one in which democratic values act both as an ideational foundation for the spread of American power, and as a constraint to hegemony, since “one cannot act as a pseudo-empire, as an imperial power, and pretend to be a democratic power”.<sup>51</sup>

### **‘Blowback’ and Constraints to Hegemonic Power**

The implication of September 11 for American power is neither that ‘nothing has changed, America still rules’ nor that ‘the world’s superpower can be crippled by a much weaker grouping’. Instead, the argument so far is that this ‘new’ terrorism and the American response have undermined critical elements of US ‘soft’ power in the international arena, even as its ‘hard’ power has been reinforced. This concluding section argues that these trends, if they continue, will, in the longer term, serve to constrain the exercise of American power by limiting the choice and effectiveness of foreign and security policies. These constraints will operate at two levels: at the international level, Washington will experience increased friction and costs in dealing with its allies and other friendly states; and at the domestic level, the Bush and subsequent administrations will have to take into account rising public unwillingness to pay the more extreme price of external interventions.

The aims of the al Qaeda network in carrying out the September 11 attacks were two-fold: to change the ideological balance of power in favour of radical fundamentalist Islam, and to bring about changes in US foreign policy. They challenged American values and power, and hoped to rock international support for the US, and to provoke an American response against the Arab world that would greatly add to the momentum for their cause. The acknowledgment that some of these goals might be in the process of being achieved is not an indication of support for the terrorists; instead, it is an integral

---

<sup>51</sup> Jean-Marc Coicaud, ‘Legitimacy, Socialization, and International Change’, in Charles Kupchan *et al*, *Power in Transition: The Peaceful Change of International Order* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press,

part of the circumspection that must accompany the careful consideration of the implications of September 11. One observer has noted that “current US policy is not about waging a war on terrorism... rather it is about restoring national honour after the humiliation of September 11.”<sup>52</sup> The danger of such a policy lies in its expansive nature, and its potential to double back upon itself.

In riding upon the back of its ‘war’ on terrorism to open a campaign of regime change in Iraq, Washington must recognize that it may be crafting a spiral by which its own credibility and effectiveness may be undermined by its own actions. There will be further ‘blowback’ effects from these policies in two senses: ideological, by which the normative framework of US world leadership is challenged, and more extremism is bred in the Muslim world; and material, by which the incidence of terrorist attacks will increase in the US and elsewhere. The growing international and domestic sensitivity to these elements of ‘blowback’ will act as constraints to the effective exercise of US power.

At the international level, Washington can expect greater pulling and hauling as it tries to coordinate its policies with its allies and friends. There have already been signs of frustration in the Bush administration with the desire for ‘coalitions of willing’ on the one hand, and contempt for the idea that a superpower has to bargain with its second-tier allies in order to act in its own national interests, on the other. Yet, allies are important to the US for ‘soft’ political and diplomatic reasons, but also for hard military reasons. For instance, in order to secure bases and air space for the Iraq campaign, Washington will have to depend on Turkey, Kuwait, Qatar, and Jordan.

The US extension of its war on terrorism may act as a wedge between Washington and its allies in three ways. First, it calls into question the perceived values and interests shared by America and its allies. As discussed above, America’s European allies – with the exception of the British Prime Minister – are the primary dissenters on the issues of legitimacy with regard to US actions. Second, it further deepens the pre-existing resentments against American power and hegemony in more ambivalent states in the less developed countries, such as those in Latin America. Third, the governments of many

---

2001), p.88, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Colin Gray, ‘World Politics as Usual after September 11: Realism Vindicated’, in Booth & Dunne, *Worlds in Collision*, p.233.

states friendly to the US are pre-occupied with the prospect of blowbacks from American actions in their domestic realms. Arab and other states with significant Muslim populations recognize most clearly that a US attack on Iraq would inflame domestic radical elements, and as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak warned, “not one Arab leader will be able to control the angry outburst of the masses”.<sup>53</sup>

The Bush administration hawks argue that an invasion of Iraq will be short and effective, like the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>54</sup> For the more cautious though, the nightmare scenario is one in which a US invasion triggers off “Armageddon in the Middle East” as a result of Saddam Hussein launching missiles against Israel and setting off a regional conflagration.<sup>55</sup> Even if the US manages to pull off a smooth invasion that succeeds in toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime, a campaign of ‘regime change’ necessarily implicates the US in the long-term rebuilding and democratisation of a complex but strategically central state in the Middle East.<sup>56</sup> Washington managed to persuade the international community to share the burden of rebuilding Afghanistan, but it is likely that the US will face a longer-term occupation of Iraq more similar to its post-World War II experience in Japan. Such a development would first serve to fuel extremist Islamic hatred of American power and occupation of sacred territory.<sup>57</sup> Beyond that, such a commitment would divert resources from the ‘war’ on terrorism, which has been portrayed as the Bush administration’s primary foreign policy goal and the basis on which it has harnessed the current international coalition. As former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski argued recently,

If America comes to be viewed by its key democratic allies in Europe and Asia as morally obtuse and politically naïve in failing to address terrorism in its broader and deeper dimensions...global support for America’s policies will surely decline. America’s ability to maintain a broadly democratic anti-terrorism coalition will suffer gravely.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> ‘Taking on the Doubters’, 2 September 2002, *The Economist*; Kumar Ramakrishna, ‘Beware of Pouring Fuel on Radical Embers’, 3 September 2002, *International Herald Tribune*.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Rumsfeld Orders Iraq Rethink’, 2 August 2002, *Daily Telegraph*; ‘Bush’s War Plan’, 8 September 2002, *The Straits Times*; ‘Afghanistan Lessons Don’t Apply to Iraq, General Says’, 22 August 2002, *Washington Times*.

<sup>55</sup> Scowcroft, ‘Don’t Attack Saddam’.

<sup>56</sup> This potential longer-term commitment has only recently been acknowledged by top Bush administration officials – see Condoleeza Rice interview with *Financial Times*, 22 September 2002.

<sup>57</sup> James Webb, ‘Heading for Trouble’, 4 September 2002, *Washington Post*.

<sup>58</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, ‘Focus on the Political Roots of Sept. 11’, 4 September 2002, *New York Times*.



We might add that the American-orchestrated liberal democratic world order would also suffer.

At the domestic level, the neo-isolationism that one might have expected as a consequence of the September 11 attacks has so far been kept in check by nationalist reactions, and by a discourse which has played down the relationship between terrorism and American foreign policy. Yet, cracks are already appearing. Civil liberties groups are calling into question the constitutional validity of elements of the Bush administration's homeland security policies, and Congress is vigorously debating the legitimacy of the potential war on Iraq. The anti-terrorism campaign is in itself a difficult enterprise, constituting a long-term battle in shadowy financial and intelligence realms whose results are not easily demonstrable to the public. Adding to that a long-term occupation and commitment to rebuilding Iraq, would only serve to stretch the tolerance of a nation well-known for its primary preoccupation with domestic affairs. At the same time, the US government will need to deal with the impact of its anti-terrorism 'war' and the Iraq campaign in deepening ethnic and religious divides within American society.

More importantly, the logical consequence of the argument that a war on Iraq would inflame radical Islamist sentiments is that there will be a rise in the incidence of attempted terrorist attacks on the US and elsewhere. In the domestic realm, Washington will have to factor in the consideration of such 'blowback' for homeland security. In the longer term, the constant fear of such consequences can only serve to strengthen neo-isolationist interest groups. One does not need to invoke the Vietnam analogy to recognize that domestic political forces will constrain decision-making in Washington over the longer term.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis has examined the implications of September 11 for American power. It has argued that the terrorist attacks and Washington's response have had significant impacts upon the 'soft' elements of American power. In the attempt to understand why such an attack happened, American values and ideology – centred on the concepts of democracy and capitalism, and flanked by more nebulous values of 'freedom',

‘justice’ and ‘development’ – have come under scrutiny. As the search for ‘root causes’ of the ‘new’ terrorism proceeded, the character and exercise of American power have also been analysed and found wanting by many in terms of benignity and legitimacy. Taking these criticisms seriously is important, as the perceptions and evaluations of America’s friends and allies about the nature of US power will critically affect the sustainability of the foundations of this power. At the same time, over the longer run, the effectiveness of the exercise of American power will be affected by negative assessments of and ‘blowback’ from its actions in response to terrorism. Increased friction with its international allies and friends, and rising concern with the costs of more overseas intervention and the possibility of further terrorist attacks at home will constrain serve to Washington’s policy choices.

These reconsiderations about the foundations and exercise of American power are particularly salient in the light of the Bush administration’s National Security Strategy, unveiled in September 2002. The ‘Bush Doctrine’ reflects how September 11 has facilitated a more assertive and interventionist, but also more idealistic, American security strategy. It is based on a more explicit combination of soft and hard power in its determination to promote “a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests”. These values are defined as “liberty and justice... principles [that] are right and true for all people everywhere”, and the “non-negotiable demands for human dignity”. At the same time, the Bush administration asserts its right to carry out “pre-emptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security”, and seeks new bases and access arrangements for further deployment of American forces overseas. Moreover, Washington retains faith in its sheer preponderance of power, and pledges that its forces will be “strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States”.<sup>59</sup> This strategy of strengthening primacy, intervening more assertively to protect security and interests, and adopting a more explicit ideological basis for foreign policy, can be expected to exacerbate extant problems.

This paper speaks to the ‘root causes’ discourse on preventing terrorism, by addressing the American side of the equation. In arguing that September 11 ought to have

generated a far more considered and temperate re-assessment of US foreign policy and of the exercise of American power, it provides a means to bridge the apparent contradiction between unsurpassed US primacy and the new US vulnerability. The ball now lies in Washington's court: the Bush administration itself will decide how much the world has changed in the wake of the September 11 attacks, by the extent to which its subsequent conduct will change the character of American power.

---

<sup>59</sup> *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002), available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.

*IDSS Working Paper Series*

1. Vietnam-China Relations Since The End of The Cold War (1998)  
*Ang Cheng Guan*
2. Multilateral Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region: Prospects and Possibilities (1999)  
*Desmond Ball*
3. Reordering Asia: "Cooperative Security" or Concert of Powers? (1999)  
*Amitav Acharya*
4. The South China Sea Dispute re-visited (1999)  
*Ang Cheng Guan*
5. Continuity and Change In Malaysian Politics: Assessing the Buildup to the 1999-2000 General Elections (1999)  
*Joseph Liow Chin Yong*
6. 'Humanitarian Intervention in Kosovo' as Justified, Executed and Mediated by NATO: Strategic Lessons for Singapore (2000)  
*Kumar Ramakrishna*
7. Taiwan's Future: Mongolia or Tibet? (2001)  
*Chien-peng (C.P.) Chung*
8. Asia-Pacific Diplomacies: Reading Discontinuity in Late-Modern Diplomatic Practice (2001)  
*Tan See Seng*
9. Framing "South Asia": Whose Imagined Region? (2001)  
*Sinderpal Singh*
10. Explaining Indonesia's Relations with Singapore During the New Order Period: The Case of Regime Maintenance and Foreign Policy (2001)  
*Terence Lee Chek Liang*
11. Human Security: Discourse, Statecraft, Emancipation (2001)  
*Tan See Seng*
12. Globalization and its Implications for Southeast Asian Security: A Vietnamese Perspective (2001)  
*Nguyen Phuong Binh*
13. Framework for Autonomy in Southeast Asia's Plural Societies (2001)  
*Miriam Coronel Ferrer*
14. Burma: Protracted Conflict, Governance and Non-Traditional Security Issues (2001)  
*Ananda Rajah*
15. Natural Resources Management and Environmental Security in Southeast Asia: Case Study of Clean Water Supplies in Singapore (2001)  
*Kog Yue Choong*
16. Crisis and Transformation: ASEAN in the New Era (2001)  
*Etel Solingen*
17. Human Security: East Versus West? (2001)  
*Amitav Acharya*
18. Asian Developing Countries and the Next Round of WTO Negotiations (2001)  
*Barry Desker*

19. Multilateralism, Neo-liberalism and Security in Asia: The Role of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation Forum (2001)  
*Ian Taylor*
20. Humanitarian Intervention and Peacekeeping as Issues for Asia-Pacific Security (2001)  
*Derek McDougall*
21. Comprehensive Security: The South Asian Case (2002)  
*S.D. Muni*
22. The Evolution of China's Maritime Combat Doctrines and Models: 1949-2001 (2002)  
*You Ji*
23. The Concept of Security Before and After September 11 (2002)
  - a. The Contested Concept of Security  
*Steve Smith*
  - b. Security and Security Studies After September 11: Some Preliminary Reflections  
*Amitav Acharya*
24. Democratisation In South Korea And Taiwan: The Effect Of Social Division On Inter-Korean and Cross-Strait Relations (2002)  
*Chien-peng (C.P.) Chung*
25. Understanding Financial Globalisation (2002)  
*Andrew Walter*
26. 911, American Praetorian Unilateralism and the Impact on State-Society Relations in Southeast Asia (2002)  
*Kumar Ramakrishna*
27. Great Power Politics in Contemporary East Asia: Negotiating Multipolarity or Hegemony? (2002)  
*Tan See Seng*
28. What Fear Hath Wrought: Missile Hysteria and The Writing of "America" (2002)  
*Tan See Seng*
29. International Responses to Terrorism: The Limits and Possibilities of Legal Control of Terrorism by Regional Arrangement with particular reference to Asean (2002)  
*Ong Yen Nee*
30. Reconceptualizing the PLA Navy in Post - Mao China: Functions, Warfare, Arms, and Organization (2002)  
*Nan Li*
31. Attempting Developmental Regionalism Through AFTA: The Domestic Politics – Domestic Capital Nexus (2002)  
*Helen E S Nesadurai*
32. 11 September and China : Opportunities, Challenges, and Warfighting (2002)  
*Nan Li*
33. Islam and Society in Southeast Asia after September 11 (2002)  
*Barry Desker*
34. Hegemonic Constraints: The Implications of September 11 For American Power (2002)  
*Evelyn Goh*